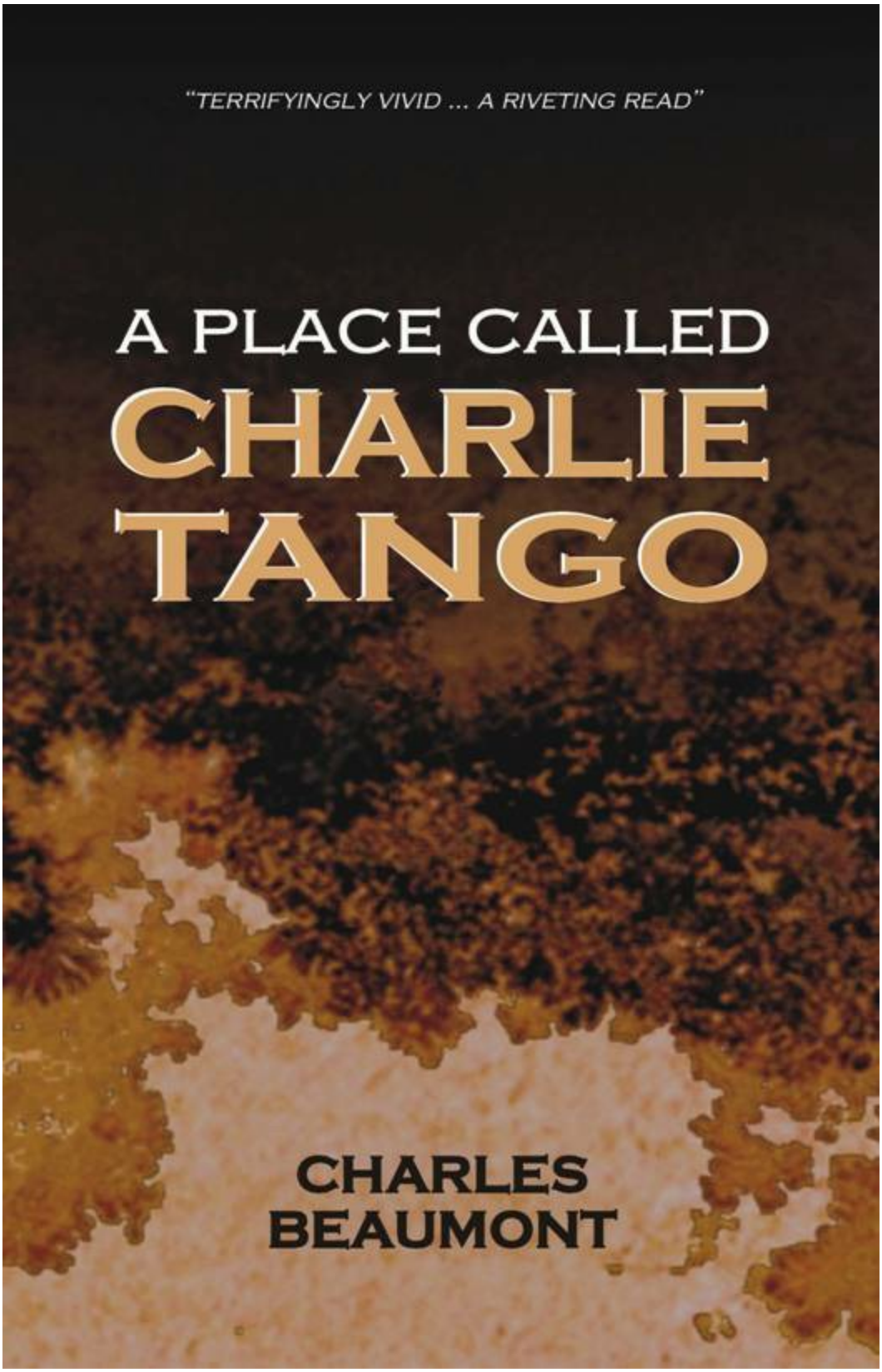
Terrifyingly vivid ... A riveting read



A PLACE CALLED CHARLIE TANGO

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Dedicated to the four most important people in my life—
with love and admiration.

‘Hold fast to your vision, tho' grievous the strife,
For to flesh forth dreams is the purpose of life.’
– Charles Beaumont

PREFACE

WARNING

Although, strictly speaking, this is a work of fiction, the background war material used throughout is nonetheless based entirely on fact which, owing to the subject matter, some readers may find extremely disturbing.

What I have set out to do in the following pages is to present an accurate reconstruction of certain historical events that took place during the closing stages of the Rhodesian Bush War.

The majority of the military incidents recorded actually took place at one time or another during the long and bitter years of conflict. However, not all occurred in the chronological order presented nor did they necessarily happen at the places stated. Furthermore, on occasion I have combined two entirely unrelated incidents for purely literary purposes.

Similarly, while many of the characters and place names in this book are entirely fictitious, with the exception of prominent figures clearly in the public eye, the names of any people who were actually involved have been changed for obvious reasons. If I have inadvertently used the name of anyone who was ever, either directly or indirectly, connected at any time to the war, it is purely coincidental.

Charles Beaumont

A PLACE CALLED
CHARLIE TANGO

‘The effect of liberty on individuals is that they may do what they please: we ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risk congratulations.’

– Edmund Burke

BOOK ONE

Initiation

CHAPTER 1

Operational Area ‘Repulse’
District Commissioner’s Office
Department of Internal Affairs, Urungwe
Time: 10h30. November 19, 197–

“That’s where you’ll be for the next six weeks, Chalmers,” the district commissioner said, pointing to a spot on a large, brightly coloured map that covered one entire wall of the hot, airless room.

He paused significantly. “Frankly, I don’t envy you. Chitangwe is a damn dangerous place—not to mention that it’s miles from anywhere.” He turned and looked at the uniformed man who was leaning back in his chair, eyeing him pensively through a cloud of bluish cigarette smoke.

The district commissioner, a small, dapper man in his early fifties dressed in immaculate white shorts and shirt and looking every inch the colonial administrator of yesteryear, stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

“Apart from the terrorists—or ‘freedom fighters’ as they choose to call themselves—it’s as hot as hell … far hotter than it is here now, and the place is riddled with malaria.”

Chalmers frowned. “It sounds a charming spot, I must say,” he murmured.

Ignoring the interruption, the commissioner went on: “Of course, we’re in radio contact if there’s a real emergency, although I’m afraid there’s not much we can do to help if—” he paused, “or rather *when*—you run into trouble.”

“How far is it from here?” Chalmers asked.

The DC pursed his lips, considering the question. “About sixty miles as the crow flies—that’s just under a hundred of those newfangled kilometres—but it’s much further by road. You’ll have two or three armoured vehicles at your disposal, but most of the dirt tracks are heavily mined, and the chances of running into an ambush are, on the whole, excellent, I would say!” he said dryly.

“And will I be going there by road now?” Chalmers asked, raising his eyebrows.

“No, no. We’ll be flying you in. It’s far too risky to drive. We don’t want to lose you on the very first day!” The DC chuckled and glanced towards the large, open window. The sun was streaming into the room from a cloudless, hard-blue sky.

“In fact,” he went on, “the aircraft should be here in about an hour for you.”

Turning again towards the map, he swept his arm across the area in an arcing gesture. “The whole region is swarming with terrorists. As you probably know, the ones we have in the Eastern Districts—and that includes Chitangwe where you’ll be going—are coming in from Mozambique. That’s Robert Mugabe’s lot. They’re well armed—mostly Chinese and Russian stuff.”

Chalmers, a tall, slightly-built man of 47, crossed his legs thoughtfully.

“Are they well-trained?”

The DC nodded. “By-and-large, yes,” he said. “Of course, the standard varies considerably from group to group, but on the whole they seem to be reasonably competent—at least against women and children!”

Taking out his handkerchief, he wiped the perspiration off his face, exclaiming: “By Jove, it’s damned hot! I’ll be glad when the rains start.” He sighed. “Where was I?”

“You were saying that the terrorists seem to be quite well-organised,” said Chalmers.

“Ah yes. They’re probably a damn-sight better than the Africans you’ll have with you at Chitangwe.” He glanced at Chalmers speculatively. “I’m afraid you’ll find them a rather undisciplined lot. If you don’t take a firm line with them right from the start, you could find yourself in trouble.”

Chalmers grimaced. “How many are there at the base?”

“At the moment, there are about 42 District Security Assistants—DSAs—but there’s always about ten or so on R&R[1] at any one time which brings it down to about 30 or 31—something like that.”

There was a silence.

Chalmers, a preoccupied look on his face, absent-mindedly watched a fly walk across his knee.

“I hear Chitangwe is attacked fairly frequently. Is that so?” he asked.

The DC walked slowly back to his desk and sat down wearily.

"Yes, I'm afraid it is. The rains are a bit late this year, but once they start, I think it can be taken for granted that the terrorists will make an all-out effort to—how shall I put it?" he hesitated as he searched for a suitable word: "neutralise the camp." He paused as if mentally savouring the aptness of the phrase. "There's certainly something big coming, and Chitangwe has always been something of a thorn in their flesh. It's an important spot, strategically."

Chalmers took a deep breath and shifted in his seat. *God, what sort of a hellhole is this place!*

The DC, noticing his expression, went on quickly: "I don't wish to be pessimistic, but I think it's best to be mentally prepared, that's all." He smiled. "Besides, you'll soon find out for yourself what it's like up there," he added drolly.

He leant back in his chair.

"At least there's one consolation—the DSAs are all armed with G3[2] rifles although, to be honest, I'm not sure that they're not a damn-sight more dangerous than the terrs! I also have more than a sneaking suspicion that some of them are actually working hand-in-hand with the terrorists."

Chalmers digested this information silently while leaning over to the ashtray and knocking the ash off the end of his cigarette.

"And what about food?" he asked, looking up.

"Ah, there we have a little problem, I'm afraid. There's a small store a mile or so from the camp, but the stock is very limited so before you leave here, you'd better go shopping and buy yourself enough supplies to last you for the next two or three weeks or so. After that—" the DC shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands in a gesture of resignation, "it means you'll have to organise a run back here for more supplies, I'm afraid." He smiled wryly. "Let's put it this way: if you're hungry enough, you won't mind running the risk of being blown-up or ambushed—it'll add relish to your meals!"

Chalmers smiled politely.

"But surely supplies can be flown in?" he asked, a slight frown on his face.

The DC shook his head and leaning over, turned the small electric fan towards him so that the draft blew directly on his face.

"'Fraid not. We have only one plane, and it's in constant use. In any case, it's nearly falling to bits as it is. We had two up until a little while ago, but

one of them was brought down by a SAM[3] missile just as it was coming in to land." The DC turned to look out of the window contemplatively. "That was up at Umsholo, not far from where you're going." He paused. "The pilot was killed instantly."

There was a long, awkward silence. Elsewhere in another part of the building, a door banged shut.

"Will there be anyone else apart from the DSAs at Chitangwe?" Chalmers asked, breaking the silence.

The DC turned back to face Chalmers. "No," he replied, shaking his head. "So many people have left the country, we're getting very short of manpower these days. You'll be relieving a fellow by the name of Falon—George Falon. He's being transferred for, um, various reasons," the DC concluded vaguely, drumming his fingers on the desk.

He glanced at Chalmers, a searching look on his plumpish face. "Have you been out into the bush on any of your previous call-ups?"

Chalmers cleared his throat, feeling slightly uncomfortable at the implication of inexperience.

"No," he said reluctantly. He hated admitting the fact.

The DC shook his head. Good God, he thought moodily. What earthly chance did these men have? Little or no military training; no experience of the bush; and yet, no one thought twice about dropping them down in the middle of some of the harshest terrain in the country and expecting them to take on bush-hardened insurgents and come out the other end alive!

He studied Chalmers thoughtfully. "Well, I presume they have given you *some* training, at least?"

"A couple of weeks refresher—but I did two years National Service in the RAF in England when I was 18, and when I first came to Rhodesia, I had to do a few call-ups with the army." He paused, seeing the flicker of doubt in the commissioner's eyes. "But I'll be alright. I know what I'm doing—well, most of the time anyway!" he added with a disarming smile.

"That's the spirit," the DC rejoined. "Although, I must say I think it's a pretty raw deal for you city types."

Chalmers gave a diffident grin. "Oh, I don't know. It seems to me just a matter of adaptation—the law of survival and all that. Doesn't everything in life ultimately boil down to a question of 'hunt or be hunted, kill or be

killed'?" he asked.

The DC raised his eyebrows. Did the man really believe that, or was it just a show of bravado? he wondered

"Are you married?" he asked suddenly after a short silence.

"Yes. Have been for over 12 years now."

"Any children?"

Chalmers nodded. "Yes, a son of eight."

The DC smiled reminiscently. "A lovely age."

He sat back in his chair and, running his fingers along the underside edge of the desk, regarded Chalmers for a few moments, a thoughtful, slightly embarrassed look on his face. "Not a pleasant thing to have to bring up, I know, but I take it we've got a contact address and telephone number for your wife should we need it?" He hesitated and then added, somewhat unconvincingly: "Just a formality, you understand."

Chalmers felt his stomach twitch nervously as the implication of what the DC said sank in. For a fraction of a second, a picture of his wife leaning a wreath against a newly-erected tombstone flashed through his mind. He shuddered involuntarily.

His train of thought was broken by the abrupt sound of a telephone ringing in the office next door.

"Er, they've got the contact details in Salisbury[4]," Chalmers answered with assumed nonchalance. "I haven't given them to your Department here yet, though."

"Oh well, perhaps you could leave them with Miss Pearson, my secretary, before you take off. She's next door."

Chalmers nodded.

The commissioner placed his open hands flat on the top of the desk, bringing the briefing to an end. "Well, then," he said lightly. "I think that's about everything, isn't it?" He stood up and held out his hand. "Good luck—look after yourself."

Chalmers got up and leaning over the desk, firmly shook the limp, outstretched hand.

Thanking the DC briefly, Chalmers turned and walked towards the door. He paused as he noticed a small wooden plaque near the window with six or seven names painted on it in gold letters. It was a Roll of Honour. He ran his

eyes down the list, stopping for a moment at the last entry: *John Burroughs (42). Chitangwe 3.2.197–*

He stared at it thoughtfully for a moment and then, half-turning to the DC, said with a quizzical smile: “If you don’t mind me saying so, I think it’s a little tactless putting that there!”

The DC smiled understandingly. “Yes, it’s not exactly the nicest thing to be reminded of.” He paused. “But all first-class men. It’s little enough when you think about it.”

Chalmers nodded in agreement. “*’Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’*— It is sweet and glorious to die for one’s country. Or so they say,” he murmured with a wry smile as he opened the door and went out.

*****

Hearing the sound of a typewriter from the next office, Chalmers went up to the half-open door and, tapping gently, glanced in.

Beneath a large window that looked out onto a sun-drenched courtyard with a small goldfish pond in the centre, was a long table on which stood a neat row of box files. An armchair was placed to one side of the secretary’s desk, and beside it was a small coffee table with a deep-mauve African violet in a pot placed on a lace cloth in the middle. A battered electric kettle, its frayed cord hanging over the side, took pride of place on a metal filing cabinet that stood in the corner behind the secretary’s desk.

A pretty young woman sitting behind the typewriter, looked up brightly as he entered. Chalmers stood and smiled at her taking in the long, golden hair, vivacious blue eyes and delicate, full lips.

She smiled, her face open and friendly. “Good morning, can I help you?” Her voice was warm and welcoming.

Chalmers walked across to her desk.

“Good morning, my name’s Mike Chalmers. I’m off to Chitangwe for a short holiday!”

She grinned, leaning her head attractively on one side, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “Have you made your reservation yet, or would you like me to do that for you now?”

He laughed appreciatively. While Chalmers seldom felt at ease in the company of men, pretty women fascinated him.

“No, I haven’t done anything about it yet,” he said. “But while you’re about it, perhaps you could make the booking for two. I’m sure you’d like it there!” he added in a bantering tone.

She half-grinned, blushing slightly. “*Really*, Mr. Chalmers!” Her tone was slightly reproving.

He smiled apologetically. “Sorry.” He hesitated. “Please call me Mike.”

She returned his smile, his indiscretion apparently forgiven. “I’m Claire,” she said, adding: “Now, *sir*, what can I do for you?”

“Well, ‘Sanders of the River’[5] next door there suggested I should leave my home address and telephone number with you just in case I have the misfortune to …” he hesitated, “fall sick or become otherwise indisposed while I’m away on vacation!”

She chuckled and getting up and walking across to the filing cabinet behind her, pulled open the bottom drawer and took out a form.

“Here we are,” she said, turning round and handing him the sheet of paper. “But I’m sure we won’t be needing it,” she added in a confident tone.

He smiled appreciatively before sitting down at the spare table and quickly completing the form.

He stood up, slipping his pen back in his shirt pocket.

“Well, I’d better be off. I’ve got quite a lot to do still.” He handed the completed form back to her. “Thanks,” he said with a smile. “It’s been lovely meeting you.”

He meant it.

She glanced up. “You too, Mike. When you’re here next time, come and say hello, won’t you?”

He nodded. “Of course I shall—your office will be my first port of call!”

She slipped the form into the top drawer of her desk.

“Good! I shall look forward to that. ‘Bye—and have a lovely time!”

Chalmers laughed, and then saying goodbye, turned and walked out into the cool corridor. For the first time in days, he felt light-hearted, almost happy.

When he had gone, Claire turned and gazed out of the window, a look of sadness in her eyes. *When you’re here next time* … These days the words carried a sinister, unspoken undertone.

CHAPTER 2

Chitangwe Base Camp
Somewhere in the south-eastern operational area
Time: 13h30. The same day.

The small, single-engined aircraft bounced violently in the turbulence, swayed and then fell with a sickening bump onto the stony airstrip that lay outside the security fence of Chitangwe Base Camp.

The pilot, a pleasant-looking, fresh-faced young man named Rob, switched off the engine and stretching himself with a loud yawn, leant back in his seat and looked around him.

Except for the slight creak of cooling metal parts on the aircraft, there was complete silence.

Chalmers, the aircraft's only passenger, didn't move.

"God, that was a bloody awful landing!" Rob said after a moment with a grin. He shook his head self-reproachfully.

Chalmers silently agreed but still managed a weak smile. Flying was always an ordeal for him at the best of times. He loathed it and was only too relieved that he was safely down on firm ground again.

He climbed awkwardly out of the aircraft and unloaded the few things he had brought with him: a kitbag, a well-worn handgrip and two cardboard boxes of provisions. Then, slinging his FN[6] on his shoulder, he stood for a few moments and glanced around him with curiosity.

Chitangwe Base Camp, grey and tired-looking, quivered in the blinding white glare of the African mid-day. From its flagpole—where two torn, faded flags hung limply, one above the other, in the scorching heat—to the square, purposeful guard tower that looked down on the long, low-roofed barracks and squat concrete bunkers, the camp had all the appearance of a French Foreign Legion fort in the Sahara Desert.

There was a dead and ominously forbidding atmosphere about the place,

almost as if it had long been deserted, a forgotten relic of the past.

A deep and exhausted silence hung over everything.

In the distance—across the arid, undulating plains sparsely dotted with a few twisted, stunted trees and the occasional *kraal*[7]—rose the imposing hills of Mazweru and Zaunga. A heavy, purple-grey haze lay over their massive granite ridges and bush-covered slopes. Beyond them and rising even higher, stood the majestic range of the Heta Mountains, blurred and indistinct in the shimmering air.

A sudden gust of hot wind stirred a cloud of deep-brown dust that swirled noisily across the airstrip and through the somnambulant camp. A scrap of old, yellowed newspaper rose frantically into the air, blew against the rusting wire-mesh fence and fell to the ground as the wind died as suddenly as it began.

Chalmers screwed up his eyes to protect them from the dust.

As he gazed at the desolate scene his heart sank.

“You should have great fun here,” called out Rob cheerfully from the cockpit, breaking the eerie silence.

“You must be joking,” Chalmers replied with forced cheerfulness. “It looks more like something out of Dante’s Inferno!”

Rob chuckled, grinning broadly. “Well, ‘fraid I can’t stop, Mike. Look after yourself and keep your head down!”

He gave Chalmers a brief, friendly wave.

The aircraft’s engine suddenly spluttered into life, idling roughly. Then, revving it noisily, Rob slowly taxied the aircraft to the end of the airstrip. It turned and after a few seconds, came roaring down towards Chalmers, tail up, in a dense, choking cloud of thick swirling dust.

As the dark, camouflaged-coloured plane passed him a few metres off the ground, Chalmers waved. He watched it bank slowly, and as the sound of its engine died away in the distance, a feeling of intense loneliness swept over him.

With a deep sigh, Chalmers bent down and picked up his kitbag and handgrip.

Leaving his two boxes of provisions where they were, he slowly walked towards the closed, wire-meshed metal gates of the camp.

CHAPTER 3

As he approached the gates, a short, wizened African guard who had been dozing out of sight in a ramshackle wood and corrugated-iron shelter placed just inside the fence, slowly got up and lazily opened one side of the gates.

His khaki uniform was creased and stained, and his boots were covered in a thick layer of dust.

Chalmers looked him up and down, frowning in displeasure. “Good afternoon,” he said curtly. “Where is the base commander?”

With barely a glance in his direction, the African DSA inclined his head indifferently towards the tower.

Chalmers immediately felt his temper rising.

“I’m the new base commander,” he said, his eyes glinting. “When you speak to me, stand to attention and say ‘sir’. Do you understand?”

He knew he sounded ridiculously pompous, but recalling the commissioner’s advice to take a ‘firm line’, he knew the reprimand needed to be given even though he disliked doing so. Chalmers quickly realised he would have to show, right from the outset, that he was not the sort of person who was prepared to tolerate slovenliness or insubordination.

The guard, looking slightly taken aback, regarded Chalmers with puckered-up, calculating eyes.

“Now, we’ll start again,” Chalmers said in a hard voice. “Where is the base commander?”

The man, now a little unsure of himself, mumbled resentfully: “In the room near the tower, I think.” He hesitated before muttering: “Sir.”

Chalmers nodded in acknowledgement.

“Have those boxes of supplies over there carried in for me straight away, please.” He eyed the guard, adding: “And next time I see you, I want you to be in a clean uniform, clean boots and with laces in them, understand?”

The guard scowled slightly.

Chalmers turned and strode away purposefully towards the square tower, past the shed-like, empty radio room, across the quadrangle where a dirty,

81mm mortar was leaning dejectedly against a circle of torn, crumbling sandbags, to the end of the building where a white-painted wooden door stood half open.

He went in and put his things down on the black, unpolished slate floor by the door. It was invitingly cool after the intense heat and glare outside.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light, Chalmers saw a shabby old, yellow sofa on which a young white man was lying indolently stretched out, reading a tattered paperback.

The long room, its walls painted a garish green, had a neglected, uncared-for look. It obviously served as a sort of mess—a place where senior staff could both eat and relax. A few dilapidated armchairs were scattered around the room. On two dust-covered tables, old newspapers and magazines lay littered in untidy heaps. Many of the windowpanes were cracked or jaggedly broken. The walls were scarred with bullet holes in places and above the settee, near one corner of the ceiling, was a large uneven hole where an unexploded RPG-7[8] rocket had careered through the room—an ominous reminder of the last time the camp had been attacked a few weeks before.

Underneath one of the small windows was a battered old mahogany bookcase, its shelves crammed unevenly with cheap, dusty books and dog-eared copies of *Readers Digest*. There was the usual array of tawdry pin-ups torn out of popular men's magazines taped to the walls—ample-breasted women lying or standing half-naked in artificially provocative poses.

"Welcome to Chitangwe," the reclining figure said, glancing briefly at Chalmers over the top of his book. "Make yourself at home." After a brief silence, he added: "I'll be leaving in an hour or so. You can put your things in the room I'm in, if you like."

Chalmers studied the younger man, puzzled. Was this Chitangwe's base commander?

"Thanks," said Chalmers. "I think I'll just cool off a bit first though."

He sat down in one of the chairs.

The man resumed reading. There was a long silence broken only by the buzzing of a large bluebottle fly against one of the dirty windowpanes.

"Tell me: what's it like here?" Chalmers asked conversationally after a while.

The young man went on looking at his book.

“What do *you* think? You can see for yourself!” he muttered.

Chalmers glanced around the room, tapping his fingers on the arm of the chair. Despite his mounting irritation at the man’s incivility, he decided to ignore it. There seemed little point in taking issue seeing the man would be leaving soon.

“Anything much going on at the moment?” he asked after a minute or two.

The man lowered his book with a sigh.

“Not much. It’s been pretty quiet lately—but something’s coming. A couple of our vehicles were hit last week.” There was another silence. “Landmines,” the man added laconically. He lifted his book again and resumed reading.

“Any casualties?” persisted Chalmers. First-hand information was valuable to one of his limited experience.

“Nothing to write home about. A couple of the DSAs were injured—one was killed, poor bastard—but we managed to get the Leopard[9] going again, thank God!”

“Are there many terrorists in the area?”

“Yep. If you look on that map over there on the wall, you’ll see their transit routes. They’re marked in red. One of them comes right past here,” the man went on, “so you’d better keep on your toes!”

Like you? thought Chalmers sardonically.

The man turned back to his book but suddenly lowered it again.

“Do you want some tea?” he asked off-handedly.

“Thanks—I could certainly do with some.”

Without moving, the young man bawled out: “Misheck!” and then, after a lengthy pause, muttered: “Where the hell is he?”

A few moments later, an elderly black man, barefoot and dressed in dirty khaki shorts and shirt, put his head round the door, an enquiring look on his deeply wrinkled face.

“Ah, at last! Two teas, Misheck,” the young man called out.

“There’s no milk,” the African answered sullenly.

“Damn! OK, forget it. Hopefully Boss Falon will bring in some powdered milk when he comes back,” he continued.

“I’ve got some here that we can use, if you like,” said Chalmers, half-rising.

The younger man shook his head. “No, it’s ok. You’d better hang onto it—you’ll be needing it yourself.”

Chalmers sank back and regarded him for a moment or two. “I assumed you were the base commander,” he said after a while.

The man threw his book down and sat up, stretching his arms above his head. He laughed. “No. My name’s John Findlay. I’m the district officer for Chitangwe and Umsholo. I thought you knew. George Falon is in charge here—well, until he leaves, anyway—and then it’s over to you. I just came over for the night to see to one or two things.”

Findlay slowly stood up. As he did so, he heard the sound of an approaching vehicle.

“Ah! That’ll be Geo now,” he said, throwing his book down on the table.

Chalmers went over to the window and looking out, saw a small cloud of dust creeping along the burnt-out landscape about half a kilometre away. He heard the faint engine noise heighten as the driver changed gear as he came to a bend in the track. The vehicle picked up speed again.

Findlay walked over towards the door.

“Coming?” he asked over his shoulder.

Chalmers turned round and followed him out of the room.

“How old is Falon?” Chalmers asked as they strolled towards the flagpole where the base’s few vehicles were parked.

Findlay thought for a moment.

“Dunno, really—about 37 or 38, I think. He’s a nice guy. A bit rough at times, but he knows his stuff.” He paused. “You’ll like him.”

A wry smile flickered across Chalmers’ face. Why did people invariably say that because they happened to like someone themselves? he wondered.

The two men stood and watched as the oddly-shaped, dirty-green camouflaged Leopard raced through the open gates at high speed before jerking to a squealing halt, a cloud of dust slowly overtaking it.

Chalmers studied the vehicle with interest. It was the first time he had seen one of them close up.

“Strange looking thing, isn’t it? Looks like a crab running round on tip-toe!”

Findlay smiled. “Maybe, but it’s still the best mine-protected vehicle that’s been built.” He paused. “The only trouble is that it’s flaming hard to get out of in a hurry.”

Momentarily dropping his supercilious manner, he gave Chalmers a frank look. “You’ll just have to hope you don’t get caught in an ambush in one of them!”

As they started walking towards the vehicle, the heavy, bulletproof door at the back clanged open noisily, and a large, overweight man with thick glasses climbed down onto the exposed rear wheel and jumped to the ground. He was followed by five DSAs.

Turning towards the kitchen barracks and ignoring Chalmers and Findlay, the commander bellowed out: “Stephen! Misheck!” He waited, breathing heavily, as the two reluctant Africans emerged from the barracks and wandered over to him.

“Get this bloody stuff out and take it into the kitchen—don’t forget to put the bread in the ‘fridge—and put the Bren[10] and ammo in No. 2 bunker,” he ordered.

He watched them for a moment and then turned to Findlay, pushing his glasses back on his nose with a stubby finger. He was red in the face and perspiring profusely.

Chalmers studied him keenly, immediately struck by the hard features and energetic, domineering figure of the man.

“Hello, Geo,” Findlay said affably. “How did it go?”

“I thought we were going to be ambushed. You know that low-level bridge down by St. Michael’s School on the Hermes road?”

“Where the other Leopard was hit?” asked Findlay.

“Yeah, that’s the one. We’d just been to the store there and were coming off the bridge when a bloody little *mujiba*[11] ran off into the bush. Jesus! I thought we were going to have a rocket for a passenger!” He laughed raucously, then cast a sidelong glance at Chalmers.

Findlay, noticing his look of enquiry, said: “Oh, by the way, Geo, this is Mike Chalmers, your relief.”

Falon smiled. “Hello Mike, welcome to the war,” he said, holding out a large hand.

Chalmers shook hands. “Thanks. I must say, it sounds a lot of fun!” he said with a wry smile.

Falon gave him a look and sniggered. ”You could call it that! I’ve had a guts full of it myself,” he said with decision.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

He shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway, terrs or no terrs, I’m going to have a bloody shower. I’m sweating like a pig!”

He walked off but, stopping suddenly, turned on his heels and yelled at the two Africans who were taking the last of the things out of the armoured vehicle. “Put some petrol in the Leopard—and I mean now, you black bastards!”

Findlay, who was watching him, shook his head and chuckled in amusement. “He’s a character that one. Still, he’s been in quite a few contacts with the terrs. It’ll pay you to pick up as many tips as you can from him.”

They strolled back to the staff lounge, and as they passed the shower-room, Chalmers heard the sound of splashing water. Falon was singing raucously.

“I think I’ll push off when Geo has finished,” said Findlay, glancing towards the sun. “I don’t want to be out on these roads too late. What time is it anyway?”

Chalmers looked at his watch. “It’s five to three.”

“Hell, I didn’t realise it was as late as that,” Findlay said with surprise. “I don’t think I’ll wait for him after all. I’ll just get my things.” He hesitated. “I’ll show you where the room is, if you like.”

Reaching the door of the room, Findlay carelessly flung it open and started gathering his scattered things together. Chalmers stood watching him from the doorway.

After a few moments, Findlay said: “Well, that’s everything, I think. I didn’t bring much,” he added, glancing around the almost bare, whitewashed room. He slung his half-empty kitbag over one shoulder, webbing on the other, and picked up his camouflaged rifle from the bed.

As they left the room, he turned and looked at Chalmers. “If you run into any trouble, give us a shout on the radio at Hermes. I’m actually being transferred in a couple of weeks but Steve Bishop—he’s the member-in-charge there—will be on call.” He paused. “Not that we can help, but it’s nice to tell somebody, if nothing else!” he quipped with an unexpected grin.

Chalmers laughed. “Thanks, but from what I’ve seen so far today, there really doesn’t seem much point in bothering anyone about anything!”

Findlay hesitated, uncertain how to take the remark and then, shrugging his shoulders, replied: “Oh well, I’ll be seeing you then. Cheers.”

Chalmers returned the farewell and wishing him a safe trip back to Hermes,

stood and watched as the young man strode off towards his vehicle.

CHAPTER 4

That evening towards sunset, Chalmers went and sat outside on an old wooden bench that stood on the dust-covered concrete verandah that ran past what was, now, his room. Although the sun had almost set, it was still very hot and he felt dusty and sticky with stale perspiration.

The evening was perfectly still. The only sounds were an occasional bark of a dog in the far distance from some native kraal and the low, subdued talk of the African DSAs as they cooked their evening meal of *sadza*[12] over small, smoky fires in the compound at the rear of the camp.

The smell was quintessentially African.

Chalmers looked towards the darkening hills that now seemed to loom menacingly in the deepening gloom. It felt to him as if an ominous air of expectancy, even foreboding, hung in the fading light. In his imagination, always vivid, he could almost see the terrorists, carefully and stealthily, creeping through the thick bush.

It was an unnerving thought.

He recalled the advice once given to him by a friend who had been an officer in the Security Forces: ‘If you go around seeing terrorists hiding behind every bush, you’ll end up a nervous wreck. You have to assume that everything will be alright; you *have* to assume that you’ll get out of it all alive, otherwise you don’t stand a chance in hell of surviving.’ Ironically, the man was now dead—killed on patrol—but, nevertheless, what he had said still held true, mused Chalmers.

Suddenly the door at the end of the verandah swung open.

“Ah, there you are.” It was Falon. “I thought you’d pushed off back to Salisbury,” he said cheerfully.

Although Chalmers normally preferred to be on his own, for once he wasn’t altogether sorry to have a bit of company—even this man’s.

Wearing only a pair of blue shorts, the man’s bulging, hairy stomach hung in a roll of fat over the tight waistband. The bench lurched and creaked loudly

as he sat down heavily with a groan next to Chalmers. He had a beer bottle in his hand.

"Lots to do tomorrow," he said shortly, taking a long drink from the bottle. He belched loudly.

"Such as?" queried Chalmers, raising his eyebrows.

"For starters, we ought to make an early morning foot patrol to Nyakende kraal, near Kwevane—the terrs abducted several villagers from there the other day." He paused thoughtfully. "Not that we'll find out much. These people don't tell us anything," he said with disgust. "Then, we've got to get up to Umsholo with that Avtur[13] helicopter fuel and diesel and some ammunition supplies. They're running out—" he broke off suddenly, smacking his leg loudly to hit a mosquito. "Got the bastard!" he exclaimed, flicking the dead insect off his leg.

From the rear compound, the sound of a cooking pot falling nosily on the ground clanged over the still air. It was followed by a loud burst of laughter.

Falon gave a half-chuckle. "Sounds like someone's cooking isn't appreciated!"

"Anyway," he went on after a short silence, "we've got a few thousand litres of fuel all ready in drums over there—" He pointed vaguely towards the security fence. "I just hope for Christ's sake, they don't attack us tonight!"

Ignoring his last remark, Chalmers turned to him and asked: "Will it all fit on the lorry?"

"Should do. We'll take the Heavy, but I don't mind telling you, I'm not looking forward to it. If the terrs ambush us and hit that bloody lot, well—" He whistled softly.

"Is there much chance of that, d'you think?" asked Chalmers.

"Too bloody true there is! They know we've got the stuff, and they know we've got to take it to Umsholo. You can be bloody sure that one of our fine friends over there—" he nodded in the direction of the African compound, "will make sure the buggers know exactly when we're coming."

The two men relapsed into silence, each involved in their own uneasy thoughts.

Darkness had fallen, and looking up at the night sky, Chalmers picked out the brilliant, gem-like constellations of the Southern Cross and Orion glistening austerely like tiny fragments of ice in the deep velvet sky.

After a few moments, Chalmers turned to Falon. “How many of the DSAs do you usually take with you on patrol?”

“About nine or ten. They’re all bloody useless when it comes to a shoot-out, but at least they know the area, and some of ‘em are good trackers. Not that I usually go with them, though,” he said. “I won’t be going to Nyakende kraal tomorrow either,” he added, turning to look briefly at Chalmers. “Hope you don’t mind going on your own.”

Chalmers frowned. Inexperienced as he was, he *did* mind, but he was determined not to let the other know it.

“No, that’s ok,” he replied with an air of seeming indifference.

Despite his lack of first-hand knowledge of local conditions, he certainly had no intention of letting anyone think that he wasn’t up to the task.

Besides, he had already come to the conclusion that he wouldn’t achieve anything by hiding away behind a barbed-wire fence. As with most things in life, taking the initiative had always seemed to him to be the best form of defence.

Obviously relieved by Chalmers’ ready acquiescence, Falon got up and, rubbing his stomach, belched noisily again. He stood for a few moments looking out into the darkness, the empty beer bottle in his hand.

“I’ve got a horrible feeling we’ll be revved[14] tonight,” he said.

“What makes you think that?”

“Just some remarks I overheard a couple of the DSAs make—plus there’s no moon tonight. The terrs like that.” He paused significantly. “Or maybe I’ve just been here too long. It’s all starting to get to me.” He hiccupped loudly. “Let’s go and eat—”

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It wasn’t much of a meal.

Misheck, who did the cooking, could manage a few simple dishes such as macaroni cheese or sausages and mash, but anything more adventurous was beyond his very limited culinary powers.

Falon pushed his plate away from him in disgust and sat moodily picking his teeth with a broken matchstick.

The windows of the lounge were open, and swarms of insects, attracted by

the bright, shadeless electric light, were buzzing and flitting noisily around the room.

Falon gazed sullenly at one of the pin-up posters—a sultry blonde in a revealing bikini.

"What I couldn't do to that floozy tonight—look at that body," he murmured with an unpleasant leer.

Chalmers looked at him with barely concealed distaste but said nothing.

"Thank God I'm leaving tomorrow!" Falon continued with deep feeling. He looked at Chalmers speculatively. "I don't envy you what's coming." He laughed humourlessly. "All I can say is: better you than me, man!"

He picked up a slice of thick bread and started chewing it, elbows on the table, all the while staring at Chalmers with unblinking eyes.

Waving the partially-eaten bread towards the gaping hole in the wall where the rocket had hit the building, and with his mouth still full, he added: "It was a bloody good job that thing didn't go off. Maybe next time they'll be luckier!"

Chalmers turned round and looked at the damage.

"Were you here when it hit?"

"Too bloody true I was! But I was in the bunker at the time, so I only found it later." He sniffed. "Who wants to be a bloody hero!"

There was a long silence.

"Have you seen any action?" he asked after a while, still staring fixedly at Chalmers through his thick glasses.

Chalmers inclined his head. "Not here. But I rememer the Battle of Britain and the air-raids during the war—and the casualties," he added, thinking of his younger brother who had been killed when their house had received a near-direct hit by a high-explosive bomb during one such raid. "So, yes, I know what it's like," he said pensively.

Falon raised his eyebrows slightly in a momentary display of interest, then looking again towards the hole in the wall, went on: "The bastards who did that were the same ones who burnt down that African school about a month ago—St. Michael's down the road there," he said, waving his arm vaguely over his shoulder. "They strung the bloody headmaster up and then used him for bayonet practice, poor bugger." He relapsed into a thoughtful silence.

"Do you know where their base is?" Chalmers queried.

Falon shook his head. "If I knew that, I'd have got the bastards a long time

ago. All I've managed to find out is that it's a big group and that their leader calls himself 'Black Satan' of all bloody things. A good name for the evil bastard, too." He threw the crust of bread onto the plate in a gesture of contempt. "Hell, I'd give anything to get that swine," he said, slowly shaking his head.

"Black Satan—" murmured Chalmers with a vague feeling of unease.

Falon nodded. "Not his real name, of course, but the terrs seem to like calling themselves after all sorts of barbaric things." He paused. "I know what I'd call them, though!" he added with a derisive smile.

Chalmers picked up his cup and took a mouthful of tea.

"Tell me something: these terrorists—do you think it's just one or two really bad individuals, like this Black Satan, who are committing the atrocities—or are they all as bad as each another?"

Falon leant back in his chair, stretching. "Who knows? You get good and bad everywhere. Look at the Germans and Japanese in the last war—and even some of the bloody English are not so particular what they do at times!"

Chalmers, who was himself English, raised his eyebrows.

"But, I'll tell you one thing," Falon went on, tapping the table with his forefinger emphatically: "hand this country over to that bastard, Mugabe, and he'll destroy it, you mark my words!" He yawned noisily, his mouth wide open. "Anyway, stuff it all! I'm going to have a beer … want one?"

Chalmers shook his head. "No, thanks. I'm going to turn-in now. It's been a long day."

"Hell!" exclaimed Falon looking at his watch and then over at Chalmers. "It's only a quarter past seven!" He sighed. "But maybe it's not such a bad idea," he said getting up from the table. "You'll need to be up by at least four for that patrol. I'll think of you!" he added sarcastically and, with a curt goodnight, left the room.

CHAPTER 5

Chalmers walked back along the verandah from the lounge to his room. He opened the door and groped around in the dark for the cord to switch on the light. His hand knocked against a bullet that had been tied around the end of the string—presumably by a previous occupant.

The dead Burroughs? he wondered fleetingly.

He pulled on the string, and as the harsh light from the naked light bulb filled the cell-like room, he looked around it with renewed interest. Underneath the two small windows was a table, and in the corner opposite the door were seven or eight rifles chained to a large wooden rack. Several dusty boxes of ammunition were stacked untidily on the floor against the wall.

He drew together the tattered bits of material that passed for curtains and sat down on the thin, uncomfortable coir mattress. At the end, an old, very dirty blanket lay untidily where it had been thrown. He looked at the uncovered pillow bolster. It was stained and torn.

Chalmers gave a resigned sigh, lit a cigarette and lay down, one hand behind his head against the uneven, whitewashed wall.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door, and before he could answer, it opened and Falon stood framed in the doorway, his hand on the loose metal doorknob.

Chalmers sat up quickly. He felt uncomfortable being caught lying down.

“You needn’t sleep in here if you don’t want to,” Falon said without preamble. “It’s much safer in the bunkers.”

Chalmers thought for a moment. As cheerless as his room was, at least he was alone. He certainly had no desire to spend the night with Falon and the DSAs in the cramped confines of an airless concrete bunker for the night.

“No, this is fine, thanks,” he said with conviction.

Falon shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He turned to go. “By the way, best keep your rifle cocked and close at hand, though. You could need it at any time—one never knows out here.”

He went out, closing the door noisily behind him.

Chalmers lay down again and ignoring the man's discomforting remarks, started thinking about home, visualising what his wife and son would probably be doing at the moment. To Chalmers, the warmth and familiarity of home and family were of supreme importance.

He let his mind dwell affectionately on his son, Christopher. Now eight years old and full of mischief, he would be probably be watching television, absent-mindedly hugging a cushion, absorbed in some exciting programme. He pictured Mary, his wife, on the telephone to someone—a social call? Work? He smiled as he imagined her curled up in the blue armchair by the phone, a cigarette burning in an ashtray on the coffee table beside her.

He looked at his watch. Chris would be going to bed soon. Chalmers pictured his young son laughingly jumping up and down on the bed in his pyjamas, his much-loved teddy bear watching from the pillows. He could almost hear the screams of delight as Mary, pretending to be cross, chased him into bed.

A chilling thought suddenly crossed his mind. Would they be safe, all alone in the big, double-storey house? No! He mustn't allow himself to think of such things. He hastily recalled the words of his friend: 'One must assume that everything's going to be alright—'

He reached over to the table by the bed and picked up his red-bound copy of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, one of only two books he had brought with him.

He opened it at random.

> 'Listen! I'll tell you the whole secret of duelling. If you are going to fight a duel, and you make a will and write loving letters to your parents and friends, and if you think you may be wounded or killed, you are a complete fool, and are lost for certain. You have to go with the firm intention of killing your man as quickly and efficiently as possible. As our bear-huntsman at Kostroma used to tell me: "Everyone fears a bear," he said, "but when you actually find one, your fear goes completely, and your only thought is not to let him get away."'

Chalmers closed the book and put it back on the table, an amused look on his face. If he came across a bear, he was pretty sure *his* only thought would be to get away as quickly as possible! he decided firmly.

He got up and walking across to the door, switched off the light. Groping his way back, he walked into the foot of the bed.

“Damn,” he muttered, feeling his way down it with his hands.

In the darkness, he remembered a quip his wife had once told him: ’”Smile—it could be worse,” they said. So he did—and it was.’ He grinned to himself and lay down.

Listening to the faint and, somehow comforting, hum of the camp generator in the distance, he gradually fell into an uneasy sleep.

CHAPTER 6

Time: 03h00. November 20

Startled, Chalmers woke up suddenly, on edge and strangely apprehensive. He was bathed in perspiration and felt cold and stiff. He had been dreaming; troubled dreams bordering on the nightmarish.

Fumbling around on the bedside table for his watch, he put it close to his eyes, peering short-sightedly at the luminous face. He then lay back, listening intently. The generator was still on, and a strong, fitful wind was wrenching at the loose window frames in noisy gusts.

After a few minutes, he got up and groped his way slowly across the cold slate floor towards the rattling door, stumbling over his webbing that he had left on the floor next to his unpacked kitbag. Eventually locating the light cord, he pulled it, screwing up his eyes as the harsh, antiseptic glare lit up the room.

A large hunting spider[15], alarmed by the sudden blaze of light, ran rapidly across the wall behind the bed and disappeared between a crack where the ill-fitting ceiling joined the plastered brick wall.

Walking back to the bed, Chalmers sat down on the edge, took out a cigarette from the packet on the table and lit it.

The foot patrol would be leaving in just over an hour, he calculated. Where was it Falon said he had to go? He frowned as he tried to remember the strange-sounding name of the African village. Suddenly he recalled the large ordnance survey map of the area on the wall in the staff lounge.

He got up again and switching off the light, went out onto the verandah. The wind was bitterly cold, and he could hear bits of debris rustling along the concrete in sporadic gusts.

Slowly finding his way to the closed door at the end, Chalmers opened it and switched on the light. Any terrorists would be able to see that miles away, he thought, hesitating for a moment. Then, brushing the idea aside, he

walked briskly over to the map and started searching for the name of the kraal. It had just come back to him: *Nyakende*.

After a few minutes, he located it and roughly measuring the distance from the camp with his forefinger, did a quick mental calculation.

"Hell," he muttered, "that's over six kilometres on foot!" Oh well, the exercise would do him good, he thought in amusement—assuming of course, that he didn't get killed in the process!

Instead of returning to his room, Chalmers walked over to one of the armchairs and sat down. Idly picking up a magazine, he started skimming mechanically through its pages, barely registering what he was looking at. Reaching the last page, he threw it down on top of the other magazines and leant back, mulling over the many potential dangers that lay ahead.

Chalmers mentally reviewed his conversation the day before with the district commissioner and, in particular, his remarks about the DSAs. Undisciplined, the commissioner had called them. Even more disturbingly, he had voiced the suspicion that at least some of them were collaborating with the terrorists—a suspicion that Falon had confirmed when he had talked about transporting the helicopter fuel to Umsholo.

They certainly didn't sound very promising material to work with, thought Chalmers with a wry grin to himself, and while he didn't believe in basing one's conclusions merely on hearsay, the few DSAs he had seen so far certainly didn't inspire him with any confidence. And yet, in all fairness, whose fault was that? he pondered. Experience had long ago taught him that indiscipline and lack of spirit were almost invariably due to poor leadership and bad example. Chalmers was a great believer in the saying 'The fish always goes rotten from the head down'.

It was painfully obvious that the DSAs needed training—badly—and that they had far too little to occupy their time productively. It was also clear to him that they had very little idea what was actually expected of them or even why they were at Chitangwe at all.

To Chalmers, it seemed almost inevitable that there would be trouble.

But from tonight, *he'd* be in charge, he thought with an unexpected tingle of excitement. Perhaps by some miracle or other, he could turn Chitangwe's undisciplined, mutinous rabble into some sort of anti-terrorist unit!

He was not a man given to dramatics, but deep down, he knew that, somehow, he *had* to succeed if he were to survive the next few weeks.

CHAPTER 7

Time: 04h02

It was still dark. By the camp gates, six DSAs stood in a scattered group, smoking and chatting quietly.

Although the men had been told that the patrol would move off at oh-four-hundred sharp, some were still missing.

Chalmers turned impatiently to one of the waiting men. “Go and get the others. Tell them that, in future, when I say I want them out here at four o’clock, I mean four o’clock *precisely*.”

The man muttered some words under his breath and stumbled off into the darkness.

Several minutes later, Chalmers heard subdued talking as the missing DSAs leisurely made their way over to the waiting group. They had obviously had to be dragged out of bed. Chalmers decided it would be better—and more appropriate—to deal with the insubordinates later when they returned to the base from patrol. Now was not the time, he decided.

“Alright, line up. Cigarettes out, and no talking,” he said in a firm, quiet voice. Even though he couldn’t see their faces, he could sense their resentment of him.

They lazily formed themselves up into a straggling line.

“Who’s in charge?” he queried.

“I am, sir.” A figure detached itself from the group and moved a few paces towards him.

“What’s your name?”

“Lance Corporal Ndlovu, sir.”

“Right, lance corporal.” He paused. “Carry on as if I weren’t here.”

Ndlovu hesitated and then turned towards the men. He was clearly unsure of himself and nervous of using his authority. Speaking in Shona, he talked quickly, nervously.

Although he didn’t understand the language, Chalmers listened with

mounting irritation as the men answered Ndlovu back, questioning his instructions.

"Be quiet!" Chalmers shouted suddenly.

A ragged, uneasy silence fell over the group.

"Who has the radio?" he asked curtly, assuming command.

"Takazura," a voice answered after a few moments.

"Is it working properly? Have you checked it?"

Takazura groped for the on-off switch in the dark. There was a sudden burst of static from the set.

"Alright, switch it off. Do you have any spare batteries with you?"

"No."

"No, *what*?" Chalmers harshly demanded.

Someone sniggered in the silence that followed.

"No, sir."

"Then go and get some. And while you're about it," Chalmers added, "check that you've got a map of the area." It almost seemed as if they were being deliberately obstructive, he fumed inwardly. "Who's the medic?" he continued.

Someone answered: "Masikela."

He turned in the direction of the voice. "Have you got your medical pack?"

"Yes, sir."

Chalmers raised his eyebrows, making a mental note of the name. The man, in marked contrast to the others, had answered smartly and cheerfully.

"And who's got the Bren?"

"I have." The voice was reluctant and resentful.

"How many magazines have you got?"

"I haven't got any."

There were more sniggers.

Chalmers' temper suddenly rose to boiling point. "What the hell do you think you're playing at? Go and get them immediately!"

There was an uncomfortable silence broken by the sound of shuffling feet and then, mouthing resentfully under his breath, the culprit slowly ambled away.

"*At the double!*" Chalmers roared.

He looked at his watch. It was twenty-five past four. The valuable minutes of darkness were slipping away. Already the first pale glimmer of dawn was

showing up faintly in the eastern sky, and he could just make out the vague and indistinct outlines of the men's heads and shoulders.

He heard the footsteps of Takazura and the Bren-man coming slowly towards them. They stopped as a couple of magazines clattered noisily to the ground. The DSAs, bored with waiting, laughed.

Chalmers frowned angrily. "Lance Corporal Ndlovu, you know the way. Position the men. I'll be immediately behind you." His manner was abrupt and cold. He turned to the others. "Have you all cocked your rifles?" he asked.

There was a ragged outburst of metallic clicks and bangs as working parts were noisily and hastily moved back. Chalmers waited for them to finish.

"Heaven help us if we run into any trouble!" he murmured fervently to himself. "Right!" he said out loud. "Let's go."

They walked out of the gates in a disorderly formation, slowly increasing the distance between each man until they formed a long, straggling line.

Chalmers heard subdued talking from the men in front of him, and in the stillness, the sound of their feet rustling through the dry grass over the rough, uneven ground seemed disturbingly loud to his acute hearing.

Behind him a DSA cocked his rifle, and as he heard the sinister noise, Chalmers felt a tingle at the base of his spine, half-expecting to feel a bullet tear into his back. It would be nothing new in war, he thought cynically.

He looked over his shoulder and glared at the culprit.

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The air was chilly, but the wind had dropped and already the walking pace was making him feel warm. Gradually the sky lightened, revealing the dim outlines of hills, trees and other features of the landscape. A profound stillness lay over everything.

Chalmers, who was positioned in the middle of the line, could now clearly see the men in front of him. After a few kilometres, he increased his pace until he drew level with Ndlovu.

"How much further to Nyakende kraal, lance corporal?"

"Very near—just over that *gomo*[16], sir." He paused and looking to his left, added: "Kwevane cattle dip is over that way—plenty terrs[17] there!" He

turned and looked at Chalmers expectantly.

Knowing that the man was watching him to see what reaction he would get, Chalmers nodded curtly. “Good! That’s why we’re here.” He smiled to himself recalling a line of Shakespeare’s: ‘Lord, Lord, how this world is given to lying’—and *how!* he thought.

After about ten minutes, Ndlovu whistled softly, and the men stopped in their tracks. Obeying his brief hand signals, the DSAs slowly moved into an extended line to the left and right of Chalmers. Glancing quickly up and down the line to check that everyone was in position, Ndlovu raised his right arm and moved it up and down, pointing in front of him. The whole line began to move forward cautiously.

Immediately in front of the advancing men was a low, rounded hill. It was bare except for a few small boulders and a grotesque baobab tree that crowned the top of the rise. As they neared it, Ndlovu raised his hand. The men stopped and slowly and silently knelt down on one knee, taking up firing positions.

Chalmers looked at them with surprised approval. They were doing well. Maybe something could be done with them after all, he thought with satisfaction.

The men at either end of the line crept forward to the top of the hill and lay down in positions from which they could observe the kraal below, while the two new end men turned round to guard the line’s rear.

No one moved.

Chalmers glanced at the sky. There was not a cloud in sight, and already the sun, though still low on the stark, bare skyline, was hot. It was going to be another scorching day, he thought with distaste. A wasp buzzed lazily past him.

Chalmers eyes searched the surrounding ground as the seconds slowly ticked away.

Suddenly, his attention was drawn to the DSA lying on the brow of the hill to his left who gave a small wave. At the signal, Chalmers and the rest of the patrol stood up and quietly moved towards the kraal which was still hidden from view on the other side of the hill.

Looking around for cover, Chalmers fixed his eyes on a small granite boulder a few metres in front of him that lay embedded in the ground near the tree. Step by step, and with a beating heart, he drew nearer to it. Trickles of

perspiration ran down his hot back. Reaching the boulder, he carefully eased himself down into a lying position and, slowly crawling forward on his arms and stomach, cautiously lifted his head and looked down the gentle slope towards the peaceful kraal a little way below.

The village consisted of about a dozen typical *rondavels*[18]. On the bare, uneven ground that separated them from each other, he could see some scrawny chickens pecking and scratching the hard, dry earth.

Near one of the huts, a shabbily dressed old man with grizzled, white hair was sitting in the dirt, fiddling with a bicycle wheel that he was holding between his bent legs. A grotesquely heavy woman in a torn, faded, red skirt ambled past the old man carrying a large, black cooking pot, her immense breasts swaying under a dirty, half-open blouse. She disappeared into the dark opening of one of the huts. Nearby, a young child, naked except for a pair of old, khaki shorts several sizes too large for him, was jabbing at the hard soil with a piece of stick.

No terrorists here at least, Chalmers thought as he surveyed the tranquil scene.

At a signal from Ndlovu, the DSAs stood up. They were now relaxed and their movements were assured and easy. One of them laughed softly. They walked down the slope towards the kraal with long, loping strides, talking freely.

Suddenly, there was an urgent cry from one of the men: "*Over there!*"

Chalmers turned his head sharply and caught a fleeting glimpse of three men, AK-47[19] rifles in their hands, leaping through the bush and zigzagging wildly as they raced away from the huts furthest away on his right.

The DSAs nearest to them already had their weapons at their shoulders, and as Chalmers ran to join them, they began firing, the reports echoing loudly in the still, clear air. The other DSAs, running and stumbling in their haste to take up firing positions, started shooting wildly at the rapidly retreating figures, but they were too late. The three terrorists had disappeared into the cover of the surrounding thick bush.

Realising that there was little point in pursuing them, the thwarted DSAs relaxed and started talking and laughing amongst themselves excitedly.

Chalmers silenced them.

He was not only disappointed at their failure to catch the terrorists but felt even angrier at himself at his own negligence. They *should* have caught them and, with hindsight, realised that he should have ordered Ndlovu to take the elementary precaution of surrounding the kraal first. A chance like the one they had just had might not come their way again for weeks—if at all, he thought in self-reproach. Well, at least he had learnt a valuable lesson, he reflected bitterly.

His thoughts were broken into by Ndlovu who, coming up from behind him, coughed loudly. “I think it would be good if we go to the kraal and speak to the people, boss,” he said, a broad smile on his face. “We might find out something.”

Chalmers looked at him. “I don’t see that there’s anything to smile about, lance corporal,” he said. “Those men shouldn’t have got away. There was no excuse. Next time, we must surround the village first, ok? We’ll talk about it later, though”

Ndlovu looked at him and smiled. “Yes, boss,” he said.

They made their way in to the kraal. The old man with the bicycle wheel and the small *piccanin*[20] had disappeared from sight.

Chalmers looked around him. “I think we’ll start with that one,” he said to Ndlovu, pointing towards one of the nearby huts.

They walked over to it, and bending slightly, Chalmers and Ndlovu went in. It was dark inside, and for a few moments, they could distinguish little.

As Chalmers’ eyes adjusted to the dimness, he picked out seven or eight women and several children squatting in a group, huddled together around a pile of embers glowing warmly on the bare earth. They stared at the two intruders with blank, unsmiling faces.

Chalmers cast his eyes over them.

“Ask them which hut the terrorists were in,” he said, turning to Ndlovu.

The lance corporal took a few steps forward. Speaking in the local dialect, his words were rapid, urgent and sharp. The women listened to him in passive silence, their faces expressionless.

Suddenly, Ndlovu raised his rifle and pointed the end of the barrel menacingly at the head of the woman nearest to him.

She didn’t move.

Chalmers scowled and taking a step forward, reached out his hand and

pushed the barrel down towards the ground.

"Don't ever let me see you do that again," he said angrily, his eyes gleaming.

At that moment, one of the little children lifted a thin arm and with eyes big and round with fear, pointed to a spot behind and slightly to the right of Chalmers, trying to indicate which hut the terrorists had used. The woman nearest to him hastily pulled the outstretched arm away.

"Thank you, young man," said Chalmers, smiling reassuringly at the child, and then, nodding to Ndlovu, he left the hut and stood in the brilliant sunshine waiting for him.

As the African came out, Chalmers looked at him severely. "I have a good mind to have you demoted, lance corporal." He paused. "We are not terrorists, and we are not going to resort to their way of doing things. Do you understand?"

Ndlovu shuffled his feet nervously. "Yes, boss," he said with a guilty look.

Chalmers turned on his heels and walked briskly away in the direction of the hut the child had indicated.

There was only one, and it stood slightly apart from all the others. He went inside, hoping that, with luck, the terrorists might have left some clue behind them in their hasty retreat which might indicate what group they belonged to and where they were presently located.

But he was disappointed.

All he found was a newspaper, an empty cigarette packet, and three filthy blankets lying in disorderly heaps on the earthen floor. A number of chipped enamel plates, some still with sadza and meat in them, lay in a broken circle near a small, blackened stove. The stuffy, foul air in the hut reeked with the smell of paraffin.

After giving the rondavel a final glance, he went back out into the sunshine.

Ndlovu, standing in the narrow band of shade cast by the over-hanging thatch of the hut, was waiting for him, an anxious look on his face.

"I am sorry about that thing, sir, but Boss Falon always does that because, otherwise, he says these people tell us nothing." He spoke apologetically, his eyes searching Chalmers' face anxiously.

Chalmers, seeing his contrite and earnest expression, relented. "It's alright, lance corporal. Until Mr. Falon goes, you must do as he says, but *always* remember—neither he nor the terrorists are our teachers. When I am in

charge, then we will do things differently." He paused. "If these people tell us nothing, then they tell us nothing. Remember, most of them are too frightened to talk. We will just have to do the best we can without their help, ok?"

Ndlovu smiled and, with his eyes still on Chalmers' face, suddenly pointed behind him to where two young women were standing some distance away, their hands clasped submissively in front of them.

Chalmers realised with irritation that Ndlovu had not really been listening to him at all. He sighed.

"We normally take people in for interrogation at the base, boss. Shall we bring these two?"

Chalmers glanced at the fulsome women.

"Your choice of whom to take back for questioning is an interesting one, lance corporal!" he said with a knowing look in his eyes. He thought for a moment. "Alright, bring them along—but I don't want any nonsense from the men, understand?"

Ndlovu grinned broadly. "Of course not, boss."

*****

As he walked into his room back at the base, hungry, hot, and tired, Chalmers glanced at his watch. It was still only twenty to eight in the morning. He lay down tiredly on the bed, resting his aching body.

Then he remembered the shower. That would soon put him right—that and some music!

Getting up, he picked up his soap and towel, and taking his portable cassette player out of his kitbag, he strolled down the verandah towards the shower-room. Passing the kitchen on his way, he put his head round the door. Misheck the cook was gazing vacantly out of the window.

"Misheck, I want sausage, egg and bacon for breakfast, please."

Misheck nodded without saying a word. He didn't even turn his head.

Just outside the kitchen, Chalmers was irritated to see that the camp's only dustbin was lying on its side, the contents scattered untidily over the ground. He returned to the kitchen.

"The dustbin has been knocked over," he said. "Did you know?"

"Yes, boss."

“Then why haven’t you cleaned it up?” he asked curtly.

“A dog—maybe he got through the fence last night,” Misheck mumbled.

Chalmers frowned. “I didn’t ask you how it was knocked over. I asked you *why* it hadn’t been cleaned up yet.” He looked hard at the African. “Go and do it now,” he ordered.

Misheck scowled and turned away, muttering under his breath.

“What did you say?” Chalmers said, his voice rising threateningly.

The African turned around but seeing the look on Chalmers’ face, gave him an uncertain half-smile. “I was just going to do it, boss.”

Chalmers eyed him coldly. “Listen to me, Misheck. I don’t like dirt, I don’t like untidiness and, above all, I don’t like liars. You and I will get on just fine if you remember that. If you don’t, life is going to be very difficult for you in the weeks ahead!”

Misheck looked at Chalmers with an appraising look on his face. He hesitated. “Yes, boss.”

Chalmers noted his tone was subdued.

“Good,” he said with a nod.

In the shower-room, he turned on the water and while he waited for it to warm up, he placed his cassette player on an upturned whisky crate that was standing against the far wall of the primitive shower.

He pressed the ‘play’ button and turned up the volume. Then, taking off his grimy, sweat-stained uniform, he stepped under the warm water with a smile of absorbed contentment as the triumphant immensities of Beethoven filled the dingy washroom around him.

CHAPTER 8

Time: 08h00

While Chalmers was showering, Falon was carrying out a routine interrogation of an old African on the verandah.

Wearing only his shorts, Falon was sitting bare-chested on an old, weathered chair behind an equally dilapidated school desk, a large notebook open in front of him. The old man sat submissively on a low bench facing him, his gnarled hands trembling. He stared at the ground with watery, bewildered eyes. Three of the DSAs were lounging around with bored expressions.

Falon turned to one of them. “Any luck on patrol this morning, Mashiri?” he asked.

The man shook his head perfunctorily. “No, boss. There were three terrs there, but they got away. We’ve brought back two women, though—nice ones, boss!” He grinned suggestively.

Falon shook his head. “You dirty bugger!”

The sun was streaming onto the verandah, and a hot, gusty wind filled the oppressive air with fine dust. A short distance from the perimeter fence, a few thin, abject cattle, their ribs standing out in stark relief, foraged for the few strands of parched fodder they could find on the arid, cracked ground.

A sudden flurry of wind raced along the verandah. As it died away, Falon turned and looked coldly at the shrivelled old man in front of him.

“Take this bloody stupid idiot away,” he said to Mashiri in a sudden burst of irritation. “Bring one of the bitches you got this morning. I could do with a bit of fun.” He smirked unpleasantly and leaning back in his chair, rubbed his stomach.

One of the DSAs, speaking a few words to the old man, gave him a rude push, telling him to go. The man blinked and standing up with difficulty, shuffled off down the verandah.

As the DSA went to fetch one of the women, Falon took a packet of

cigarettes out of his shirt pocket and taking one, lit it. As he did so, the other two DSAs got up and, ambling over to the desk, helped themselves to a cigarette each, smiling slyly at Falon as they watched his reaction.

"You cheeky bastards," he said, a slight grin on his face. The men laughed as Falon picked up his lighter and, flicking it on, held the flame up for them to light their cigarettes.

"Next time, go and buy your own," he said, blowing a cloud of smoke out of the side of his mouth.

"We've got no money, boss," Mashiri replied.

Falon looked at him unbelievingly. "You lying bastard—you were only paid a few days ago," he said.

"I know, boss, but its all gone," Mashiri answered with a wide grin.

Falon shook his head, an amused look on his face. "I suppose you've blown it all on women and dagga—as usual."

The two DSAs laughed uproariously.

At that moment, they heard the sound of softly scuffling bare feet from the end of the verandah. They turned and watched as a well-built young woman came towards them. The DSA who had fetched her pushed her roughly into a sitting position on the bench opposite Falon and went and sat nearby on the low verandah wall.

Falon looked the woman up and down appraisingly, a slow smile spreading across his face.

The three DSAs, seeing his expression, winked and grinned at each other in anticipation. There was a long silence.

"This one's alright," Falon said after a while with a suggestive look. "What's your name, you kaffir bitch?" he asked in a harsh voice, looking at her.

The girl mumbled inaudibly, looking at her fingers.

"Speak up!" he shouted.

"Marita."

"Marita *what*?" he demanded.

"Makwara."

"What kraal do you come from?"

"Nyakende," she said almost in a whisper.

"When did you last see the terrorists?" Falon demanded, frowning at her.

She didn't answer but continued to look at her hands.

“I’ll ask again: when did you last see the terrorists?” he said menacingly.

She twisted the clasped fingers of each hand together in anguish but still said nothing.

Mashiri, speaking in Shona, shouted at her. They all waited in silence for her reply.

“I have not seen the terrorists since last year,” she said in a faint voice.

Falon slowly stood up and moved with deliberation round the desk until he stood over her. Without any warning, he suddenly brought up his hand and struck her across the side of her head—a blow so hard and unexpected that she lost her balance and with a cry of pain, fell sideways, striking her head on the wall as she fell.

“You lying bitch,” he shouted, standing over her. “You slept with the *kandangas*[21] last night. Stop telling me lies.”

He walked back to his chair, and the woman, rubbing her face, slowly got up and meekly sat down on the bench again.

“Now, when did you last see the terrorists?” Falon repeated.

She looked up at him with pleading eyes. “I have not seen them,” she wailed in a tiny, frightened voice.

The DSA nearest her sneered and, leaning over, raised his clenched hand and swung it down with force on the crown of her head. She cried out and, cowering down, covered her head protectively with shaking hands. The man straightened up, looking at the others with a satisfied grin.

Falon waited a moment and then turned to Mashiri: “You said you saw three terrs there this morning, didn’t you?”

Mashiri nodded his head.

“Well then, let’s have some fun! Go and get the machine, Chomo.”

“Yes, boss!” Chomo said with a grin and walked away jauntily down the verandah.

At that moment, the base’s black and white cat, Belinda, appeared and slowly walked towards the group. She stopped, meowed plaintively, before sitting down and then started to lick herself, a back leg pointing stiffly in the air. As Chomo reappeared a few minutes later, she stopped and watched him for a moment and then, unconcernedly, resumed her toilet.

Falon grinned at the African. “You know what to do,” he said, taking out another cigarette.

Chomo quickly unravelled the thin, yellow wires that were coiled around the generator and, taking hold of the two crocodile clips that were attached to the ends, clipped one on each of the bewildered woman's big toes. He then handed the machine to Falon.

Mashiri, a newly-enlisted DSA, walked to the desk and studied the generator. "I haven't seen one of these before, boss. What does it do?"

Falon looked up at him. "This, my black friend, is an ingenious piece of equipment. When you turn the handle—like *so*!—it gives quite a nasty little shock." As he spoke, he gave the handle a swift 180-degree turn, a sadistic smile on his face.

The effect was immediate. The girl convulsed and cried out in agony.

The DSAs laughed with delight.

"Now," said Falon, turning to the woman again, "unless you tell me the truth, my White Man's devil machine is going to make you sing and dance like a bloody little bird on a hot tin roof. Understand?" He laid the generator down carefully on the desk where she could see it clearly and then clasped his hands together.

Suddenly changing the tone of his voice and leaning forward menacingly, he said—quite softly: "Now, you kaffir bitch, when did you last see the terrorists, and how many were there?"

Her eyes were full of fear. "Please, *please*, boss. I haven't seen them," she pleaded.

Falon sat back.

"Right, if that's how you want it—" he said. He turned and looked at Mashiri. "You ready? Here comes the little birdie, tweet-tweet!" As he spoke, he wrenched the handle backwards and forwards rapidly—ten, eleven, twelve times—sending excruciating electric shocks, one after the other, through the young woman's body with each vicious twist.

She screamed and fell on her knees, her face contorted with pain. As the shocks went on, she fell helplessly on her side, shrieking and kicking her legs violently. The watching men guffawed in delight as she writhed on the concrete, her body twisting convulsively. Her thin dress rode up her well-fleshed thighs revealing her black, shining legs and worn underwear.

Falon took a deep breath. "*Now* let's see if she'll talk."

The clips were removed. The woman, her cheeks streaked with tears which had channelled little rivulets through the dust and grime on her face, stood up

shaking violently. She hastily tried to cover herself up, pulling down the hem of her dress, before sitting down on the bench again.

Falon stared at her intently. “When did you last see the terrorists?” he resumed in a quiet voice, almost as if it were the first time he had asked the question.

“Last night,” the woman whispered after a pause. She sniffed loudly.

A satisfied grin appeared on his face. “Where?”

“At my home in Nyakende.”

“How many?”

“Three—” She hesitated. “Yes, three. I remember.”

“What are their names?”

There was a moment’s silence. “I don’t know their names,” she said fearfully.

Falon scowled. “Do you want more of the machine again?” he asked threateningly.

A look of alarm spread across the woman’s tear-streaked face. With a moan, she fell on her knees pleadingly in front of him. Speaking hurriedly and looking around her in anguish, she cried: “If I tell you, they will come and kill me.”

Falon looked at her in silence for a moment. “Christ, you people make me sick!” he spat out in disgust, leaning back in his chair.

“Let’s put the clips on her tits, boss,” Matola interjected excitedly.

Falon turned to the woman: “Do you hear that? You tell me the truth or—” he tailed off.

Without waiting for an answer, Matola leant forward and ripped the top of her dress open, pulling it down over her shoulders to expose her full breasts. As he roughly fastened the serrated clips to her nipples, the young woman winced in pain as the sharp teeth bit into the soft tissue. After rearranging the wires, Matola stood up and putting his hands on his hips, looked appraisingly at the sobbing girl for a few moments, a dark expression in his eyes.

Falon sniggered impatiently. “Come on, come on, you dirty bugger!” he said, his eyes shining. “You can have *your* fun later when I’ve finished!”

The DSA laughed and rubbed his hands together. “OK, boss, this should be good.”

The girl’s eye widened in fear as, with calculated cruelty, Falon slowly started turning the handle.

*****

Over the stirring finale of the *Eroica* that mingled with the splash of water on bare concrete, Chalmers suddenly became conscious of another sound. It seemed almost like a high-pitched scream! Puzzled, he quickly turned off the taps and, reaching for the towel to dry his hands, switched off the cassette player and stood stock still, listening intently.

There it was again—it *was* a scream, and it was coming from the direction of the verandah!

After drying himself and dressing hastily, he made his way hurriedly towards the verandah. As he stepped out into the glare of the sunshine, he stopped in disbelief as the full horror of the nauseating scene before him sank in—Falon, the excited DSAs and the half-naked, tortured girl.

A wave of rage and revulsion overwhelmed him.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!” Chalmers shouted as he strode over to the group and stooped down to release the clips from the woman’s breasts.

The DSAs looked at him nervously, guilty expressions on their faces, before turning to look uncertainly at Falon.

As he stood up, Chalmers turned to face Falon who had risen to his feet and was glaring angrily at him.

“What the hell’s *your* bloody problem?” Falon growled.

Chalmers’ eyes narrowed. “God! People like you are beneath contempt!”

Falon, his veins standing out on his forehead with suppressed anger, stared at him for a moment in speechless rage. For a moment, he seemed he was about to hit Chalmers but, thinking better of it, he suddenly turned on his heel and walked away towards a nearby door.

Reaching it, he turned and glared blackly at Chalmers. “Go and get stuffed, you fucking pommy bastard,” he spat out, clearly articulating each word.

CHAPTER 9

The same morning—the same time.

Assegai Kopje is a long, low, well-treed hill lying less than a kilometre to the west of Chitangwe base camp. From its gentle slopes, it is easy to see across the intervening broken ground, and it is an ideal vantage point from which to study, undisturbed, the layout of the camp's various buildings and defences.

At the moment, a thin, undernourished African boy of about twelve years of age is there, squatting on a large flat rock in the shade of a msasa tree. He is watching the group of tiny figures on the long, sunlit verandah intently.

John Tapere, herd-boy and now a useful *mujiba*, scowls. What are they talking about? he wonders. He stares hard. He must try and find out what is being said.

He stands up and making his way carefully down the hill, strolls in a nonchalant manner towards the scattered cattle that are grazing near the camp's boundary fence. He swishes a long, thin stick as he lopes carelessly along whistling tunelessly to himself.

As he draws near the wire-mesh fence, he can now clearly make out the figures on the verandah. He sees one of the women who were taken by the patrol from Nyakende kraal early this morning. With her are five men—three black men, two white. The woman seems to be hurt and Tapere can just hear her softly crying.

Stroking one of the cows in a preoccupied manner, he continues to watch surreptitiously over its bony back. He recognises the big, fat white man, the base commander, who suddenly stands up and, after a few moments, walks off down the verandah. Tapere looks curiously at the other white man. Maybe this one is the new boss, he thinks.

Just then, he sees the fat boss stop briefly, turn around and angrily say something before going inside the building. John Tapere strains to hear the words, but the sound doesn't carry far enough. After a few moments, the other white man also leaves the verandah through another door.

Now it is only the DSAs who are with the woman. Tapere watches as one of them walks over to the low wall and sits down on it. He says something to the woman who, still crying, goes over and stands with her head bowed submissively in front of him. He puts his arm out and roughly pulls her down close to him.

John Tapere hears the DSA laugh and pulls a disappointed face. There's nothing of interest to learn now. Later, perhaps.

He saunters off, leaving the cattle to graze. Once he is safe from any possible observation, he breaks into a run. He is anxious to tell the comrades what he has seen. They will be pleased with him.

Several minutes later, sweat-stained and panting hard for breath, the boy reaches the guerrillas' hideout. They are lying around lazily in a small clearing under some trees. There are about 20 of them.

"They have the women from Nyakende kraal at the camp," he says breathlessly. "I think one of them talked."

Several of the terrorists look over at a powerful-looking man—Black Satan—who is sporting a large pair of black sunglasses. He has a small beard and is dressed in typical guerrilla bush clothing: green jeans, brown jacket, black peaked-cap.

At well over 1.8 metres tall, the group's leader is a menacing figure.

"Of course they have the women—*idiot!*" He spits on the ground contemptuously. "That is why we will go and see the bitches again when they go back to Nyakende. We know how to deal with those who talk too much," he sneers contemptuously.

Tapere smiles uncertainly as Black Satan's meaning becomes clear to him.

"Now, go! Find out something we *don't* know," the leader growled threateningly. "When the fat one is leaving; when the women are returning to Nyakende—understand?"

Although disappointed, Tapere nods, desperately anxious to please. "Where will I find you?"

"The same place as before—and keep your mouth shut! You know what we do to sell-outs." Black Satan draws his hand across his throat in a menacing gesture.

John Tapere's eyes widen in fear. He licks his lips quickly and runs off.

Once he's out of earshot, Black Satan turns to his lieutenant, Letson, a deep frown creasing his forehead. "If the women *have* talked, maybe they have

told them where we are. Tonight, we move to the caves near Magomba kraal —the whities won't go there." He pauses and then looks meaningfully at Letson. "And when the women return to Nyakende, we will go and have some fun with them!" His eyes narrow. "Then, it is time to visit the new white bastard at the camp and show him who's *really* boss around here!"

He lets out a loud, derisive laugh.

CHAPTER 10

During lunch, Falon was silent, absorbed in his own thoughts, and he picked at the unappetising food moodily.

Suddenly looking up at Chalmers, he said: “We’ll leave for Umsholo shortly after the Pookie[22] arrives. Hermes is sending one over with a driver to escort us.” He spoke in a suppressed voice.

Both of them were carefully pretending to have put the morning’s brief, but bitter, exchange behind them, but it still lay smouldering just below the surface.

“And what is a Pookie?” Chalmers asked coldly.

Staring fixedly at his plate, Falon went on chewing a mouthful of food. He swallowed it, picked up his glass of water, took a drink and then, slowly and deliberately, moved his food around his plate with his fork before answering.

“A Pookie,” he said, emphasising his words as if he were speaking to a rather simple child, “is a mine detection vehicle. It travels ahead of a convoy and detects any mines that may have been laid in the track on which the convoy intends travelling.”

He put his fork down on the plate with exaggerated care and pushing his chair away from the table, got up and walked out of the room without another word.

Chalmers sighed. “Thank God there’s only a few more hours before he goes,” he muttered softly to himself.

Finishing his lunch, Chalmers went and lay down on the sofa at the other end of the room and listened to the portable radio. A *Forces Request* programme was being broadcast. Every few minutes, the sound faded and then, equally unpredictably, surged back. His eyelids grew heavier and heavier. Within minutes, he was fast asleep.

*****

Chalmers woke abruptly, drenched in perspiration. Startled and slightly befuddled, he lifted his head and glanced uncomprehendingly around him. For a moment, he couldn't remember where he was. Then, becoming conscious of someone in the doorway, he turned his head.

A young man of about 20, tanned, alert and muscular, stood in the entrance looking at him with an amiable smile. He wore a t-shirt and black shorts.

"Sorry if I woke you," the young man said in a friendly voice, coming into the room.

Feeling his habitual sense of awkwardness, Chalmers swung his legs rapidly off the sofa and sat up. He was now wide-awake.

"Not at all," he said. "Take a pew." He straightened his ruffled hair with his hands.

"I'm Wally—the Pookie driver," the young man said with a grin, introducing himself. "Also known as Pookie, the Wally driver, to my friends!" He laughed and pulled a comical face.

Chalmers grinned broadly at the nonsensical overture. "Hi. My name's Mike—Mike Chalmers." He stood up somewhat stiffly after his short, but deep, sleep. "Pleased to meet you, Pookie!"

The young man chuckled. "Hell, man, it's like a cemetery in here!" he said, glancing around the room. "Hit me with some groovy music, Dad!" he went on, clicking his fingers rhythmically.

Chalmers, thoroughly entertained, stood watching the young man's antics, a broad smile on his face.

"You heard me! Let's move it!" said Wally breezily, then without waiting, he strode over to the radio and started flicking through the stations. "Do you mind?" he suddenly asked apologetically, looking round at Chalmers.

"No, of course not—help yourself," replied Chalmers, sitting down on the sofa again. "If you can't find anything you like, I've got some tapes in my room that you'd obviously enjoy very much."

"Oh? What of?" asked Wally, interestedly, without turning around.

"Mainly Beethoven, but it should be just up your street, I imagine!"

Wally turned round and stared at him in disbelief. "You on drugs or something?" he asked incredulously.

Chalmers chuckled. "Not yet, but I think I soon will be!"

Wally shook his head. "God, you had me worried there for a minute!"

Finding some pop music to his taste, Wally leapt nimbly over the arm of

one of the chairs and stretched out his legs, drumming his fingers on his thighs in time to the beat.

"Are you here just for the Umsholo run this afternoon?" asked Chalmers, raising his voice above the music.

Wally shook his head. "No. My orders are to stay here as long as you need me, Mon Capitaine." He gave a mock bow from the waist up. "I am yours to command, O Most Terrible Master!"

Chalmers chuckled. He loved this sort of buffoonery. "Good! Then I certainly hope you will stay—a long time!"

"OK, if I must, I suppose I must," replied Wally, banteringly.

"So, where do you come from?" asked Chalmers after a few moments of easy, unstrained silence.

"I was born here," Wally answered in a preoccupied manner. He was looking at the pin-ups on the wall and listening to the music.

"And your parents?" Chalmers asked with curiosity. The man interested him.

"My mother comes from England—Oxfordshire—but my Dad's South African."

"So, how long have you—?"

"Wow!" exclaimed Wally, cutting Chalmers short. "Just look at that chick!" He got up quickly and went across to take a closer look at one of the centrespreads taped to the wall. "Now *that's* what I call a woman!"

It was a picture of a girl in a tight, blue miniskirt who was posing saucily on a short ladder. She was looking over her shoulders at the camera, a beguiling look on her attractive face.

Chalmers joined him. "Hmmm, yes—very nice, huh? Just my type!"

Wally looked at him. "Watch it, Dad! She's mine, and I'm rough, tough and dangerous. Besides, you're way too old!"

Chalmers burst into laughter. Funny, he thought, how, with some people, such talk was just inoffensive fun while, with others—Falon for instance—it quickly degenerated into something altogether more sordid and unpleasant. Interesting, too, he mused, how different people brought out totally different aspects of one's own personality.

Wally took a last look at the picture. "She'd go crazy over me." He leant forward and in a mock French accent, drawled: "Never mind, *ma cheri*, just wait 'til I'm on R&R—and *that*," he added in his normal voice, "is,

according to my calculations, in only another 29 days—“ he looked at his watch, “5 hours, 23 minutes and about 10 seconds—give or take a couple of weeks!” He turned and walked back to his chair. “But who’s counting!” he added with a boyish grin.

They both laughed.

At that moment, Falon appeared in the doorway. Like the sun going behind a heavy cloud, the atmosphere immediately changed and became tense and sombre.

“Afternoon,” he said curtly, nodding at Wally.

Wally returned the greeting good-naturedly.

Falon ignored the friendly response. “*If* it’s no trouble—” he said sarcastically, “we’re all ready—when *you* are!” and, turning on his heels, he left the room.

Wally looked at Chalmers with a surprised look. “Who on earth was *that*?”

Chalmers grinned broadly. “George Falon, the base commander—and don’t you forget it.”

“But I was told *you* were,” said Wally, raising his dark eyebrows questioningly.

“Ah, I shall be later on today—when Falon leaves—that is,” he added with a grin, “if we’re not all dead and buried by then! So you can muck about all you like until then but, after that, you’d better be very careful, my boy!” He gave Wally a friendly clap on the back.

Wally came to attention, stamping his left foot down on the floor with exaggerated vigour. “Sir!” he shouted, poker-faced, his body rigid and straight as a rod.

Chalmers grinned appreciatively. “Come on, you idiot, we’d better not keep Sir George Falon waiting any longer!”

Wally went and turned off the radio.

“Oh, stuff him!” he said. “I wasn’t told what time we were leaving.”

“Nor me,” replied Chalmers as they left the staff lounge.

After stopping by Chalmers’ room to collect his rifle and cigarettes, the two men made their way to the waiting vehicles.

“All I hope is that you know what you’re doing,” Chalmers continued. “Have you much experience with landmines?”

Wally turned and looked at him in mock surprise. “Landmines? *Landmines!* What the hell are they? I was hoping *you* knew all about things like that!”

Chalmers chuckled, then catching sight of the four vehicles, he exclaimed: “Christ! They *are* all waiting for us. I thought he was only saying that to make us feel guilty!”

Wally stared at the lorry and trailer that was crammed with all the fuel drums.

“Bloody hell!” he ejaculated, a concerned look on his sunburnt face. “Just look at all the fuel on the back of that bloody trailer there!” He whistled softly, shaking his head slowly in disbelief. “Holy Moses! I don’t fancy being around if the gooks[23] hit *that* little lot. It’ll be ‘Bye, bye, baby’ for all of us!”

The sight had also taken Chalmers somewhat aback, and he eyed the trailer speculatively. “Yes,” he murmured, “I think you’re right. We’ll probably all be barbecued to a crisp, if you ask me.”

Wally crossed his fingers with a smile. “Oh well, maybe we won’t run into any trouble.” Suddenly turning serious, he added: “By the way, Mike, I don’t mean to be rude but have you ever been in a convoy like this before?”

Chalmers shook his head. There seemed little point in pretending otherwise.

“Not to worry,” replied Wally. “It’s all pretty self-evident really. I assume you’ll be driving that Leopard there, the one immediately behind me. The main thing is to try and follow in my tracks as best you can and keep a reasonable distance apart.”

“And what is a reasonable distance?”

“About 100 metres or so—just enough so that if one of us hits a tin[24], it doesn’t damage the other vehicles as well.” He glanced at the fuel-laden trailer and, with a wry grin, added: “But I’d keep well away from *that* bloody thing if I were you!”

Chalmers, ignoring the quip, looked at him queryingly: “How far do you reckon?”

Wally laughed. “About 25 kilometres, I’d say!”

Chalmers grinned. “Right. Anything else?”

“If we *are* ambushed, put your foot down hard and get the hell out of the killing zone as quickly as you can. If you stop, you don’t stand much chance of getting out—in one piece, that is!”

Chalmers nodded. “Fortunately that’s something I *do* know a little about—we did quite a lot of training on ambushes,” he said.

“Good.” Wally rubbed his hands on his shorts, wiping off the perspiration.

Chalmers, noticing the gesture, grinned. “Nervous?”

Wally raised his eyebrows in surprise. “What me? No, I’m not nervous at all.” He gave a short laugh. “Just petrified!”

Chalmers chuckled. “Well, I’m glad somebody else is,” he said.

There was a moment’s silence.

“OK, Wally, I suppose we’d better get going!” said Chalmers, walking away towards the Leopard that had been assigned to him.

“See you!” Wally called out and, giving a half-wave, walked briskly towards the Pookie waiting at the head of the small column of vehicles.

Chalmers climbed into the back of the Leopard, casting a quick glance at the lorry behind. It was crowded with subdued DSAs who were sitting, back to back, on a central bench that ran down the entire rear of the vehicle.

Behind the lorry and trailer with its heavy load of fuel, Chalmers could just make out the face of Falon watching him coldly through the narrow windscreen of the second Leopard that brought up the rear of the small convoy.

Chalmers climbed up into the vehicle and, easing himself past the five seated DSAs who were accompanying him, squeezed himself into the bare metal driving seat and fastened the seatbelt. He looked blankly at the simple dashboard. Suddenly undoing his seatbelt, he got up, climbed out and walked briskly over to the Pookie.

With its long, cigarette-shaped mine detector tubes protruding from each side, it was a decidedly odd-looking contraption. To get into it, the driver needed to climb up over the front wheels and squeeze himself into a small, turret-like opening at the top. There was only room for one man in it.

Wally was revving the engine loudly and, using an internally operated control, was checking the detectors, moving them up and down several times. Chalmers knocked loudly on the Pookie’s scarred, armour-plated side.

The engine noise suddenly died away and Wally popped his head over the top of the turret.

“What the hell do you want now, Dad? I’m a busy man,” he said looking down at Chalmers and trying to keep a straight face.

“I didn’t think of it before, but I’ve never driven a Leopard. What are the gears?”

“Bloody hell!” exclaimed Wally, shaking his head. “The poor quality of the

men they're sending up into the forward operational areas these days! No wonder the war's going on so long!"

"No, seriously, man—what are they?" Chalmers said, frowning.

"Well, if it's like this broken-down heap, you'll only have first and reverse, but if it's working properly—which I doubt—it'll have four forward and one reverse. Usual Volkswagen or Chevy gearbox. Now, as much as I'd like to spend the afternoon chatting to you, do you mind if we get going?" he went on. "I've got important things to do, even if you haven't!"

Wally suddenly disappeared from view and switched the engine on again. A dense cloud of black, oily smoke blew out the vehicle's rusted exhaust.

Barely a second later, he popped up again. "God! What a smell!" he exclaimed, glancing at the cloud of smoke. "Hey, Mike," he yelled after Chalmers' retreating figure. "D'you know the way to Umsholo? I've never been there before!"

Chalmers stopped and turned round, eyes twinkling. "Good God, the poor quality of the men …!"

Wally jeered. "Well? *Do* you?"

Chalmers shook his head. "Haven't a clue—I thought you did!"

Wally stared at him. "Oh Christ, this is going to be nothing but a fucking suicide mission if you ask me!" he said with feeling, sliding down out of sight inside the turret and slamming the lid down after him with a loud clang.

Chalmers, still chuckling at Wally's remark, climbed back into the Leopard, strapped himself in again and searched for the ignition switch. Locating it, he turned the key. The engine burst into life.

Moving the gear lever into the left-forward position, he cautiously eased out the clutch and, to his relief, felt the Leopard move slightly. Making himself as comfortable as he could in the hard seat, he leant forward, frowning as he looked at the dirty windscreen. He rubbed it with his hand. It obviously hadn't been cleaned for a long time.

"This must be washed properly as soon as we get back," he said, turning to Lance Corporal Ndlovu who was sitting slightly behind to his left.

Ndlovu grinned and nodded.

Turning back, Chalmers watched the Pookie slowly move towards the camp gates that were now wide open. The mine detection vehicle gathered speed, bumped onto the airstrip and, turning right, drove away in a billowing cloud of dust and grit.

Letting it get some way ahead, Chalmers followed it onto the airstrip. Glancing out behind him through the narrow side window, he saw the truck with its twelve-man escort and trailer piled high with its stacked drums of diesel and helicopter fuel, slowly begin to move towards the gates. At the end of the airstrip, where it joined a dirt track which ran past a nearby kraal, Chalmers saw the Pookie's two warning lights, which were mounted near the top of its turret, flash on

He slowed down and came to a standstill as Wally's head unexpectedly appeared over the top of the Pookie's turret. Wally turned and then pointed with his arm first to the left and then to the right, questioningly.

"Which way?" Chalmers asked turning to Ndlovu.

"Left, boss."

Chalmers undid his seatbelt and, half-standing, squeezed as much of his arm as he could out through the gap where the canvas roof was laced to the top of the Leopard's armour-plated sides. He indicated the correct direction as best he could.

Wally peered hard and then, waving his hand in acknowledgement, disappeared from view.

*****

The tortuous dirt road to Umsholo was not one that anyone 'in the know' relished. Seldom used, even in peacetime, it had now fallen into almost complete disuse. The whole area through which it ran was known to be infested with terrorists, and many stretches of the deeply sanded and corrugated surface had been booby-trapped and laid with landmines.

Nicknamed 'Hell Run' by those who had made the two-and-a-half hour journey and survived, the track twisted and turned around steep, densely-bushed *kopjes*[25], and down through narrow, rocky defiles which frequently levelled out without warning onto low-level, often precarious, derelict bridges. Every kilometre of the route offered numerous opportunities for a terrorist ambush.

Chalmers had already heard of its dangerous reputation on more than one occasion, and though determined not to show it, he had secretly been dreading the forthcoming expedition.

But, now that the convoy was actually underway, Chalmers unexpectedly found that he had little time to worry about what might lie ahead. As the four vehicles gathered speed, the air was filled with a choking, all-enveloping cloud of bitter-tasting dust and sand that hung almost motionless in the hot, still afternoon air, totally obscuring the drivers' view of the road and the other vehicles in the convoy.

Chalmers, who had little experience of driving on such remote and isolated roads, peered anxiously through the windscreen in an attempt to keep to the Pookie's ill-defined tracks. As they drove on, swerving and bucketing from side to side over the deeply-pitted and ridged surface, it became increasingly obvious to Chalmers that Wally had overlooked the fact that while, as lead vehicle, his own view of the road ahead was virginally clear, those in his wake were not nearly so fortunate. Driving in the blinding clouds of dust churned up by the Pookie's wide tyres, it was almost impossible for Chalmers, following behind, to maintain a constant speed or distance with any degree of safety.

Approaching a sharp corner, he was about to reduce speed when the Leopard's left front wheel suddenly hit a deep bank of sand. The vehicle rose up on one side, bounced jarringly over some partially concealed rocks nearby and slewed across the road, coming to a standstill at an angle, half–blocking the track.

A heavy silence descended on the hot, dust-filled vehicle.

Suddenly remembering the vehicles following behind, Chalmers glanced quickly out of the narrow side window, his heart tightening as, dimly through the slowly swirling dust, he caught a shadowy glimpse of the truck swinging round the corner and, unaware of his presence, accelerate towards him.

Frantically, he turned the ignition key mentally urging the engine to fire. It burst into life. Ramming the gear lever into first, he put his foot down hard on the accelerator. The Leopard lurched forward, its engine whining in protest, rear wheels spinning furiously in the loose sand.

Just in time, the tyres gained traction, and the Leopard lurched back into the middle of the road. As it did so, he shot a look at the rear mirror. To his intense relief, he saw the approaching truck recede from view in the violently churning dust that they had thrown up.

He took a deep breath and slowly exhaled between tightly pursed lips. His shirt was wringing wet. His face, neck and upper chest were covered in a

fine, streaked layer of dirt, and when he licked his dry lips, the taste was bitter and gritty.

Tapping his fingers on the wet steering wheel, he turned to look at Lance Corporal Ndlovu. “That was fun, wasn’t it!” he said with a chuckle.

Ndlovu and the other DSAs started laughing and chatting among themselves, releasing their tension.

When a level stretch of road opened up, Chalmers awkwardly prised his cigarettes from his shirt pocket with one hand. Without taking his eyes from the road, he handed the packet to Ndlovu. “Light one for me, will you, please—and see if anyone else wants one,” he added over his shoulder.

A few moments later, he felt a tap on his arm and a lit cigarette appeared by the side of his face.

“Thanks,” he said, gratefully taking it from the outstretched hand. Exhaling a cloud of smoke, he mused how, only a few short days ago, nothing would have induced him to smoke a cigarette someone else had put in their mouth! Now, it just didn’t seem that important any more.

As he gradually grew accustomed to handling the Leopard, he eased himself back in the hard, unforgiving seat. To his intense surprise, he realised that, for the first time in years, he felt happy—not just superficially, but deeply so. He started humming to himself very softly and—as far as the restricted visibility of the Leopard allowed—looked around with interest at the surrounding kopjes and the flat-topped msasa trees rising out of the ochre-tinted elephant grass and dry, brown-yellow scrub. In the scorching afternoon sun, the sky was like a lake of deep, tropical blue.

Chalmers turned his eyes back to the road. With a start, he realised that the Pookie was nowhere in sight and that, for a while, he had completely forgotten all about it—along with all thought of landmines, ambushes and terrorists!

The stretch of road immediately ahead curved gently away to the right, and a little further on, Chalmers noted that it appeared to dip down out of sight. He braked gently, slowing the Leopard to walking speed and, putting the gear lever into neutral, allowed the vehicle to come creakingly to a halt at the top of the decline.

Chalmers felt his stomach lurch as, looking through the windscreen, he saw with a sinking heart that the road fell away a couple of hundred metres into a steep, rocky gorge. At the bottom, surrounded by over-hanging hills and

trees, was a small, very narrow, low-level bridge that spanned a dry, rock-strewn riverbed that gleamed whitely in the sun's glare.

Chalmers, who had a fear of heights, studied the wild, yet romantic beauty of the scene before him. There was perfect silence. A small movement far below caught his attention. Narrowing his eyes, he concentrated hard on the bridge. He could just make out the Pookie which, slipping and slithering, was slowly approaching the low concrete structure. The bridge appeared to have no guardrails or protective walls and, as far as Chalmers could make out from such a distance, looked so narrow that only small vehicles would be capable of crossing it.

His thoughts were broken into by the arrival of the truck and trailer that came to a halt a few metres behind the Leopard.

He turned back and looked down into the ravine. He watched as the Pookie's braking lights flashed on—mere pinpricks of washed-out red in the distance—as Wally came to a stop a metre or so from the bridge.

Chalmers glanced round at the now-tense DSAs who, sensing a potential ambush but unable to see anything beyond the confined, windowless vehicle, sat in rigid silence looking at each other apprehensively.

Chalmers smiled at them reassuringly. "Nothing to worry about," he told them in a relaxed, confident voice. "The Pookie's just come to a bridge, that's all."

The heat in the Leopard was stifling, and Chalmers could feel trickles of perspiration running down his chest and back.

To his puzzlement, he saw Wally's head and shoulders appear unexpectedly above the top of the small turret, and then he climbed out of the Pookie altogether and jumped to the ground, his rifle and mine prodder in hand.

Assuming that he had detected a mine, Chalmers was surprised to see him start making his way up the slope towards the waiting vehicles instead.

Impatient to find out what the problem was, Chalmers hastily undid his safety belt, grabbed his FN, and climbed out onto the Leopard's rear wheel. He could smell the hot rubber of the tyres.

Jumping to the ground, he started walking gingerly down the slippery, stone-covered track towards Wally. He felt totally exposed and, in his tension, he pictured in his mind the many hidden eyes that he imagined were

closely watching him. His veldskoens[26] lightly crunching on the gravely surface of the road was the only sound in the oppressive silence.

As they approached each other from opposite directions, Chalmers called out: “What’s up, Wally?”

“There’s something down there by the bridge,” Wally said, panting hard. He was drenched in sweat. They stood in the road for a few moments while Wally regained his breath.

“But why have you come back?” asked Chalmers, puzzled.

“I can’t find my handset[27]. I’m hoping some idiot put it in your Leopard by mistake.” He paused. “If it wasn’t, I’m going to put in for an immediate transfer,” he added with a grin.

“I haven’t seen it,” said Chalmers, “but let’s check.”

As they turned and started walking back up the hill, Wally glanced around somewhat apprehensively. “Jeepers! What a fantastic place—perfect for an ambush!”

Chalmers nodded. “Just what I’ve been thinking.”

They reached the Leopard and, leaning over the rear wheel, Chalmers looked inside at the expectant DSAs. “Is there a mine detector in there somewhere?”

The DSAs looked around on the floor and felt underneath the long seats with their hands.

“Is this it, sir?” asked Ndlovu, holding up a black-handled piece of equipment.

Wally peered over Chalmers shoulder. “*Ja!* That’s it, thank God!” he exclaimed in a relieved voice. “Give the man a medal!”

The Africans laughed appreciatively.

Chalmers reached forward and took it from Ndlovu. “Looks like a bloody vacuum cleaner,” he said, passing it to Wally.

“Yep,” said Wally with a grin. “It is. I thought I’d just give the Pookie a bit of a clean!”

As they turned away, Wally glanced at Chalmers, hesitating a little: “It feels rather lonely down there by myself, Dad—I don’t suppose you’d like to keep me company, would you? Even you’d be better than no one!”

Chalmers grinned. “You must be joking!” he exclaimed, then, seeing the anxious look in Wally’s eyes, he smiled. “Sure, why not? I can help you

clean the Pookie!”

Wally smiled with relief.

Chalmers looked at the Leopard thoughtfully. “I don’t think it would be advisable to take the Leopard down there, though. We’d better walk.”

“OK, Dad, let’s go!” said Wally brightly.

Chalmers laid a detaining hand on his arm. “Hold on a mo’.”

He went back to the Leopard and put his head inside. “Lance corporal, we think there might be a mine down there. Get the men spread out down the hill to cover us.”

Ndlovu nodded. “Yes, sir.”

While the DSAs clambered out, Wally and Chalmers walked slowly down the hill. Neither man spoke, both unwilling to break the tense silence. As they approached the Pookie, Chalmers glanced back and saw the last of the DSAs disappear from view into the surrounding bush. It was reassuring.

Reaching the stationary vehicle, Wally handed the prodder to Chalmers and, switching on the detector, slowly and methodically went over the uneven ground a couple of metres in front of the Pookie. He stopped as it suddenly emitted a shrill, whining noise.

“Here it is,” said Wally tensely, looking down at a sand-covered patch of ground.

He took the prodder from Chalmers and started gently nosing the loose surface. Feeling metal, he put the prodder on the ground and, kneeling down, began delicately brushing the sand away with his hands.

Chalmers watched him with beating heart, his eyes riveted to the spot. He half-expected the mine to explode in their faces at any moment. He was oblivious to everything except Wally’s hands carefully moving the sand to one side with a surgeon’s precision.

Suddenly, there was a glint of metal in the fierce sun. Chalmers could feel the artery in his throat throbbing as he watched Wally feel around in the soft sand.

All of a sudden, he saw Wally’s hands freeze. “Bloody hell!” he exclaimed, sitting down unexpectedly in the road, a broad grin of sheer relief on his face. “It’s a sodding baked bean tin!” He picked up the flattened can and examined it for a moment before tossing it with disgust into the dry riverbed. “The fishes can have it!” he grinned.

Two or three seconds later, Chalmers heard a faint metallic clink as it

landed on the rock-strewn bed below.

He breathed out deeply in relief and then looked at Wally. “Well, young man, when you’ve finished playing sand-castles, perhaps we might get going. We’ve still got a long way to go, I imagine.” He thumped him lightly on the back.

Wally nodded. “OK, Dad, let’s hit the road!” He vigorously brushed the dust off his shorts with his hands. “By the way, Mike, I don’t want to worry you, but these detectors can’t pick up the new plastic mines they’ve started using nowadays!”

Chalmers stared at him. “Christ, I wish you hadn’t told me that! It’s being so cheerful that keeps you going, isn’t it?” He turned and started walking back up the hill. “Give me a few minutes to get back to the Leopard before you move off, won’t you?” he said over his shoulder.

Wally watched him for a few moments. “OK. And don’t forget to round up the DSAs!” he shouted.

“I’m not senile, you know!” called Chalmers, walking on.

There was a meaningful silence. “You could have fooled me!” shouted Wally from a distance

Chalmers grinned.

‘Hey, Dad!”

“What *now!*”

There was a short silence. “Thanks!”

Without turning round, Chalmers gave a brief wave of acknowledgement.

He smiled to himself. *A great kid, that*.

CHAPTER 11

Collecting the DSAs on the way, Chalmers trudged back up the hill and reaching the stationary Leopard, climbed back in and re-started the engine.

With his fingers gently tapping the burning hot steering wheel, he sat watching the Pookie that, after a few minutes, began edging slowly across the bridge. Chalmers noticed that Wally had centred it perfectly. It stopped briefly as it safely reached the far side, and then Chalmers heard the faint sound of gears grating. This was followed by a high-pitched whine from its labouring engine as Wally tried to pick up enough speed to rush the steep and slippery ascent up the hillside opposite.

Chalmers sat for a few more moments until the Pookie disappeared from view around a bend in the road. Releasing the handbrake, he jammed his foot down on the worn brake pedal and let the Leopard roll gently and quietly down the hill

The Leopard's bodywork creaked and groaned softly as the vehicle inched its way down, its engine almost inaudibly ticking over.

Chalmers clenched his jaw as he cast his eyes over the surrounding hills, searching for any hint that they might be moving into an ambush.

At any moment, he thought, a rocket might come flashing out from the steep, precipitous hillsides and tear into the helpless Leopard. At any moment, he might himself be just a mangled heap of broken bone and torn, bleeding flesh. *Michael Chalmers (47). Died 20.11.197–-.* Impossible! That only happens to other people, he thought fiercely.

He frowned as he remembered the Roll Of Honour in the district commissioner's office. He shook his head. Was that only yesterday? So much had happened in the last 24 hours that it seemed a lifetime ago that he had stood in that office looking at the gold-lettered names.

How true the saying: 'It takes a lifetime to live but only a moment to die', he reflected. It was a distinction that he had never fully appreciated before today.

He turned his attention back to the road in front of him as, reaching the

bottom of the hill, they neared the bridge. Braking to a halt, he viewed the narrow, sideless concrete slabs that spanned the riverbed, screwing up his eyes against the glare from the bleached, grey-white cement. Then, taking a deep breath and wiping the sweat from his hands on his trousers, he put the Leopard into gear and carefully manoeuvred it so that the front wheels were exactly centred on the first of the slabs, noting with relief that there were several centimetres to spare on either side.

As the vehicle slowly made its way across the bridge, Chalmers caught glimpses of the parched and cracked riverbed below, its bottom strewn with quartz-like rocks and fragments of stones that glittered and sparkled in the fierce rays of the sun. Urging himself to concentrate on keeping the Leopard centred, he leant forward over the wheel, his whole body taut with tension.

After what seemed an eternity, he felt the front wheels bump slightly as the vehicle rejoined the dirt road. He brought the Leopard to a standstill.

In the silence that followed, he turned to Ndlovu and said: “Please have a look out the back and see where the lorry is now.”

Ndlovu got up and, bending low, climbed over the legs of the other DSAs and opened the rear door halfway.

“It’s just starting down the hill, boss.”

Chalmers nodded. “Thanks.”

As Ndlovu made his way back to his seat, questions started racing through Chalmers’ mind: Would the truck’s wheelbase be too wide for the bridge? If so, what would they all do? Were any terrorists waiting to attack as it crawled helplessly across? Would the DSAs sitting in the rear think to de-bus before it crossed? Chalmers clicked his tongue.

Well, there was only one way to find out, he concluded, turning his attention back to the steep hill ahead.

As he studied it, another difficulty presented itself—one that, until now, he hadn’t given any thought to. Would his battered, worn-out Leopard even be able to make it up the hill ahead?

He shrugged his shoulders resignedly, and looking back at Ndlovu, said: “Well, if the Pookie got up there, I suppose we can!”

Ndlovu leant forward, a broad grin on his face. “I hope we don’t have to push, boss!”

Chalmers laughed and, gripping the wheel firmly, called out: “Well, here goes. Hold on everyone!”

He pushed his foot down on the accelerator and let out the clutch. The Leopard roared up the base of the slope, its rear wheels spinning noisily on the gravely surface, engine screaming. As the gradient increased, the vehicle slowed almost to a standstill until, suddenly, its engine faltered and then cut out completely. Chalmers jerked the worn handbrake on and, slipping her quickly into neutral, tried to restart the engine. On each attempt it fired momentarily, only to die again almost immediately.

Suddenly, Chalmers became conscious that the Leopard was beginning to roll slowly backwards down the hill. Almost imperceptibly at first, the vehicle quickly gained momentum. He pulled violently on the handbrake in an effort to slow it down while, with his right hand, he tried to ram the Leopard into gear.

To Chalmers' dismay, the gear lever jammed. Now unable to control the vehicle's movements, Chalmers felt the Leopard start to swing erratically from side to side across the road.

He jerked his head round. "Open the door!" he yelled.

The DSA nearest to it hastily undid his seat belt and, grimly clutching at the side of the rocking vehicle with one hand, struggled to free the large metal bolt that secured the rear door from the inside.

The bolt suddenly shot back. Instantly, the heavy door swung open with a violent, resounding clang.

Looking over his shoulder through the open doorway, Chalmers caught a fleeting glimpse of the approaching lorry and trailer looming out of the swirling dust.

Chalmers instantly swung the wheel to the right. Almost turning over with the sudden change of direction, the Leopard leant over drunkenly on two wheels and careered backwards across the road, bouncing up into the air as it ran over a pile of rocks heaped up on the verge. It came to rest at a crazy angle in a large clump of bushes, its rear door wedged shut by the thick vegetation.

Chalmers sat back, breathing hard and listening to the sound of the lorry as it laboured up the hill. At least the driver will have time to see us and stop, he thought with relief. He wiped the sweat from his aching eyes with the palms of his hands.

At that instant, there was a deafening burst of machine gun fire and, almost simultaneously, one of the DSAs screamed out *"Ambush! Ambush!"* in a

high-pitched, terrified voice. A spasm of fear twisted Chalmers' stomach.

As he frantically released his seatbelt and grabbed his rifle, he heard another long burst of automatic fire and, looking out of the windscreen, watched transfixed as a stream of tracer bullets blazed across the road a couple of metres away, sending up sinister little spurts of dust and dirt where they struck the ground.

He struggled up but immediately crouched down again instinctively as a stream of bullets raked the Leopard's side with a loud, hailstone-like tattoo of metallic thuds. As they ricocheted off the heavy armour plating, he heard them whining away harmlessly into the surrounding trees and bushes.

Some of the DSAs, yelling in panic and blindly clambering over each other in the confined space, began pushing violently against the firmly wedged door in a vain effort to open it and escape.

"Leave the door! Leave it!" Chalmers yelled above the uproar. "Fire over the top!"

The men scrambled to raise their rifles, pushing and shoving each other in their wild desperation to get the barrels pointing out over the side of vehicle. Too frightened to notice—or even care—where they were shooting, two of them, their weapons pointing straight up in the air, began firing into, and through, the canvas top.

In the confined space, the reports were deafening, and Chalmers winced in agony at the ear-splitting noise.

He leapt towards the nearest man and, seizing him by the arm, pointed to where the canvas joined the metal. "They're not in the sky, you idiot—fire through the opening!"

Chalmers, trying to think rationally, realised that unless he could free the Leopard from the bushes, they would remain trapped. He scrambled back to the driver's seat but, as he eased himself down, the Leopard was rocked violently by a series of thunderous explosions.

He craned forward in his seat and looked out to his left. A dense cloud of choking, oily smoke was roiling slowly across the road a couple of hundred metres further down the hill, totally obscuring the truck from his sight.

Brilliant, orange-red tongues of flame were soaring skywards. As he watched in fascinated horror, his fingers still gripping the ignition key, two more deafening explosions rent the air as more drums of fuel ignited, spewing their contents over the surrounding ground. A thick jet of burning

fuel arced across the road as if ejected from a powerful flame-thrower.

Almost at the same moment, Chalmers saw, as if in slow-motion, a burning body, like a small doll, gracefully, hideously, spiralling away through the air into the now burning grass and bushes lining the sides of the road.

Above the roar of the flames, spasmodic firing could be heard in the distance but there was complete silence from the surrounding hills. The terrorists, having achieved their objective, had silently slipped away. The attack, lasting a couple of minutes at most, had ended as suddenly as it had begun. It had been a model exercise, executed with deadly precision.

Chalmers turned the ignition key, less urgently now. The starter motor whirred for a few moments and then, with a roar, the engine burst into life. With the clutch in, he pulled on the jammed gear lever. To his chagrin, it now engaged easily. He shook his head angrily at the utter perversity of things. Putting the Leopard into first gear and revving hard, he managed to free the vehicle from the restraining foliage and drive it back onto the middle of the road.

Almost before coming to a stop, the badly frightened DSAs had scrambled out and run for cover, making off into the bush in different directions.

Switching off the engine and making sure that the vehicle was in gear, Chalmers reached over for his rifle and made his way to the back of the deserted Leopard, a scowl on his face.

Jumping down, he ran downhill through the choking, acrid smoke towards the truck and the burning trailer. His eyes smarted and he coughed painfully as the billowing clouds of pungent smoke drifted around him. Coming to the lorry he found, to his relief, that it was still intact, although deserted.

Anxious to see what damage the trailer had sustained, he started walking towards it, but even though he tried shielding his face with a protective arm, the intense heat generated by the still-burning fuel drove him back. As the smoke began to clear in drifts, he could just make out the twisted wreckage of the trailer lying on its side, partially blocking the road.

Nearby in the surrounding bush, several fires were burning, the tinder-dry grass and small bushes crackling noisily as the flames spread across the hillocky ground, now parched and deeply cracked after the long, hot months of drought.

Chalmers turned and ran back up the deserted road. *Where the hell was everyone?* His exasperation was tinged with anxiety.

“Lance corporal!” he shouted.

A faint answering shout came from somewhere on his left.

He ran across the road and into the tall elephant grass, trampling it down as he pushed his way through. In a small clearing a few metres ahead, he saw a group of DSAs, some standing, others kneeling. They turned and looked at him. As he approached, they silently moved aside.

Lying on the ground were the bodies of three of the DSAs.

Chalmers knelt down on one knee beside the nearest, drawing in a sharp breath as a jagged stone dug into his kneecap. He shifted his weight and looked at the dead men’s faces.

He glanced up. Words were pointless.

“What about you men? Are you all alright?” he asked with concern, looking from one to the other.

There were murmurs and nods. “Just a few cuts and burns, boss. Nothing much,” one of them answered.

Chalmers nodded and stood up. “That’s good.” He paused and then, taking command, continued firmly: “We must try and put these fires out first, and then we’ll put these men—carefully,” he stressed the word, “on the lorry for burial at Umsholo. Then,” he added, “we must try and shift the trailer out of the road, ok?”

He turned his head as he heard Falon’s Leopard draw up nearby, its brakes squeaking noisily. He could just see the top of it showing above the tall, yellow grass. The engine was switched off.

“We’re over here,” Chalmers called out between cupped hands.

They heard the grass rustling, and a few seconds later, Falon pushed his way over to them.

He looked down at the three bodies for a moment in silence. “*Christ*—and all that bloody fuel too!” he said in disgust.

*****

Umsholo Base Camp, nestling peacefully amid the encircling, luxuriantly vegetated hills, lay slumbering in the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon sun.

As Chalmers wearily parked the Leopard in the deep, cool shade cast by the guard tower—almost identical to the one at Chitangwe—he spotted Wally

lying stretched out at length on a nearby bench.

Seeing the dust-covered Leopard, Wally got up and leisurely walked across to the vehicle. “You took your time, Dad!” he said as Chalmers clambered down over the rear wheel. “What the hell were you doing? Catching butterflies?” he asked with a grin.

“Something like that,” replied Chalmers, slinging his rifle over his shoulder.

“Well, that wasn’t such a bad run after all, was it? I don’t know what everyone makes so much fuss about, do you?”

Chalmers stopped and looked at him incredulously. “What! Didn’t you hear or see *anything*?” he asked in astonishment.

“No. It was a piece of cake. Sunday School stuff!”

Chalmers shook his head disbelievingly and smiled weakly. “Well, after we’ve unloaded the ammunition, you and I will have a drink and, if you’re very, very good, I’ll tell you a little story!”

Wally grinned.

Chalmers shook his head again. “Sunday School stuff, my foot!”

CHAPTER 12

Time: 07h15. November 21

The early morning air was cool and invigorating, and as he stood by the security fence looking out towards the distant hills, sharp and clear in the still and rarefied atmosphere, Chalmers inhaled deeply, bracing his shoulders. Glancing down at his feet, he saw that his shoes were wet from the heavy dew.

After a few moments, he turned and idly studied the camp's ten-metre high guard tower. Its rugged structure was somehow reassuring.

At the top, in a primitive sort of belfry, stood a large, round corrugated-iron water tank. Next to it, surrounded by a ring of sandbags, he could just make out the converted .303 Browning machine gun that Falon had told him had originally come from an old, disused World War II Spitfire.

What a crowd of memories the mere mention of that stirring name brought back!

Chalmers loved the early mark Spitfires that so reminded him of the exciting days when, as a young schoolboy, he used to watch the delicate, wispy vapour trails criss-crossing the summer skies of southern England during the Battle of Britain.

Not many of these beautiful aircraft had survived the War intact but, surprisingly, Rhodesia still possessed two—late-mark F22s admittedly but, even so, traces of their elegant, aristocratic ancestry could still be detected[28].

An unexpected movement on the tower caught his attention.

The DSA on duty, having finished his watch, was tying his unslung rifle to a piece of long, thin rope which he then lowered carefully, hand-over-hand, to the ground. As it reached the bottom, he secured the rope to a railing and, without holding on for support, unconcernedly climbed out onto the narrow parapet and, turning around, slowly climbed down the shaky wooden ladder

that ran flush to the tower wall. As he reached the bottom, he untied his rifle and, exchanging a few brief words with his replacement, walked stiffly away. The new guard then followed the same procedure in reverse.

Chalmers shook his head in envy at their indifference to heights, then took out a cigarette and lighting it, watched the tenuous grey-blue spiral of smoke drift upwards and gradually disperse in the still air. He flicked the dead match away and resumed his walk round the still-silent camp.

He was feeling happy and relaxed.

Falon had finally left by aircraft half an hour before. Although he had been scheduled to leave the previous afternoon, the eventful trip to Umsholo had delayed their return to Chitangwe. Darkness had fallen by the time they had arrived back at the camp and, to both men's annoyance, Falon's departure had had to be delayed until first light today. Their parting earlier had been brief and decidedly cool, and neither had taken the trouble to disguise either their extreme dislike of each other—or their mutual relief at parting company.

Right at this moment, Chalmers was revelling in the fact that, apart from Wally with whom he got on so well, there was now no one on the base to prevent him from making all the improvements he was itching to implement. For once, if only for a few weeks, he would no longer have to defer to anyone. The prospect of such freedom from all interference and discussion filled him with elation.

Now, he realised with satisfaction, he could really get down to shaping the DSAs into a small, disciplined force capable of taking on the enemy on equal terms.

However, the terrorists were not, at the moment, his immediate problem. Before all else, Chalmers knew that it was absolutely imperative that he first establish his authority over the 30-plus mutinous DSAs at the base if he was to stand any chance of success whatsoever. Even though he'd been at Chitangwe for less than 48 hours, he was under no illusion that, here on this isolated outpost, he was very much on his own should anything go wrong.

It was a chilling thought.

Finishing his walk around the camp perimeter, he walked back to his room, picked up his shaving gear and strolled to the primitive washroom. Going over to the washbasin, he saw it was filthy, the inner surface coated with a layer of grease and dirt. A spider was struggling to free itself from the pieces of thread and hair that clogged the plughole. Bits of cracked and hardened

soap lay piled up in a broken, green plastic dish, and the small mirror over the washbasin was chipped and marked with fly spots and toothpaste smears.

Chalmers put his things down on the dirty floor and went next door to the kitchen. Misheck was standing over an old-fashioned wood stove, moodily putting some firewood into the small furnace. Chalmers breathed in the delicious tangy smell of smouldering wood.

“Misheck, could you come with me a moment, please.”

Together, they walked back to the washroom.

“Look at this,” he said, pointing at the washbasin. “When did you last clean it?”

“This morning, boss,” Misheck replied in a surly voice.

“Well, you didn’t do it very well, did you?”

“The dirt won’t come off. We’ve got no cleaner,” he muttered.

“Then why don’t you use sand? There’s plenty of that just outside the door there!” said Chalmers, striding outside and scooping up a handful. He carried it back into the washroom and spread it evenly over the inside of the basin then, taking a piece of cloth he found on the floor, he rubbed the surface of the basin vigorously.

“I want you to clean this basin properly like that every morning from now on. Do you understand?”

Misheck stared sullenly at the basin. Chalmers could see the resentment and suppressed anger in the man’s face.

“Yes—boss,” he muttered after a lengthy silence.

As Misheck left the washroom, Chalmers called out to him. “In the meanwhile, Misheck, please make my breakfast. I’ll be ready shortly.”

From the kitchen, he heard the camp’s one and only very battered frying pan being flung down noisily in response, followed by a volley of suppressed expletives.

Chalmers shook his head, smiling to himself. For once, he was rather glad he didn’t understand Shona!

CHAPTER 13

Time: 08h30

Following a light breakfast—which he half-expected to have been tampered with in some way, considering Misheck's smouldering resentment—Chalmers called the NCOs to the staff lounge.

There were three of them—Lance Corporal Ndlovu, Lance Corporal Ruzwidzo, and the senior NCO, Corporal Chakanyuka. The first two were pleasant enough, thought Chalmers but, like Falon, they tried to ingratiate themselves with the men under them. Lacking either the confidence or character to enforce their authority, they endeavoured to gain allegiance by 'being one of the boys'.

It didn't work—it never does, Chalmers reflected—and, as a result, neither man commanded any respect from the DSAs who systematically disregarded any orders they were given that weren't to their liking.

Corporal Chakanyuka, however, was different. Tall, brash and muscular, he was actively disliked—and not a little feared—by the men on the base. When he felt inclined to exert his authority—mainly, it seemed, for personal and selfish reasons—he obtained obedience simply by applying physical violence. More often than not, this strategy proved to be very effective.

Whereas the two junior NCOs were almost good-humouredly ignored, Chakanyuka was treated, as all bullies are, with outward respect but inner contempt and dislike.

Chalmers looked at them speculatively as they sat in awkward silence in front of him. They had clearly never been allowed in the lounge before under such circumstances.

"I've asked you to come here because there are certain things that need to be sorted out immediately," he said. He cleared his throat. "I am not, I am sorry to say, very impressed with what I have seen so far. There appears to be little, if any discipline, the base is filthy, the men are poorly trained, and they seem to think they can do just as they please."

Corporal Chakanyuka nodded his head.

"As for going out and dealing with the terrorists," Chalmers went on with a slight grin, "one might as well expect them to walk on the moon!"

Lance Corporal Ndlovu laughed.

"It is true, boss," said Corporal Chakanyuka. "The DSAs won't take orders from us. They won't take orders from other blacks, and Boss Falon said—"

Chalmers cut him short. "Corporal, Mr. Falon is no longer here. What he said or didn't say is not of the slightest importance any more. I am in charge now. My point is, that orders—whether they're given by me or any of you three—must be fully obeyed."

Ruzwidzo, feeling more relaxed and confident, leant forward. "But what the corporal says is true, boss. If we say 'Do this or that' to them, they ignore us, but if a white man says 'Do this', they do it!"

"Sometimes!" interjected Ndlovu with a sly grin.

Chalmers' eyes twinkled. He liked that. "I agree with you, lance corporal. It doesn't seem to me that they obey anybody, black *or* white, if it doesn't suit them. However, the important thing is that, from now on, they *will* take orders from you."

The three Africans fell silent, looks of doubt on their faces.

"The first point," went on Chalmers, "is that you will have to stop mixing with the men. I want you, therefore, to move your beds and all your personal things to the two empty rooms at the end of the verandah, there." He pointed towards his right.

Seeing their puzzled looks, he went on: "You must be separated from the men. You can't expect obedience and respect if you spend all your time joking and playing about as if you were one of them."

The two lance corporals shifted uncomfortably in their seats.

"When must we move our things, boss?" asked Ndlovu.

"This morning sometime," said Chalmers decisively. "Next, I've noticed that the men are not kept nearly busy enough," he went on, turning and looking at Corporal Chakanyuka. "I want you to draw up a roster of duties as soon as possible. I have already done one as a guide for you."

He pulled out a sheet of paper from a folder that was lying on the table in front of him. "This is the sort of thing I mean. You can change it if you want—but we must go over it together first, alright?"

Chakanyuka nodded.

Chalmers started reading from the page: “07h00: Airstrip clearance. 08h00: Parade and flag raising; inspection of dress and weapons; vehicle inspection, and so on. 08h30: Barrack and bunker inspection. 09h00 to 11h00: Drill—” He went through the formidable list, item by item—weapons training, anti-ambush drill, patrol formations, observation patrols, setting up ambushes, security fence patrols—the list seemed endless.

He handed the paper to Chakanyuka.

The corporal studied it with interest.

“The important thing is that, once you have drawn it up, you must stick to it—no matter what. We’ve got to establish hard-and-fast routines. For example, the morning parade must be at *exactly* oh-eight-hundred every morning. Not at ten minutes to eight one day and five minutes past eight the next. Routine, punctuality and order are absolutely vital, and I will not tolerate any sloppiness or messing around.”

Chakanyuka made signs of getting up.

“Hold on a minute, corporal, I haven’t finished yet, if you don’t mind,” said Chalmers, looking at him with a slight smile

Chakanyuka sank back with a grin. “Sorry, boss!”

“There is one other point. I want you three to come to the lounge here every evening at six o’clock, sharp.” Chalmers emphasised the word. “We can then go through in detail what we are going to do the next day.”

Chalmers noted that Ndlovu was absent-mindedly tapping the arm of his chair. He had a worried, doubtful look on his round face.

“What is it, lance corporal? Is something worrying you?”

Ndlovu was hesitant. “I know these men, boss. They won’t do these things. They don’t understand all this!”

Lance Corporal Ruzwidzo nodded in agreement. “Especially Chikono—he’s bad news, boss. Big trouble!”

Chalmers frowned slightly. It was a worrying thought—and one that had occurred to him more than once since his arrival. To be killed by the terrorists was one thing, but to constantly face being murdered at any moment by one of his own rebellious men, was another matter altogether.

He looked at Ruzwidzo. “I know it’s not going to be easy, but it must be done. I am going to speak to the men myself as soon as we’ve finished here.“ He paused and turned to Chakanyuka. “We have got to gain control over the men. I know you are worried about it, but you must remember that you three

were promoted to NCO rank because you are responsible, intelligent and have above-average leadership qualities. But don't forget—rank involves responsibilities, too."

Chalmers inwardly groaned to himself. He sounded just like his old headmaster at morning assembly! While he didn't doubt that it was all sterling stuff, he didn't relish the task of actually having to get up in the pulpit and preach to others.

"Believe it or not," Chalmers went on doggedly, "you men are the most important people on the camp. You have a very difficult job in front you, but I have absolute confidence in you," he lied. He looked at them and smiled reassuringly.

There was a long silence.

Suddenly, Chakanyuka banged his open hands down on the arms of his chair. "We'll try, boss!" he said enthusiastically.

Chalmers, somewhat relieved, looked at him encouragingly. "Good!" he said, standing up. "That's all for the moment." He turned to Chakanyuka: "If you'll get the men out on parade, corporal, I'll come and speak to them now."

The men got up.

"They're not going to like this," said Ruzwidzo, shaking his head.

Chalmers, irritated, looked at him. "I am not interested in whether they like it or not. They'll do as they're told from now on!"

Taken aback, the lance corporal grinned sheepishly. "Yes, boss," he replied.

After they had left the room, Chalmers sat down thoughtfully. Although the NCOs had appeared to be willing to cooperate with him in principle, he knew that they could still be easily swayed. Talking to the three of them in an informal environment was a totally different thing from standing up in front of 30 or more disaffected men armed with rifles!

Perhaps a little unfairly, he couldn't help feeling that most of the DSAs had little on their minds except drink and women and it seemed to him that their highest ambition was to do as little as possible and spend as much time as they could sleeping!

Chalmers thoughts were broken into by the sound of raucous shouting from the quadrangle outside. He stood up quickly and went across to the window facing the camp quadrangle and the barracks on the far side. A number of DSAs, dressed in dirty singlets and shorts, were arguing heatedly with the

two lance corporals. One of the DSAs was shaking his fist in Rudwidzo's face.

As Chalmers watched, he saw Chakanyuka stride across to the group of shouting men and push his way through. He grabbed one of them roughly and thrust him hard up against the barrack wall threateningly. The DSA, a muscular, well-built man, angrily retaliated by striking the corporal on the chest. Sensing a free-for-all, the watching DSAs yelled and roared enthusiastically as Chakanyuka staggered back and collided with one of the metal roof supports. Recovering, he lunged at the DSA and began kicking him savagely and then rained down a flurry of punishing blows on the man's head and body. Managing to break free, the DSA grabbed Chakanyuka and, still grappling furiously, the two fell to the ground, struggling violently to the jeers and shouts of encouragement from the ring of onlookers.

Chalmers watched them with mounting anger.

Quickly leaving the lounge, he walked with deliberate casualness across the grass quadrangle towards the group of men. As he reached them, he loudly ordered: "Stop this immediately!"

At the unquestionable authority of the command, the men turned to look at him. An uneasy silence fell.

Chalmers regarded the two heavily breathing and sprawling figures on the ground. He frowned disapprovingly. "Corporal Chakanyuka."

"Sir?" The corporal got up and dusted himself.

"Have the men out on parade in 30 minutes." His tone was one of suppressed anger.

In complete silence, he turned and strode away.

CHAPTER 14

Chalmers looked at his watch. Only five minutes to go.

He frowned. This was the moment he had been dreading. Unless he managed to assert his authority over the DSAs during the next few critical minutes, the result could be disastrous—at least for him. He stared out of the window thoughtfully.

On an academic level, he well understood the paradox that freedom could only exist where law, authority and restraint were strictly observed and enforced. And yet, to Chalmers, this was no mere academic exercise. The situation that he now faced was an intensely real and personal one.

What would be the best approach? he mused. Anger? Threats?

As he considered these options, he shook his head, almost as if someone were standing in front of him and actually asking him. No, he thought, that was not the way to get a man's willing co-operation. He firmly believed that no one ever responded to the 'big stick' except out of fear which, invariably, only bred a longing for revenge.

He glanced at his watch again and seeing it was time, stood up stiffly. He inhaled deeply, mentally rehearsing the qualities of confidence and authority he hoped to convey, the most important being to give the appearance of being in complete control—even if he wasn't!

He went over to the door and walked along the verandah out to what was euphemistically termed the parade square—in reality, a small unlevelled patch of ground in front of the camp's flagpole.

There were four men standing there in a small group talking quietly—Chakanyuka and three of the DSAs. Chalmers strode over to them and turning to the corporal, asked where all the others were. It was a purely rhetorical question. Chalmers already knew the answer.

Chakanyuka looked at him apologetically. "They refuse to come, boss."

"And the other two NCOs—where are they?" he asked casually.

"They are in their rooms."

"Tell them to come here, please, corporal." His voice was quiet.

Chakanyuka walked off. Chalmers heard him shout their names roughly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see some of the DSAs, still out of uniform, furtively watching what was going on from the barrack room windows. Glancing towards the camp's main gates, he saw that they were wide open. No one was on guard.

He heard the soft footsteps of the approaching NCOs and turned to look at them. Without a word, he studied their downcast, nervous faces for a few moments.

"Go and tell the men I wish to speak to them—*all* of them. They needn't dress in uniform or bring their rifles," he said.

Ndlovu shuffled his feet and a frightened look came into his eyes. He stood there looking at Chalmers irresolutely, almost pleadingly.

"Go on, lance corporal. Do as I ask, please—*immediately!*"

Ndlovu hesitated.

"Do as you're told!" Chakanyuka spoke suddenly and sternly.

Chalmers raised his eyebrows. Although unexpected, he felt, with something approaching amusement, that he could do with an ally at that moment!

Ndlovu turned and walked off reluctantly towards the barracks.

Chalmers and the other men waited in silence. At least there's been no shouting or rifle shots—so far! he thought with a touch of sardonic humour.

Slowly, over the next few minutes, the DSAs wandered over to the parade square, stopping frequently on the way to talk and lark about, defiance and insolence in every word and gesture.

Chalmers watched them, hands behind his back—inwardly seething with rage but outwardly calm and composed. He waited until they were all there and then told the three DSAs behind him to join the main group.

There was a long silence. No one moved.

Chalmers had long ago learnt how effective both silence and humour could be, and he intended to take maximum advantage of both in dealing with the situation confronting him. He stood there, passive and seemingly indifferent, watching the DSAs antagonism and rebelliousness turn to puzzlement.

"Good morning," he said suddenly, in brisk, ringing tones.

The DSAs shuffled their feet. A few mumbled, glancing at each other uncertainly.

Chalmers narrowed his eyes but said nothing more. He could sense that the

silence was disconcerting them. They were mystified and unsure of how to react.

Chalmers turned and walked a few metres away towards the flagpole. He stopped and with his back turned to them, raised his head and, with apparent interest, studied the two flags hanging limply in the calm air. He could hear water from the storage tank on top of the tower splashing gently onto the parapet as the tank overflowed.

The seconds ticked by.

Another 15 or 20 seconds should do it … Chalmers mentally counted them off and then slowly turning around, he strolled back to the group. All eyes were riveted on him.

"You obviously don't like parades," he said, smiling slowly. He paused. "I must admit, I don't either!"

A few of the Africans grinned, rather shamefacedly.

Again, there was a long pause.

"However," he went on finally, shaking his head, "that is no reason for disobeying orders."

He pointed to a smartly dressed, rather timid looking DSA. He was one of the three who had been on parade on time. Chalmers could tell by the look of him that he wouldn't give any trouble. It was unfair to single out the blameless but Chalmers felt he had no option. He could not afford such niceties at this critical juncture.

"What is your name?" he asked abruptly.

"Sewera, sir," the young man answered nervously.

"Are you one of those who refuse to obey my orders?" he asked accusingly.

Abashed and nonplussed, Sewera shifted on his feet. "No, sir," he stammered guiltily after a few moments.

"Oh, really!" said Chalmers, pretending to be surprised. "That's very nice to hear!"

He turned and walked away from the group again. After a few paces, he then turned and deliberately walked behind them, up and down, in complete silence. Chalmers knew from experience just how disconcerting *that* could be.

He stopped behind one of the DSAs and after a pause, said: "And what about you? Chikono, isn't it? Are you going to refuse to obey orders? Or are you a clever person like Sewera here?"

This was the man he'd been warned about—the ringleader—and Chalmers knew that if he could bring *him* into line, the rest would almost certainly follow suit. Not waiting for an answer, Chalmers turned and walked briskly back until he was facing the men again. He turned his head and looked at Chikono.

"Well, Chikono? You haven't answered my question yet. Come and stand out here. I want everyone to hear your answer."

Chikono, discomforted and clearly ill at ease, slouched over to where Chalmers and the NCOs were standing.

"Now, turn around and face everyone. I want you to tell them if you are going to obey orders."

The African sullenly mumbled something inaudible.

Chalmers shook his head. "Speak loudly, man, so that we can all hear. It's no good muttering to yourself!"

Chalmers could feel his heart hammering. This, he realised, was the critical moment. Everything hung on the next few seconds. Either he'd carry the men with him—or it was all over.

There was complete silence.

"Well, Chikono, we're all waiting for your pearls of wisdom," Chalmers said with a smile.

The tension was almost palpable.

"I can't hear you, Chikono," Chalmers goaded him, cupping a hand to one ear.

Someone sniggered and whispered something to his companion who, in turn, roared with laughter. Chikono, visibly embarrassed, shifted his weight uncertainly on his feet.

"I didn't hear any order," he complained. "I didn't know we had to parade."

The DSAs turned their eyes on Chalmers. Everyone knew Chikono was lying.

Unexpectedly, Chalmers chuckled. "Then why are you here now, Chikono? Why aren't you still in bed, dreaming about sexy women?"

Several of the Africans started laughing and calling out ribald comments to the abashed man.

To Chalmers, it was all painfully childish but, thankfully, it had saved the day. He instinctively felt that the crisis had passed.

Seizing his opportunity, he turned and looked at the DSAs. "In future, when

either I or the NCOs give an order, you will obey it instantly. It may just save your lives one day," he said sternly.

Chalmers turned abruptly to Chakanyuka.

"Corporal—" His tone was sharp. "The main gates are open and there's no one on guard. Have the terrorists been invited for dinner?"

The DSAs laughed uproariously, but Chalmers, feigning annoyance, went on: "Attend to it as soon as I've finished," he said curtly.

He turned back to the DSAs. "Up until now, you've all had an easy time here. I envy you. But we've got a lot of work to do. In case you don't know it, there are terrorists out there—hundreds of them," he said, pointing towards the hills, "and you men are going to go out and get some of them—and I'm not talking about asking them here for a drink, either!"

There was more laughter which Chalmers cut short. His voice was authoritative. "But to get these terrorists, you're going to have to be fit, and you're going to have to be trained—hard. Chitangwe Base is going to earn a reputation for having the best fighting men in the country. I want the terrorists to run like frightened rabbits when they see the men from Chitangwe coming."

The DSAs, almost like children, started pulling faces, pretending to be frightened. Chalmers smiled patiently at them.

He turned to an inoffensive young African near the front. "What's your name?"

"Sixpence, boss," he replied smartly.

"Well, Sixpence, imagine it's you walking through the bush, and all the *kandangas* run for miles when they see you! 'There's the mighty Sixpence coming!' they'll shout. 'Run for your lives—quick!'"

Chalmers realised, rather shame-facedly, that he was quite enjoying himself!

The DSAs were now all noisily joining in the fun. They crowded around Sixpence, patting him on the back, some feigning to be terrified of him.

"Here comes Killer Sixpence—the terror of the terrs!" called out an animated DSA.

Chalmers held up his hand for silence. "I was told I was being put in charge of the best camp and the best men in Internal Affairs. I think that is true—or rather, that it soon will be." He paused. "Now, let's have no more nonsense. Let's go out there and get hold of some of those terrs. That's what we're here

for—and that's what we're going to do!"

To his overwhelming relief, there were enthusiastic murmurs of assent. "Yes, boss. We'll get 'em!"

Chalmers eyes creased-up in amusement—and secret disbelief!

"Now," he said, turning to Chikono who was still standing uncertainly by his side where Chalmers had deliberately left him. "Chikono, I think you have all the makings of a first-class leader. Let's see if that is so! Line the men up and march them back to the barracks." He smiled at him. "Do you think you can do that—or shall we get Killer Sixpence here to do it for you? What's it to be?"

A puzzled look flashed across Chikono's face followed, almost immediately, by a broad smile of understanding. "Sixpence? He's rubbish, boss. Leave it to me!" he said, rubbing his hands together enthusiastically.

He stepped aside, stood smartly to attention and then, hoisting up his shorts, shouted out in a piercing voice: "Fall in, you bloody monkeys. Fall in, fall in!"

The NCOs, who were all standing near Chalmers, were laughing in relief and pleasure as they watched the DSAs push, shove and jostle each other as they scrambled into three disorderly ranks.

"Squad! *A … tten … tion!*" yelled Chikono. "Now, dress-off to your right, you black bastards, otherwise I'll have you all running around the camp fence in full kit."

Chalmers grinned conspiratorially at the NCOs, nodded and started to walk away.

Suddenly, he stopped and turning round, spoke to Chakanyuka: "Don't ever lose your temper again like you did earlier—and don't ever strike a man again. Do you understand?"

To his satisfaction, the corporal came smartly to attention and saluted. "Yes, sir. Sorry, boss!"

Chalmers grinned. "Good, but if you do, I'm warning you now—I'll hand you over to Sixpence and let him deal with you!"

Chakanyuka burst out laughing. "Yes, boss!" he called out, coming to attention again and saluting.

Chalmers walked slowly back to the mess.

Thankfully, it had gone well—better than he had dared to hope. Yet he couldn't help wondering—had he *really* got the upper hand?

He recalled, yet again, the district commissioner’s suspicions that some of the men were very probably working with the terrorists. Chalmers was only too well aware that he would have to watch his every step very, very carefully in the weeks that lay ahead if he hoped to ever see his wife and son again.

CHAPTER 15

Time: 10h20

”See? The end of the rotor arm has broken off completely,” said Wally in disgust before straightening himself up and pointing at the Pookie’s open distributor.

Chalmers bent over the dusty, oil-streaked engine to take a closer look. “Well, that’ll teach you to go joy-riding around the camp at the crack of dawn and making such a hell of a nuisance of yourself!” he said with a grin. He straightened up. “We were very lucky that it didn’t go yesterday on the Umsholo run, though. Just imagine!” He gave a short laugh.

Wally kicked the nearest tyre savagely and cast his eyes disparagingly over the immobile Pookie. “Just look at the bloody thing—it’s a heap. Christ, it makes me mad! Nobody cares a damn, and yet they can send two Pookies to lead the drum majorettes at the Jacaranda Festival parade in Salisbury last week. And they were brand new ones, too!”

Chalmers eyes twinkled. “What? New Pookies—or new drum majorettes?”

Wally grinned. “No, but seriously, it’s not right.” He scuffed the ground with his foot, disconsolately. “Here we are, running around on roads littered with sodding mines and most of the time, you guys have to go out without a Pookie escort at all. It makes me sick!” he said in angry disgust.

Chalmers looked at Wally thoughtfully. In the short while he’d known him, very little had appeared to bother the fun-loving, easy-going young man, yet at the moment, he was displaying a depth of feeling that seemed totally out of character. Or had all his earlier light-heartedness merely been a front? wondered Chalmers.

“Not to worry,” he said consolingly. “I suppose you’ve already radioed through for a replacement?” he asked.

Wally nodded. “Yeah, about half an hour ago. But I bet it’ll take them weeks to get it, and then it’ll be another two or three months before I actually get my hands on it, you see! They couldn’t care a stuff about us.”

He kicked a stone savagely. It struck the side of the Pookie with a metallic clink. “And what am I supposed to do in the meantime? Sit around in this god-forsaken dump, twiddling my thumbs?”

Chalmers patted him on the back. “Well, you could always clean the engine for a start if you really want something to do. It could certainly do with it!” he observed with a chuckle.

Wally turned and stared at him, eyebrows raised. “Oh, Christ!” he said with feeling.

Chalmers laughed. “By the way, Wally, did you …?”

“Excuse me, sir.” It was Kenneth Matinda, the radio operator.

Chalmers turned around at the interruption. “Yes, Kenneth?” he enquired. Behind him, Chalmers could see the thin, tall radio mast and its supporting stays, etched against the pale, eggshell blue of the clear sky.

“Oscar Kilo want to speak to you on the radio.”

“Right, thank you. I’ll come now.”

He turned to Wally. “Maybe headquarters have got a new Pookie for you!”

Wally jeered. “*Ja*. And maybe there’ll be a gorgeous drum majorette waiting inside, too!” he replied sarcastically.

Chalmers grinned. “It had better have a couple of them—you mustn’t forget me!”

*****

Inside the radio room, Chalmers picked up the black plastic mouthpiece of the radio set and pushed the red button. “Oscar Kilo, Charlie Tango four zero.”

“Four Zero, this is Oscar kilo. Confirm Sunray[29] on set?”

“Affirmative, Oscar Kilo.”

“I have a message for you. Are you ready to copy?”

The set crackled loudly, and Chalmers turned the volume dial down slightly. “Go, Oscar Kilo,” he said.

There was a long pause.

Chalmers, who had been staring absent-mindedly at the floor, noticed the four 12-volt batteries under the radio bench near the radio operator’s feet.

“Kenneth, you are remembering to charge the batteries every night, aren’t

you? It’s vital you do.”

“Yes, sir,” Kenneth replied, fiddling with a large, shiny silver cross he had around his neck.

Chalmers looked at it speculatively.

At that moment, the radio burst into life. “Charlie Tango Four Zero, this is Oscar Kilo.”

“Come in, Oscar Kilo.” Chalmers sighed with impatience. Why couldn’t they just get on with it? he wondered irritably. Such a time-wasting formality.

“I have a message for you, Charlie Tango Four Zero. Crusader Three[30] has had a visual sighting of plus-minus 45 CTs—Charlie Tangos[31]. Copied?”

“Copied,” acknowledged Chalmers.

“They appear to be heading for Hamboze Hill, a little north of Kwevane cattle dip.”

Chalmers realised that meant the terrorists were only about five or six kilometres away at most.

The voice went on: “Crusader have lost contact with them but they appeared to be heading for your location. Copied?”

“Copied.” Chalmers frowned in annoyance as a burst of interference disrupted reception.

“… abducted 38 farm labourers … area. Ten Alpha Alpha Mike 9—Adult African Males, and 28 women and children. Can you mount Oscar Papa[32] at earliest and report back to Oscar Kilo?”

The set fell silent.

“Stand by, Oscar Kilo,” Chalmers said before walking over to the large wall map of the area.

“Where’s Hamboze Hill, Kenneth?”

The radio operator got up and leaning round Chalmers, put his finger on a spot on the top right-hand corner. “There it is, boss.”

Chalmers studied it for a moment taking in Nyakende kraal, Kwevane dip and, right alongside it, Hamboze Hill. He was pleased. Already a few of the strange African names were becoming more familiar to him.

He turned and walked back to the set. “Oscar Kilo—Charlie Tango Four Zero.”

“Come in, Four Zero.”

“Will mount Oscar Papa as soon as possible. Please advise whether any other Crusader elements in area. If affirmative, I need their operating call signs.”

“Stand by, Four Zero.” Silence. The set suddenly burst into life again. “Charlie Tango Four Zero—Oscar Kilo. Affirmative. Crusader identification and call signs follow in code.”

“Copied Oscar Kilo. Anything further?”

“Confirm your patrol’s call sign will be Charlie Tango Three One.”

“Affirmative.”

“The Sunray of this Loc. asks you to maintain a 24-hour radio watch until further notice.”

“Damn!” muttered Chalmers softly under his breath. “Affirmative, Oscar Kilo. Copied and out.”

He looked at Kenneth and seeing him absent-mindedly picking his nose, frowned. “For God’s sake, stop doing that!”

The abashed radio operator dropped his hand quickly.

Chalmers sighed and putting down the radio mouthpiece, looked at his watch. It was just after half past ten. Still plenty of time to get a patrol out, he noted with satisfaction.

Suddenly, a disturbing thought flashed across his mind: *Bloody hell! 45 terrs!* That was a big group and they were sure to have plenty of sophisticated firepower.

He thought of his little band of inexperienced men. They would need to be extremely cautious. Now was certainly not the time for any misguided recklessness. He wanted living soldiers—not dead heroes.

For a few moments he stood lost in thought.

He turned to Kenneth. “I’m afraid you’ve got a lot of work ahead of you. I think you’d better move your bed in here for now.”

Kenneth nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Don’t keep the main SSB[33] set on all night, though—just use the small one. We need to save the batteries, ok?” As Chalmers turned to go out, he stopped. “And you must wake me straight away if any important messages come through in the night. It doesn’t matter what time it is, alright?”

Kenneth nodded again.

“And tell Corporal Chakanyuka that I want to see him immediately, please.

I'll be in the staff lounge."

Once there, Chalmers sat down and lit a cigarette. There was a knock at the open door. It was Chakanyuka.

"Come in, corporal," he called out crisply. "Sit down."

When Chakanyuka had settled himself, Chalmers updated him. "Hermes has just radioed through to say that a group of about 45 terrs have been sighted in the Kwevane cattle dip area. They think they may be heading this way."

Chakanyuka raised his eyebrows.

"Yes," nodded Chalmers, noting the response. "I think we may be in for it." He paused. "Anyway, I want you to pick our 12 best men to go on an OP. We'll take the Bren, too."

Chakanyuka's eyes lit up in pleasurable anticipation.

Chalmers eyes twinkled. "That's just in case we run into any trouble. But we are *not*," he stressed, "going on a shooting spree, understand? It's just an OP, that's all."

Disappointed, Chakanyuka's face fell.

The thought of one of his DSAs let lose with a Bren was too terrifying to contemplate, thought Chalmers, smiling inwardly at the vision.

"You must tell the men to be extremely careful. The terrs have 38 abductees with them—men, women and children. I don't want a full-scale massacre on my hands! There is to be no firing whatsoever—under *any* circumstances—unless I specifically say so. Is that clearly understood?" said Chalmers sternly.

Chakanyuka nodded. "Yes, boss. I understand." He hesitated. "Do you want the patrol to go out now, sir?"

"Yes, but before you get the men, corporal—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," called Chalmers.

It was Kenneth. "You're wanted urgently on the radio again, sir."

Chalmers clicked his tongue with annoyance. He turned to Chakanyuka. "Hang on a moment, corporal."

He made his way back to the radio room with Kenneth. "Who is it this time?"

"113—Urungwe, sir," he replied.

Chalmers raised his eyebrows in surprise. "The DC's office—must be

something important," he murmured pensively.

"113, this is Four Zero," he said perfunctorily as he began the customary introductory formalities.

The African voice on the radio, already distorted by static, was almost incomprehensible to Chalmers. Launching into a long message, Chalmers could only sit and listen in mounting irritation.

When the operator had finished, he turned to Kenneth impatiently: "Did you understand any of that?"

Kenneth, with an infuriating smile, duly translated: "They say that all the NCOs must report to Urungwe immediately by road for a special six-week training course."

Chalmers stared at him in disbelief. "*What!*" he exploded. He turned on his heels. "Acknowledge the message, Kenneth," he ordered over his shoulder before storming out of the radio room.

He walked back to lounge, seething. Chakanyuka, who was sitting waiting for him, stood up as he strode in angrily.

"Forget the patrol, corporal. You, Ndlovu and Ruzwidzo have to go into Urungwe immediately to attend a special training course. You'd better go and get your things together straight away!"

Chakanyuka looked at him in surprise. "What is the course for, sir?"

Chalmers shook his head. "God only knows! Perhaps the powers-that-be have decided that it's about time you men started learning how to run the base by yourselves. Independence and all that sort of thing." He shrugged and sat down heavily. "Anyway, whatever the reason, you better look sharp and go and tell the others."

Chakanyuka hesitated. "What about the patrol, sir? Will we go on that first?"

Chalmers shook his head. "No, there won't be time. You've got to go immediately."

The corporal, secretly pleased at the sudden turn of events, walked jauntily to the door.

Chalmers watched him go. As he reached it, he called out to him: "I probably won't be here by the time you get back from the course, corporal. I hope it goes well—and thank you for your support over the last couple of days. I shall mention it in my weekly report."

The corporal smiled. "Thank you, boss." He hesitated a moment. "The men

will be very sorry when you go, sir. I know."

Chalmers smiled. "Thank you, corporal."

As the door closed behind the departing NCO, he lit another cigarette and sat back, eyeing the smoke as it spiralled upwards.

The order couldn't have come at a worse moment, he thought angrily. Just at the very moment when it seemed possible that he might be able bring some degree of order and discipline to the camp, here he was losing his three most valuable men.

In addition—and of more immediate concern—was the fact that, when the NCOs left for Urungwe, they would need to take at least 12 men with them as an armed escort. It was already too late for them to be able to make the round trip in one day which meant that the camp would be left with a mere handful of untrained DSAs until the escort returned later tomorrow.

And what if the base were attacked in their absence? The terrs would be sure to know the place would be almost deserted tonight, he thought anxiously. Perhaps it even explained why a second large group of terrorists had suddenly put in an appearance just a few kilometres north of Chitangwe.

However, there was one consolation at least, he thought with a rueful smile. He could ask one of the DSAs to buy him some more cigarettes in Urungwe and, more importantly, bring back any letters that might be waiting for him from home.

As for the rest? Well, he knew he'd manage somehow.

He *had* to.

CHAPTER 16

Time: 11h05. The same morning.

Chalmers and Wally stood by the main gate and watched the trail of dust thrown up by the fast-disappearing vehicles.

Chalmers, who had wanted to keep his own Leopard on the camp in case of an emergency, had decided the three NCOs and 14 escorting DSAs should take the other Leopard and the lorry itself for the return journey from Urungwe. He was being far too generous in a way but, as he had explained to Wally, he couldn't in all conscience let the three NCOs and a driver go off on such a dangerous trip unprotected.

Nevertheless, he spoke sternly to Corporal Chakanyuka before the group left: "We cannot really afford to give you such a large escort. As you know, it will leave us almost defenceless. So I am relying on you *personally* to make absolutely sure that the men behave themselves and return here as soon as they have dropped you and the two lance corporals off in Urungwe. I am putting my complete trust in you, corporal. Please don't let me down."

Chakanyuka had solemnly promised that he wouldn't fail him but, although he didn't say it, to Chalmers such assurances were generally like pieces of ice that just melted away in the sun. And he had not been reassured in any degree to see with what noisy jubilation the whole excited crowd of them had set off, shouting, joking and laughing like a bunch of schoolboys on a day's outing to the seaside!

As the sound of the vehicles' engines gradually died away in the distance, Chalmers and Wally turned and strolled slowly back through the strangely quiet and seemingly deserted camp. It felt very empty without them all, thought Chalmers.

There was not a breath of wind and the atmosphere was humid and oppressive. Chalmers felt almost physically sick with the sweltering heat and was bathed in perspiration.

He looked around at the coppery-coloured sky. "Doesn't look as if it will be

long before the rains start, thank God!" he said with feeling.

Wally glanced up and nodded in agreement. "No, not long now." He gave a short laugh. "Then I suppose we'll be flooded and going around on rafts." As he walked, he kicked a stone moodily along in front of him until it spun off to one side out of reach of his foot. "No wonder October and November are called the suicide months!" he said.

They walked on in silence.

"Let's go and sit on the verandah for a while," Wally suggested. "I don't feel like doing a bloody thing!"

"Good idea," agreed Chalmers. "There doesn't seem to be much point in trying to do anything today with half the DSAs not here."

But he, too, was feeling unusually irritable—and it was not just because of the heat or worry about the safety of the absent men. He always found enforced idleness aggravating, especially when there was so much that needed to be done.

They carried a couple of armchairs out from the lounge into the shade of the verandah and sat idly looking at the distant hills, now mauvish and shrouded in a dull, bronze-tinted heat haze. To the east, towards the Eastern Highlands and Mozambique border, massive creamy-white cumulus clouds were banked-up in serried ranks in the sky.

Wally leant back lazily and watched them idly for a few moments, his legs stretched out in front of him. "This is the life!" He sighed contentedly. "I'm quite glad that the Pookie isn't working."

"Well, it's alright when there's nothing special to do but, I must say, I'm not very amused at the moment," said Chalmers. "I want to get these chaps trained and out in the bush. We're not here for a holiday!"

Wally looked at him. "The trouble with you is you're too keen. Stuff the bloody terrorists, I say!"

Chalmers relapsed into a thoughtful silence.

After a few moments, he suddenly sat up. "You know what, Wally, I've just had an idea!" he said brightly.

"Oh, Christ," murmured Wally, his eyes half-closed sleepily. "What now, Dad?"

"I was thinking—I don't see why a few of us can't still go out on patrol to try and see what those terrs are up to—" said Chalmers thoughtfully. "After all, all we've got to do is find out where they are and see where they're

heading—and four guys can do that as well as 24."

Wally opened his eyes and turned his head to look at Chalmers incredulously. "Are you crazy? And in this heat? What would you do if you ran into an ambush? You'd all be taken out just like *that!*" he said, snapping his fingers.

The two men fell silent for a few moments.

"You're just trying to get yourself a bloody medal or something!" he added in disgust.

Chalmers grinned. "Don't be an idiot, man," he replied. "Think! It's just commonsense. You're forgetting about tonight. There'll only be 16 or 17 of us all together. I, for one, want to know exactly where the terrs are and what they're getting up to, thank you very much!"

There was a short silence.

Wally widened his eyes. "Jesus, you're right, Dad! I hadn't thought of that," he exclaimed as the significance of what Chalmers had said sank in. "Bloody hell!"

Chalmers nodded his head. "Yes—and you can be damn sure the terrs know that half our men have gone into Urungwe. The *mujibas*—or perhaps even one of our own men—will have made certain of that," he said decisively.

Wally sat up alertly. "God, I wish I'd gone into Urungwe with them!" He grinned. "I think I'll try and get the Pookie going again."

Chalmers laughed. "If you manage it, don't forget to wait for me." He stood up. "I'm going to get the DSAs organised. I bet they're all asleep. They're just like you—lazy as hell!"

The young man jeered at him as he walked off down the verandah.

Reaching the end, Chalmers turned round. "We'd better make sure the mortar works, too, and see that there's plenty of ammo in the bunkers. I think we might be in for a busy night tonight."

He walked through the doorway, but a moment later his head reappeared. "By the way, Wally," he called, "d'you want to come on patrol with us?"

The young man looked up, his eyes wide with surprise and incredulity. "No, I fucking well don't!" he said with feeling.

"It was just an idea," replied Chalmers. "I thought you might like to as you're so bored!"

*****

Chalmers walked across the quadrangle towards the African quarters. He went into one of the rooms.

Even though all the barrack-room windows were wide open, for a moment he was taken aback by the overpoweringly fetid smell of sweaty bodies and the reek of paraffin in the stifling, almost suffocating, air.

A cheap, black plastic, portable radio—a long piece of wire trailing from its telescopic aerial to the verdigrised brass window catch around which its bare copper wires had been twisted—was blaring out some dissonant, tuneless African music. An enamel saucepan, half-full of cold, congealed mealie-meal, was standing on a rusted paraffin stove in one corner. Several discarded tin cans lay nearby.

Despite yesterday's brief inspection, the room was already littered with bits of paper, clothes and dirty plates. The floor was unswept.

Three of the DSAs, one completely naked, lay stretched out on their beds fast asleep. A fourth, lying on his side on a camp stretcher, his head on his crooked arm, was looking at a cheap comic. Above his head and taped to the filthy, whitewashed wall, Chalmers noticed a photograph—torn from some pornographic magazine—of a naked white girl sitting astride a black man who grasped her full breasts in his hands.

Chalmers turned to the African on the stretcher. "Where is Joshua?"

The man—Chalmers didn't know his name—barely moved. "Chimoya, boss?" he asked.

Chalmers frowned in displeasure. "Yes—and when I speak to you, I expect you to stand up," he said. "Just because the NCOs have left, don't think you can now do just as you please. That, my friend, would be a big mistake."

Seeing his anger, the African stood up uncertainly, the comic still in his hand.

Chalmers turned and regarded the sleeping figures darkly. "Get up, all of you!" he shouted.

The men, startled out of their slumber, opened dazed eyes and looked uncomprehendingly around them for a moment, then they hastily scrambled up into sitting positions.

"I want you all dressed and outside in ten minutes." He turned back to the first DSA who was now hurriedly putting on his shirt. "Where is Joshua

Chimoya?" he asked him sharply.

The African pointed awkwardly towards the neighbouring room. "Next door, boss."

Chalmers turned on his heels and going to the adjoining door, knocked on it loudly. "Joshua!" he shouted roughly.

"Sir?" There was a hurried rustling sound from inside.

A few moments later, Joshua opened the door, quickly tucking his shirt into his trousers.

Chalmers looked at him.

Tall and well-built, the African had a strong face and Chalmers had the immediate impression that in a tight corner, Chimoya would prove to be a formidable adversary.

He remembered what Falon had said about the DSA on his first evening at Chitangwe: "I'd keep my eye on that one if I were you. He thinks of only one thing—revenge. His whole family—wife, children, parents, even his brothers and sisters—were wiped out by terrorists. I'd be sorry for any gook that happened to come *his* way."

Chalmers had made a mental note of the African's name. Joshua sounded like just the sort of man he wanted on the base.

And yet, as Chalmers studied the man's face, he could see no trace of suffering on the firm, good-looking features—no sign at all of the awful tragedy that had ravaged his life.

"You want me, boss?"

"Yes, Joshua. I'm going out on patrol shortly. You know the men better than I do. I want you to chose the three best to go with me."

Joshua hesitated. "I would like to come, boss—I'll bring two of the others."

Chalmers was glad. It was just the sort of reaction he had hoped for. "OK, Joshua. Have everything ready, and be outside in ten minutes." He turned, then stopped: "Oh, and we'll be taking the Bren with us."

Joshua smiled broadly. "OK, boss!"

On his way to his room, Chalmers put his head inside the radio room. "Any messages, Kenneth?"

The radio operator was lazily swinging backwards and forwards on his chair, idly tapping the bench with a pencil. "No, sir."

Chalmers was puzzled. Surely there should have been something by now about the 45-strong group of terrorists at Kwevane? "Are you sure?" he

asked.

The radio operator suddenly clicked his fingers. “Oh, sorry, boss,” he said contritely. “Oscar Kilo said they’ve lost track of the terrs, and they want to know when our patrol is going out.”

Chalmers frowned angrily. “Kenneth! How many more times must I tell you? You *must* give me any messages that come in straight away.” He shook his head. “Call them up *immediately* and tell them that the patrol will be leaving in 20 minutes.”

“Yes, boss.”

CHAPTER 17

Time 12h45. That afternoon—on patrol.

Chalmers unscrewed the top of his canvas-covered water flask and took a short drink. The water was warm and tasted brackish.

His skin was prickling and itching all over from the heat. To add to his discomfort, he could feel ants crawling inside his uniform while sweat ran in little rivulets down his back and chest making his shirt stick to his clammy body. His arms, too, were covered in a network of painful scratches from the vicious thorn bushes that covered large stretches of the scrub through which he and the three Africans had laboriously pushed their way.

Now, lying full-length on the hard, stony ground halfway up the face of Kwevane Kopje, Chalmers and the DSAs—Joshua, Chisina and Mutsata—were carefully scanning the surrounding hills.

Immediately in front of them, across a low, shallow valley dotted with kraals and stunted, flat-topped mopani trees, Chalmers could see the massive rounded peak of Hamboze Hill almost five kilometres away. It shimmered indistinctly in the burning heat.

A heavy, fatigued silence lay over the sun-bleached hills and plains. Even the clouds that he had seen earlier from the verandah had wasted away into a formless haze.

Chalmers turned his head and looked at Joshua who was crouched next to him. He saw him suddenly cock his head to one side as if listening.

"What's up?" he asked.

Joshua ignored the question, still listening intently.

After a few seconds, the African relaxed and turned to Chalmers. "I thought I heard firing, boss—in the distance." He stiffened alertly. "There it is again," he said.

They all turned their heads, straining to catch the sound.

"Yes, yes. I can hear it," said Chisina in a low, tense voice.

Despite his own acute sense of hearing, Chalmers could hear nothing. "Was

it single or automatic?" he asked.

"Automatic, boss—I'm sure," said Chisina.

"Where do you think it was?"

Chisina pointed behind them, in the direction they had come from.

Chalmers raised his eyebrows. "From the camp?" His stomach lurched as the thought raced across his mind.

Chisina shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno, boss. But I don't think so."

"Right," Chalmers said, getting to his feet quickly and cursorily brushing the grass and dirt from his uniform. "There's nothing here by the looks of it. Let's move on and see what we can find."

They picked their way in single file down the steep slope of the kopje, grasping at clumps of dried-up grass to stop themselves from slipping. When they reached the bottom, they stopped for a few moments while Mutsata removed a stone from one of his boots. While they waited for him, the others sat in the cool, deep shade cast by a large baobab tree. Despite the long, dry winter, it was already bursting out in a delicate tracery of tiny, pale, green shoots.

Chalmers took out his soiled handkerchief, poured a little water on it from his bottle and wiped it over his face and chest. Against his heated body, the damp cloth felt cool and soothing.

He glanced around at the burnt-up landscape. What a place to live, he thought—flies, mosquitoes, disease, poverty, burnt grass, dry riverbeds, stones—and, everywhere, scorched barrenness. And, as if all that weren't enough, the constant fear of terrorist attack.

Chalmers sighed. *Poor people…*

He turned and looked at Mutsata. "OK? Can we go now, sir?"

The DSA beamed. "Yes, boss, we can go—you won't have to carry me!"

Chalmers chuckled. Although many Africans had few material possessions, most had something far more valuable, he reflected.

*****

Chalmers, concentrating intently on the surrounding bush as he walked, jumped as Joshua suddenly materialised at his side.

"Something is burning over there," the African said in a quiet voice, pointing towards a low kopje that lay ahead, slightly to their left.

“Yes, I’d noticed that too. Are there any kraals that way?” Chalmers asked.

“Just one, boss—Magunya. But not many live there any more. Most have gone since the war.”

Chalmers felt a tingle of apprehension. It was probably just a bush fire, he thought to himself trying to allay his anxiety. After all, this *was* the time of the year for them. The vegetation was like tinder after six months of dry, hot weather. And yet, what about the shots they had heard earlier?

They increased their pace, and after 15 minutes hard walking, they had climbed up the rocky slope of the small kopje. Reaching the top, they looked down at the silent, smoking kraal that lay at its foot.

The smoke and ash from the still-burning huts rose straight up in the air, and Chalmers noticed how the primitive dwellings appeared to shimmer and dance distortedly in the waves of heat. His gaze moved from one smouldering hut to the next, becoming transfixed on what at first sight appeared to be several blankets lying in disorderly heaps on the ground. There was something odd about them—something he couldn’t define rationally…

They stumbled down the uneven slope of the hill at a run. As they approached the nearest huts, Chalmers realised with horrified certainty that the objects he had seen were not blankets—but bodies.

They all slowed their pace and stopped as one, reluctant to go any closer.

There were six bodies in the nearest group. They lay huddled close together as if for protection, their legs and arms splayed out in abandon.

Wherever Chalmers looked, he saw more lying scattered around the kraal in the grotesquely contorted throes of violent death. He stared at the scene around him in utter horror.

Nothing in life had prepared him for this—and absolutely *nothing* could have prepared him for what he was to see moments later inside the still-burning rondavels where the charred bodies of several women and children—unrecognisable as human—lay heaped together.

*****

“Mutsata, find Joshua—I think he’s still doing a body count—and tell him to radio through to camp and tell Kenneth to report this to Crusader immediately. Also, tell him to say that we’ll stay here until they arrive. There’s no point in us trying to catch up with the terrs now,” he added,

almost to himself.

Mutsata, glad to have something to do, nodded his head. “Yes, boss. Straight away.”

Chalmers walked a little away from the kraal and finding a large, flat rock, sat down heavily. He felt nauseous and emotionally drained.

He cast his eyes numbly around the huts, and as he did so, he noticed a small object lying in the dirt and ashes by the hut nearest him. He stood up and walked over to it, welcoming the distraction.

It was a crude, brown-glazed clay figure of a lion’s head.

Guessing it had been made by one of the dead villagers, Chalmers bent down and picked it up. Although primitive—even ugly—to Chalmers, surrounded by so much carnage, it was strangely moving.

*****

Later, as the four weary men made their way back to the camp, Chisina said: “Why are you keeping that thing, boss? It’s just rubbish!”

Chalmers didn’t reply for several moments. Then he said: “To remind me of something.”

“What’s that, boss?”

When Chalmers replied, his voice was slow and thoughtful: “Something I learnt today—something very, very important, my friend: *’Si vis pacem, para bellum’*—if you want to live in peace, you must always be prepared for war.”

CHAPTER 18

Time: 16h30. The same afternoon.

Back at camp, Chalmers stood in the shower and scrubbed himself vigorously, almost as if hoping that the violent scouring would wash away the memory of the hideous scenes he had witnessed earlier that day at Magunya. He knew that he had to learn, somehow or another, to put such things out of his mind—and quickly.

He got dried and dressed.

As he stepped out into the hot sunlight, clean and reinvigorated, he was surprised to hear the distinctive and unmistakable sound of approaching helicopters in the distance.

Puzzled, he strode briskly to his room, and after throwing his towel and soap onto the bed from the open doorway, he turned and walked across the quadrangle towards the main gates.

The few remaining DSAs on the camp were already standing around outside talking animatedly, their heads turned in the direction of Assegai Kopje and the incoming aircraft.

Five Alouettes[34], painted in mottled green and black camouflage, were approaching slowly in a straight, stepped-up line like hovering dragonflies, their Plexiglas noses pointing gently downwards. Clouds of ochre-coloured dust, leaves and twigs, stirred up by the whirling rotor blades, billowed into the air as the lead helicopter gradually lost height. The setting sun glinted brightly on their cockpits.

As the machines skimmed along Chitangwe's airstrip a few metres off the ground, their powerful turbo engines screamed in a high-pitched whine. Chalmers winced and put his hands protectively over his ears. Through the swirling dust and dirt, he could see the shadowy, almost sinister, silhouettes of the troops and pilots inside the descending aircraft.

One by one, the helicopters delicately settled to earth on their small black

wheels, the noise of their engines gradually dying away.

Chalmers, his hair ruffled, turned to Wally who had now joined him on the edge of the airstrip. “Hell, that’s a lovely sight, isn’t it?”

Wally grinned, sharing his mood. “*Ja*,” he said enthusiastically. He suddenly pointed to one of the helicopters. “Look at those machine guns there!”

Seeing the impressive armaments, Chalmers nodded. “We could certainly do with some of those here, that’s for sure,” he said enviously. “They make our two Brens look like little popguns, don’t they?”

Wally burst out laughing. “I’ll say!”

Chalmers watched as the soldiers—young men mostly in their late teens, their faces blackened with camouflage-cream—jumped down wearily onto the ground. Some immediately lay down on the airstrip in the shade cast by the helicopters, while others stood around talking and smoking.

He strolled over to the nearest group. As he looked around at them, he became conscious, almost for the first time, of his age. No wonder Wally called him ‘Dad’! Almost any one of these young men could be his son, he thought. Yet, despite their boyish-looking faces, few had the sparkle of youth.

Chalmers smiled. “Hello there,” he called out cheerily.

One or two of them turned towards him apathetically and nodded their heads in acknowledgement. “Hi,” one of them mumbled with indifference.

“So, what are you guys doing in this God-forsaken spot?” he asked conversationally, turning to a thin-faced, fair-haired youngster.

“Come for fuel.” His voice was flat and tired. “Been spending most of the time looking for a bunch of bloody gooks reported to be around here somewhere,” he added.

Chalmers looked at him with interest. Probably the same lot of terrorists he and the DSAs had been out looking for earlier, he suspected.

“Did you have any luck?” he asked.

One of the other men who was resting in the shade, rolled over and regarded Chalmers with a jaundiced eye. “Nah—a bloody lemon.”

“Pity,” he responded and turning away, walked over to the helicopter standing next in line.

He glanced at a powerful MAG[35] machine gun that had been put on the ground. Lying next to it was a swarthy young man with a moustache.

Chalmers stopped next to the weapon. “You can leave that here as a present if you don’t want it,” he said with a grin, inclining his head towards the powerful gun.

The resting man didn’t even smile. He took a draw at his cigarette, and shook his head. “That’ll be the bloody day. That means life, brother!” he rejoined in a broad Scots accent.

Chalmers frowned. Where, oh where, had everyone’s sense of humour gone these days? he wondered irritably, turning away. Thank God for Wally, he thought with relief.

He looked around as a vibrant, commanding voice suddenly called out loudly: “Where’s all the bloody fuel gone then?”

Chalmers walked over to the man. “Good afternoon—Mike Chalmers,” he said with a friendly smile. “Having problems?”

The man, pilot of the lead helicopter, turned abruptly and looked at him. Chalmers immediately noticed the fine network of crows’ feet around the corners of his eyes.

The man smiled warmly and held out his hand. “Good afternoon. Are you the base commander?”

“Yes—as penance for my sins!”

The man laughed. “Steve Grant. Glad to meet you, Mike.” He paused. “It looks as if your chaps have been at my fuel again,” he said, looking towards the shallow pit where the Avtur drums were normally kept. “The scavengers must drink the bloody stuff,” he said with a trace of irritation in his voice.

Chalmers felt awkward. “I’m afraid I’ve only been here two or three days, so I don’t know exactly how much there was—or should be. Actually, I wasn’t even told officially that we kept fuel permanently here on the base for helicopters at all!”

Steve shook his head in disgust. “Is that a fact?” he said. “Nobody tells anyone a damn thing these days. No wonder everything’s in such a mess.” He frowned. “I wonder why we bother at all sometimes.”

Chalmers changed the subject. “We took a load of Avtur and diesel up to Umsholo yesterday, but I haven’t a clue who it was meant for, I’m afraid.” He paused. “Unfortunately, we lost the whole lot.”

Steve looked at him closely. “Yes, I heard about that. I didn’t realise it was you. Are you ok?”

Chalmers grinned. “Yep, just about!”

They both turned as one of the other helicopter pilots who was standing by the small fuel dump inside the camp, shouted out: “It’s alright, Steve. We’ve found a few drums.”

Steve waved in acknowledgement to the man. “OK—load up,” he shouted back.

“Good,” he said, turning back to Chalmers. “I’m afraid we’ll have to take that, but we’ll bring some more over later as a reserve. We’re going to be needing it so please make sure that your men don’t use it for cooking their bloody sadza!” He grinned.

Chalmers laughed. “I’ll do that, don’t you worry.”

They watched as the crews rolled the five remaining 200-litre drums towards the waiting helicopters.

Steve folded his arms. “By the way,” he asked, “was it you who reported sighting the latest bunch of terrs?”

“Yes and no,” replied Chalmers. “We didn’t actually have a contact, but on patrol earlier this afternoon, we found the bodies of about 20 villagers at Magunya kraal—that’s up that way,” he added, turning and pointing northwards across the airstrip. “I assume—although I can’t be sure—that they were the same group of terrs that abducted all those women and children,” he said, looking at Steve enquiringly.

Steve rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Sounds like it, but I don’t think we stand much chance of finding them now.” He put his thumb and forefinger to his mouth and puffed out his breath. “They disappear just that like that. Now you see them, now you don’t. It’s incredible!”

Chalmers nodded. “Maybe the army chaps have managed to pick up their tracks.”

“Let’s hope so,” replied Steve, “but I haven’t heard anything from them as yet.”

Chalmers cleared his throat. “I’m a bit in the dark, I’m afraid, but are there many terrs around here?”

Steve nodded his head vigorously. ”I’ll say!” he said laconically. He turned toward the troops and with a friendly shout, called out: “Get ready, chaps. Sleepy-byes time is over!” Then to Chalmers: “By the way, Mike, have you come across a guy called Black Satan yet?”

“No, not yet. I’ve still got that pleasure to come. I gather he’s quite a nasty character!”

Steve smiled. “He is—and just to really cheer you up, we’ve picked up info that as soon as the rains begin, he’s going to get stuck into you lot in earnest.” He nodded in the direction of the camp.

“Wonderful news, thank you!” said Chalmers with a short laugh. “But he’ll have to hurry because I’ve got some plans of my own too, and I don’t think he’s going to like them very much!”

Steve looked at him, his eyebrows raised. “Good for you—but be careful.” He paused a moment, his face suddenly serious. “And remember, Mike, you might not see us often, but we’re always somewhere around if you really need us,” he added reassuringly.

Chalmers suddenly didn’t feel quite so lonely and defenceless anymore.

“That’s fantastic. Best bit of news I’ve had in ages—thank you, Steve.”

The pilot paused a moment. “Well, it’s time we were on our way. Got to be back at Grand Reef before sundown.” He gave the camp a brief, swift look and shook his head. “Man, I don’t envy you being stuck out here all on your own; I’d shoot myself! Mind you, with the right company—” He chuckled.

Chalmers grinned. “Well, next time you come, perhaps you could bring some lovely young lass for me to help pass the time with!”

Steve laughed and walking away, raised his thumb. “I’ll see what I can do!” He climbed into the helicopter. “Cheers, Mike, and remember—just call us if you run into trouble.”

Chalmers waved briefly in acknowledgement, a broad grin on his face.

CHAPTER 19

Time: 01h30. November 22

That night, Chalmers tossed and turned restlessly on his bed.

Most nights now he slept fitfully, always on the alert for possible attack, half-expecting to hear the camp erupt into pandemonium at any moment. He remembered Falon telling him that a few nights at Chitangwe, and he probably wouldn't sleep more than two hours at a stretch—if that.

At least tonight, he had one consolation. A message had been received earlier from Urungwe to say that the NCOs and their armed escort had arrived safely. It was a great weight off his mind. And, God willing, the returning DSAs would be safely back in camp around mid-day, he calculated with satisfaction.

He sat up, lit a cigarette and, getting off the bed, went over and switched on the light. He stood still, listening for a few moments. Aside from the gentle, monotonous hum of the base's generator, there wasn't a sound.

Going back to the bed, he picked up the blank sitrep[36] form that was lying on the bedside table.

Radioed into Urungwe every morning at eight, Chalmers had already got into the habit of putting the day's report in the radio room the evening before so that Kenneth could relay it first thing the next morning.

He hadn't completed yesterday's report and, feeling wide-awake, he filled it in now, giving a brief, clinical summary of the previous day's dramatic events. Once he'd finished, he looked at his watch. It was a quarter past two.

On an impulse, he decided to put it in the radio room straight away. Pulling on his trousers and opening the door, he stood for a few moments looking around him, listening intently. A soft, warm breeze was blowing through the silent camp and glancing up, he could see the thin, silvery crescent of the waxing moon in the clear, cloudless sky.

Still the rains had not come.

He heard the guard on top of the darkly shadowed tower cough softly.

Silently, with bare feet, he carefully picked his way over the rough ground towards the radio room, stopping once to dislodge a small piece of gravel that had become wedged between his toes. Then, reaching the radio shed, he gently pushed open the wooden door.

A sudden, hurried movement inside startled him. Something fell on the floor. He switched on the light and swiftly looked round the room.

Lying on Kenneth's bed, Chalmers saw Joshua with the young woman from Nyakende kraal, Marita Makwara. They were both naked. Chalmers frowned. He hadn't realised the woman was still on the base.

The two hastily disentangled themselves. The woman, her full breasts heaving as she regained her breath, stood up and put her hands in front of her in embarrassment. Chalmers could see the perspiration on her forehead glistening in the strong light of the bare electric light bulb.

He turned away, putting the report down on the table in front of the radio. As he did so, he noticed with annoyance that both radio sets were off. He leant forward and turned the small set on.

"Where is Kenneth?" he asked, his voice quiet with suppressed anger.

Joshua, still sitting awkwardly on the edge of the bed, his shirt draped across his lap, stammered quietly: "In his room, I think, boss."

Chalmers went over to the open door and stood studiously looking out into the darkness. "Get dressed, Joshua, and tell Kenneth to come and spend the rest of the night here. I'll deal with him—and you—in the morning."

*****

Time: 07h20. The same morning.

Chalmers walked across the quadrangle, past the DSA's sleeping quarters, to the back of the camp where Marita Makwara and the other woman, Susan Chipungare, were cooking sadza in a pot over a small wood fire. Hearing his approaching footsteps, the two stood up. Marita smiled shyly at him and curtsied.

Chalmers smiled back. "I'm afraid that as soon as you've had your breakfast, you must both leave the camp and go home to your kraal," he said, his tone firm but kindly.

Immediately, an anxious look appeared in Marita's eyes. "No, boss, please—we stay here. It is good here."

Chalmers was not surprised that they wanted to stay—particularly now that Falon had gone. Here, there was food, security and pleasant company. All the comforts of home—probably more, in fact, judging by last night! More importantly, though, while they remained on the camp, they had no need to fear any reprisals from the terrorists.

Still, as harsh as it seemed, it would be impossible to allow them to stay; Chitangwe was not a refugee camp. He knew they should have been sent back to Nyakende kraal the same day they had been brought in for interrogation.

Chalmers shook his head firmly. "No, I'm sorry, you will have to leave. You can have your breakfast, but then you must both go immediately," he said. He turned abruptly and walked away to forestall any further discussion. He knew from experience that if one once started arguing with an African, one could be there all day!

Heading straight for Joshua's room, he knocked on his door. "Joshua," he called.

After a few moments, the door opened. The African's manner was subdued and respectful. "Yes, sir?"

"Joshua, you know very well that you're not supposed to mix with any of the local women, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am not going to report you this time—but for God's sake, Joshua, be sensible and don't do it again, otherwise I'm afraid you'll be in a lot of trouble."

A look of relief appeared on Joshua's face. "Thank you, sir," he said.

But as Chalmers studied him, for a fleeting moment, he felt a twinge of uncertainty, even anxiety. He was suddenly very aware that he and the African DSAs lived in totally different worlds, each completely unknown to the other. What was *really* going on behind that impassive face, he wondered.

Setting aside his qualms, Chalmers went on, his voice encouraging. "I particularly don't want *you* to blot your copy-book, Joshua. You would make a very good NCO so, please, no more nonsense from now on. When I leave here, I want to be able to put in a good report about you, ok?"

Joshua smiled. "Yes, boss."

*****

Leaving the barracks, Chalmers walked across to the radio room. Kenneth was sitting idly leafing through a magazine.

"Why didn't you sleep in here last night, Kenneth?" he demanded.

The radio operator shifted uneasily in his chair. "I did, sir!"

Chalmers frowned angrily. "Don't lie, Matinda! I came in here myself at twenty past two. Do you think I am a fool? You were not here and both radios were switched off."

Kenneth looked guiltily at the floor.

"Supposing," went on Chalmers, "supposing we had been attacked? Supposing Crusader had sent an urgent message to us?" He paused. "You have to realise, Kenneth, that *your* job in particular carries important responsibilities. The lives of everyone on the camp—and that includes *yours* don't forget—rests on your shoulders. Until I find someone capable of helping you, you must remain here at all times because if there is a sudden attack—and there could be one at any time, as you well know—I need someone on the radio who knows exactly what he's doing. Do you understand?" he asked angrily.

Kenneth was looking down at his shoes, examining them closely.

"Well? Do you understand?" Chalmers questioned, frowning.

"Yes, sir," he muttered.

"Good! Now don't let me catch you out of the radio room again except when absolutely necessary."

Chalmers strode out of the shed and made his way back to his room, deep in thought.

When he got there, to his surprise and further annoyance, he found Marita Makwara on her hands and knees industriously rubbing the slate floor with a dirty cloth. The room was filled with the pungent smell of floor polish, and as he walked in, his foot slipped on a thick smear of it.

"Oh, sorry, boss!" she said, looking up at him quickly with concern.

"Marita—it is Marita, isn't it?" He hesitated.

She nodded.

"I told you that you must leave the camp, Marita. Why are you still here?"

"I put polish on the floor for you, boss," she said.

Chalmers sighed in exasperation. “No, Marita. You must go now. You must go home to your people, your village, straight away,” he said. He spoke slowly, unsure how well she understood English.

A sudden gust of warm wind blew through the room causing the curtains to billow inwards. A loose sheet of paper fell from the table onto the floor. Marita stood up and wiping her greasy palms down over her thighs, crossed the room and, bending down, deftly picked it up.

“If the boss lets me stay, I clean, I cook and look after him very nicely.” She smiled almost coquettishly, and pulling back her broad shoulders so that her wide-necked dress stretched tightly across her large, shapely breasts, she looked at him with a provocative smile.

Chalmers, taken aback, looked at her for a few moments, a twinkle of amusement in his eyes. One thing was certain, she obviously understood English quite well enough!

“Thank you, Marita, that is kind of you, but I’m afraid the answer is still no. Women are not allowed to stay on the camp.”

Her face fell.

He walked to the door and opening it, held it open for her. “You and your friend, Susan, must go now. I’m very sorry. Goodbye.”

She slowly and sadly shook her head and then reluctantly walked out of the room.

He closed the door behind her and sat down and lit a cigarette. *That*, he thought with a chuckle, was definitely something he must remember to tease his wife about when he got home!

CHAPTER 20

Time: 17h30. The same day.

"The fat boss with the glasses has gone—he went yesterday before the sun came. The two women from Nyakende are still on the camp." The herd-boy, John Tapere, hesitated. "But I think they go back—soon." He stopped and looked nervously at the small group of guerrillas sitting in a half-circle in a small clearing in the trees.

"Well, go on!" said Black Satan, his voice rising impatiently and glaring at him.

John Tapere licked his lips. "Maybe the trucks from the base come back from Urungwe today some time—but I am not sure. The three DSAs will stay at Urungwe a long time—for training," he added, referring to Corporal Chakanyuka and the two lance corporals.

Black Satan, who was sitting on a small flat-topped stone eating sadza from a tin plate, looked up at him sharply. "Are you sure?"

John Tapere nodded his head rapidly.

Black Satan turned back to his plate after a few moments and, scooping up a lump of the mealie-meal, crammed it into his mouth with his fingers.

"Good, good, good," he said, still eating. He nodded with approval at the boy's words. "But who told you this?" the guerrilla leader asked suddenly after a moment's reflection.

John Tapere shifted his weight from one thin leg to the other and scratched his knee without taking his big, round eyes off the large man. "Cephas Masia, who lives at Zingoma kraal told me, and he heard it from Lenos Bodiya who works at the store by St. Michaels School," he said rapidly, "and—and he has friends on the base."

Black Satan smiled. There was a long pause. "You did well, little swine-boy."

John Tapere, watching the man's face closely, smiled nervously.

Black Satan licked his plate clean and then threw it down on the ground. He

turned and looked at a young woman who was sitting under a tree on the edge of the clearing.

“Get me some water,” he shouted at her.

The woman got up slowly and picking up a battered enamel tin mug, walked towards an old dented, petrol tin. She filled the mug and ambled across and held it out to him sullenly.

Black Satan drank greedily and noisily while she stood over him. When he had finished, he looked up at her, his eyes moving over her body appraisingly.

“Kneel down—there!” he said harshly, pointing to a spot immediately in front of him.

She shrugged her shoulders and dropped to her knees, her eyes cast down.

Smiles broke out on the faces of the other terrorists who were now all watching with awakened interest.

Black Satan leant forward and, with one hand, ripped open her stained white blouse. Looking at the other men, he put his large hand on her chest and moved it roughly over her small breasts. After a few moments, he took his hand away and spat contemptuously on the ground.

“This skinny cow is good for nothing,” he said with a sneer. He stood up. “Go and get me some more food.”

As he spoke, he pushed her head viciously with his open hand.

“There is no more. It is finished,” she said, getting up from her knees awkwardly and pulling her blouse back on her thin, bony shoulders.

“I said: get me more!” he shouted in a burst of irritation.

She shrugged her shoulders again, walked back to the tree and sat down, her arms resting listlessly on her knees.

Black Satan looked at her frowning. “Didn’t you hear what I said?” he shouted angrily.

Several of the lounging men turned and stared at her.

She lifted her head and spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. “How can I give you food if there is no more?” she asked in a quiet, resigned voice.

Black Satan walked across to her, his hands on his hips.

“Don’t you know what we do to people like you who don’t want to co-operate with us, eh?” he said threateningly. He bent down and gripped her jaw with his hand and moved her head slowly from side to side. ”If you are not careful, we will put you on a spit like a piece of meat and roast you—just

like Comrade Moyo did to some others yesterday." He laughed and started picking his teeth with a small broken twig.

She continued staring at the ground, her face flat and expressionless.

Without taking his eyes off her, Black Satan said: "What's your name, bitch?"

"Anna Sibanda," she mumbled.

"Well, Anna Sibanda. I hate sell-outs like you. I hate you almost as much as I hate the white pigs who take our country from us and treat us like slaves." His voice was full of bitterness and contempt. He spat on the ground.

He looked at Letson. "*Aluta continua*—the struggle continues, eh, Letson?" he said in a sinister voice.

"Yes, Blacko, *Aluta continua!*"

"I'm thinking," continued Black Satan after a moment, "that we'll teach her a little lesson, hey, Comrades?" As he spoke, he took out a sheath knife he was carrying on his belt and then gently ran his coarse, thick thumb along the sharp edge of the shining blade.

Several of the guerrillas stood up and lazily strolled over to him.

John Tapere, his eyes wide with fear and fascination, was standing a little apart from the group. With the helpless feeling that young children experience when suddenly confronted with the frightening world of adults, the little herd-boy instinctively sensed that something terrible was about to happen.

His mind leapt back to that never-to-be-forgotten day when a group of armed Freedom Fighters had first come to his village and had killed his crippled father and so many of the villagers. It was almost three years ago, and he had been very young, yet it was as clear in his mind as if it had only happened a week ago.

A voice suddenly broke into his thoughts. It was Black Satan.

"Come here, swine boy. You must see—and remember—what happens to people who do not want to help us free our beloved country."

The petrified child walked unsteadily over towards the guerrillas and watched with wide, staring eyes as several of them grabbed the woman and roughly pushed her backwards to the ground. Pulling her arms above her head, they pinned her down so that she couldn't move. One of them then knelt at her head and held it firmly between his knees.

Gripping his knife, Black Satan straddled her chest and looked down at her.

He grinned. “Now, let’s see how you like this, you bitch.”

Unable to control his panic, John Tapere turned and fled into the bushes, retching violently. Black Satan, hearing him flee, turned and, with a roar of derisive laughter, watched him as he disappeared out of sight.

As the little *mujiba* raced blindly away down the hill, the agonised cries of the woman and the raucous shouts and laughter of the guerrillas, mercifully grew fainter and fainter in his ears.

When he reached his village, the sun was setting in a blaze of resplendent colours and the peaceful kopjes and distant hills were bathed in a glorious, rich, golden glow.

CHAPTER 21

Time: 17h20. The same evening.

Wally put his empty mug of tea down on the small table with a thump. Belinda, the cat, looked up at him with half-closed, lazy eyes.

"Crikey! I'll go crazy if I have to sit around here much more," he exclaimed, turning to Chalmers.

They were sitting in the cool shade of the verandah.

Chalmers looked at him with tolerant amusement. "Why don't you get all the spiders and cobwebs out of your rifle? That should kill a few hours," he said with a chuckle.

"What a brilliant idea—the man's a genius!" said Wally with mock enthusiasm. He stood up and walked off down the verandah, whistling jauntily. Chalmers watched him go and, smilingly, shook his head.

After a few moments, he bent down and picked up the folded map of the Chitangwe Tribal Trust Land area from the concrete floor next to his feet. He unfolded it and started studying it carefully.

In the four short days he had been at the base, terrorist incidents had been reported at Kado kraal, north of Kwevane; to the south, at Katamany kraal; and now, yesterday, at Magunya—less than two kilometres to the south-west.

From information he had gleaned from some of the locals, he surmised that at least four large groups of terrorists were operating within a five to six kilometre radius of the base itself.

Chalmers took out his pen and marked the latest reported sighting on the map. He frowned thoughtfully. It certainly looked as if Chitangwe was being systematically surrounded—and the rains were about to start.

Chalmers sighed.

"Ah, the mighty brain is at work again!" said Wally as he reappeared on the verandah with his rifle and cleaning kit.

Chalmers looked up. "What do you make of this, Wally?" he asked, indicating the sightings on the map.

“About what?” asked Wally, sitting down.

“All these recent attacks—do you think the terrs just move around on the off-chance that something will turn up, or do they actually work to a plan?”

Wally laughed derisively. “Work to a plan? Them? You must be joking!” he said. “All they do is sleep, eat and fuck up all the women they can get hold of.”

Chalmers chuckled. “That sounds just like a few whites I’ve come across.”

Wally looked at him. “I reckon everyone’s more or less the same, white or black. Well, apart, from the atrocities that is,” he added.

A speculative look crossed Chalmers face. “I’m not even so sure of that either, anymore—there are a lot of nasty people in this world, no matter where you go,” he said.

Wally pulled the bolt of his rifle open and examined it closely.

”*Ja*. Perhaps you’re right,” he replied with a sigh.

Chalmers turned and looked thoughtfully into the far distance. After a few moments’ silence, he said: “God! I really *must* get down to training these guys as soon as the rest of the DSAs get back from Urungwe.” He glanced at his watch. “Which reminds me: they should have been back hours ago—I hope they haven’t been ambushed.”

Wally, who had started stripping his rifle, chuckled. “No, they’ll be alright. They’re probably all drunk and still lying around in some filthy compound in Urungwe!”

Chalmers smiled. “Maybe—or perhaps they’ve also been learning how to run a modern democracy!” he added with a cynical laugh. He looked at Wally. “Falon was telling me before he left Chitangwe that the last time he went into town with them, he caught one of ‘em putting half a bag of sugar in the fuel tank of the lorry so that they’d be able to stay an extra night.” He shook his head incredulously.

“Is that a fact?” asked Wally, looking up at him. “It’s really quite frightening when you think about it,” he added.

Chalmers gave a short laugh. “In my opinion, it’s probably best not to think about anything, if you can help it. ‘Ignorance is bliss’ and all that sort of thing—so you’ll be alright, Wally!”

Wally, grinning broadly, groped around his feet for the small phial of rifle oil. Picking it up, he half turned towards Chalmers and said: “Are you really serious when you say you’re going after this Black Satan guy?”

Chalmers absent-mindedly watched the young man as he carefully up-ended the bottle and dabbed a little oil on a 4 x 2[37] cleaning patch.

He nodded. “Yep. Especially after what I saw at Magunya,” he said slowly, emphasising the words.

Hearing the tone of his voice, Wally looked round at him.

Chalmers eyes had a steely glint in them.

The youngster studied the older man’s face for a moment. “But what about the DSAs you’ve got here—I mean, they’re not exactly what you’d call crack troops, are they?” he said sarcastically.

Chalmers grinned. “Don’t you worry—they *will* be by the time I’ve finished with them!”

“You must be joking,” laughed Wally.

The older man ignored the remark. “Now that my three NCOs have gone, I’ve decided to put Masikela in charge of the DSAs. He’s not marvellous, but I’ve got to put someone in charge.”

“But what about that tall guy you were telling me about? What’s wrong with him?”

“You mean Joshua?”

“*Ja*—Joshua, that’s the one.”

“No,” said Chalmers, shaking his head thoughtfully. “I think Masikela would be better somehow. He’s older for one thing—seems pretty intelligent and is certainly a lot more responsible.” Chalmers paused. A look of amusement appeared on his face. “Rather like you and me really—you’re Joshua and I’m…!”

“G’on, you bastard!” rejoined Wally with a laugh.

Chalmers stood up. “Anyway, I’m going to radio through to Urungwe now and find out what time the guys left.”

He walked down the verandah, suddenly stopping and turning round. “Damn! I should have remembered to ask them to bring back some food with them. *Ich habe es ganz vergessen*—I completely forgot!”

Wally turned and looked at him. *“Jawohl, Mein Führer!”*

Chalmers grinned but ignoring the rejoinder, went on: “We’re going to run short. I didn’t know when I came here that I’d have to feed you as well as *meself*!”

Wally shrugged his shoulders. “Well, I suppose there’s only one thing for

it, Dad—you'll just have to cut down so that there'll be enough for me. I'm the important bugger around here, you know!" he added with a broad grin.

"Oh yeah," rejoined Chalmers with mock sarcasm. "Here's an idea—if you ask Belinda very nicely, she might let you have some of *her* food!" he retorted as he walked away.

*****

Entering the radio room, by coincidence the first thing Chalmers saw was Belinda the cat draped over the main radio set, lying in a splash of sunshine.

He walked over and stroked her affectionately. Her fur was warm.

"Have you heard anything from the men, Kenneth?" he asked, turning to look at the radio operator.

"Yes, sir. They radioed in about two hours ago to say that they had just left the police post at Hermes."

Chalmers looked at his watch. Barring accidents, he calculated they should be back at the base any time now.

A slight frown of annoyance appeared on Chalmers face. "Why didn't you give me the message when you received it?"

Kenneth looked at him with a grin. "I forgot, boss," he said simply.

Without a word, Chalmers turned and walked out.

As if on cue, he heard the sound of approaching vehicles. A long cloud of thick, brown dust was hanging in the air over the airstrip, and as the vehicles recklessly bounced along at high speed, Chalmers could make out the haunting sound of voices raised in some native chant.

An Englishman to the core, Chalmers had never really grown accustomed to Africa, yet there were times—brief moments like now—when he fleetingly understood the mysterious attraction that the place, this Dark Continent, held for so many people.

He looked around him. Even though it was late afternoon, the fierce sun was still beating down on the golden-brown kopjes out of a vast, cloudless blue sky. On the horizon, he could see the distant purple mountains, and over the rolling plains of scrub and dried grass, he could just make out in the clear air, tiny clumps of African huts and, here and there, small herds of black native cattle.

He inhaled deeply, catching the faint smell of wood smoke on the still

evening air. Africa …

*****

The DSAs, laughing and joking, noisily jumped down one by one from the hot, dusty vehicles and made their disorderly way to the barracks. They greeted him as they passed. A few came to attention with a “Good evening, boss.”

Chalmers smiled and returned their welcomes. He was pleased to see them.

The driver of the lorry, Leonard, climbed stiffly down from the high cab. He was holding a bundle of letters in one hand and two parcels tucked under his other arm.

He walked over to Chalmers, a broad smile on his face. “Good evening, boss. I have some letters, cigarettes and the spare part for the Pookie.”

“Thank you very much, Leonard. Tell me—did everything go alright?” asked Chalmers.

“Yes, boss. It was a good run. No terrs at all!”

“Good, I’m glad about that,” said Chalmers. “But I must say, you took your time—I was expecting you back about noon,” he added with a touch of reproof.

The driver nodded apologetically before handing the thick bundle of letters and the two packets to him.

Quickly skimming through the twenty or so envelopes, Chalmers saw a long, white envelope addressed to him at the bottom of the pile of letters. He recognised the immaculate typing and knew immediately that it was from his wife. He handed the other letters back to Leonard and, taking the two parcels containing his cigarettes and the spare part for Wally, walked happily back to the verandah.

“Now you’ve got no excuse,” he said cheerily, holding out the smaller of the two packets to Wally. “Just go and get that infernal mine-machine of yours on the road again!”

Wally took it from him and started opening it.

“Wonders never cease,” he said, looking inside the box “And it looks like it’s the right part, too.”

“Good,” said Chalmers. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go and read my letter in my room. See you shortly, Wally, me boy!”

The youngster looked at him enviously. “You lucky sod! All I get is a bloody rotor arm. No one ever writes to me,” he wailed, pulling a mock glum face.

Chalmers grinned. “Well, it’s not hard to understand why. Who the hell would want to write to a nut like you?” he quipped, walking off to Wally’s jeers.

CHAPTER 22

Chalmers put the envelope down on the small table by his bed.

Taking a cigarette out of the packet, he lit it and sat smoking thoughtfully. Despite his eagerness to read the letter, he felt almost too nervous to open it in case something serious had gone wrong at home in his absence.

After a few moments, he opened the envelope carefully and removed the neatly folded sheets of paper.

'My darling,' he read—

> 'Thank you so much for your long letter. Fantastic effort of yours to write when you had had such a hideous day. It seems as if you've been away for months already although it's really only a few days.'

Chalmers smiled with relief. Thank God, everything seemed to be alright! As usual, he had been worrying for nothing.

He reached over to pick up the battered tin ashtray that stood on the table and carefully eased the long, round of ash from the end of his cigarette.

> 'I had a very kind letter from the District Commissioner at Urungwe which made me feel a little better. He said I was to contact his office if I had any problems. Extremely nice of him, don't you think?'

Chalmers raised his eyebrows in surprise. Maybe the man wasn't such a bad old stick after all, he thought.

> 'Christopher is being quite good, but is missing you a lot …'

There was a sudden knock at the door. Chalmers got up impatiently and walked over to open it.

"Yes, Kenneth?"

"You're wanted on the set, sir."

Chalmers frowned. "All right, thank you. I'll come now."

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“Charlie Tango four zero—this is Lighthouse Cyclone[38]. I will be arriving at your loc. in about 30 minutes. Copied?”

Chalmers was puzzled. Why should Rob be coming here—and so late in the day? he wondered. He pressed the switch of the mouthpiece and briefly acknowledged the message.

Turning to Kenneth, he said: “Please go and tell Masikela I want to see him in my room straight away.”

Kenneth didn’t move but stood looking blankly at Chalmers.

“Well? What are you waiting for? *Now!* Chop-chop!”

Kenneth grinned. “Yes, boss!” he said, going to the door.

Chalmers watched him in puzzlement. Never in a thousand years would he ever understand these people, he thought, shaking his head.

He hurried back to his room. Perhaps he would just have time to finish reading his letter before the aircraft arrived.

> ‘When we got back from the cinema, Chris and I made masses of popcorn. Great fun. It shot all over the kitchen before I managed to get the lid on the saucepan. I let Tigger into the kitchen and he very helpfully ate all the popcorn on the floor, greedy dog!
>
> ‘This is only a short letter to let you know that everything’s alright. Take care of yourself, my love. We miss you so much. Don’t worry about us as we are both safely locked up at night from very early on and Tigger is a very good watchdog! We love you.’

It was signed with her customary elegant and flowing ‘M’. At the side of the page was a postscript.

> ‘PS: John and Heather have decided to go back to Ireland. Both are fed-up with the continual call-ups, and they feel there’s no future in the country under a black government.
>
> ‘Cecily has also decided to pack up and move down to South Africa for similar reasons. Everyone seems to be leaving the country these days!’

Chalmers put the letter back in the envelope and slipped it between the pages of *War and Peace*.

He stretched his arms above his head and yawned happily.

There was a gentle knock at the door. He got up and strolled across the room and opened it.

"Ah, Masikela," he said smiling. "Good. Could you come with me to the lounge for a moment? I want to speak to you."

CHAPTER 23

Although Chalmers had decided to promote the medic, Masikela, to the rank of acting corporal during Corporal Chakanyuka's absence, he was doing so with some misgivings.

Ideally, the position needed not only someone who had a lot of experience and a good military background but who was also strong enough to enforce discipline and able to command the headstrong men.

None of the DSAs on the camp appeared to have any of those qualifications, and Masikela himself certainly hadn't inspired Chalmers with much confidence. However, he had not forgotten how the man had responded at the main gates on the morning of their first dawn patrol to Nyakende kraal. It was, he admitted, a very small point but to Chalmers—who believed men showed their true character in minor things more clearly than in larger matters—it was a significant one.

Masikela was a reserved, soft-spoken and very private man. He was considerably older than the other DSAs, and Chalmers had noticed that he kept very much to himself, spending most of his free time alone in his room, sitting in an old, one-armed easy chair reading a large, black-covered medical textbook. No one ever took much notice of him, and he, in turn, largely ignored the other men on the base. He also appeared to have some disability in one of his legs which gave him a noticeable limp.

Chalmers studied the man thoughtfully as he sat in the armchair opposite him.

"Masikela, as you know, we no longer have any NCOs on the camp. I have decided, therefore, to promote you to senior NCO, and I want you to pick someone whom you feel would make the most suitable acting lance corporal under you."

The African shifted in his chair.

"Please think about it carefully, and let me know your choice as soon as you have come to a decision," Chalmers continued. "However, don't leave it too long, please, as I want to start training the men as soon as possible."

“Yes, sir,” replied Masikela. There was no trace of surprise or concern on the impassive face. “I can give you the answer now, sir. There is only one person who could do the job properly—Joshua Chimoya.”

Chalmers looked at him with visible surprise. It almost seemed as if the man had anticipated that he was going to be asked such a question and had already given the matter considerable thought!

“Are you quite sure?”

Masikela nodded. “Yes, sir, very sure—he is the best.”

Chalmers was nonplussed and not a little disconcerted at the man’s air of calm decision. He looked at him thoughtfully for a few moments, wondering anew whether or not he had misjudged his man.

“Very well,” he said, taking his cigarettes from his shirt pocket and offering one to Masikela. The African leant forward and deferentially took one from the packet.

“Now, Masikela,” Chalmers went on after lighting the cigarettes, “I don’t need to tell you how difficult your job will be. The DSAs are cheeky, undisciplined and they don’t like being told what to do, although I must admit they’re a little better than they were when I first arrived at the base. They are going to resent you—a lot. Do you honestly think you can handle it?”

Masikela smiled. It was a relaxed, very confident smile. “There won’t be any trouble, sir,” he said bluntly.

Chalmers frowned. Was the man stupid? he wondered. He recalled once reading a remark which Napoleon had made after interrogating an insolent junior officer: ‘”The man was even too unintelligent to be afraid,” the Emperor had commented with contempt.’

“I don’t think you realise what the position involves,” he said with a slight edge to his voice.

Masikela leant forward in the chair. “You needn’t worry, sir. I can handle the men,” he said softly.

Chalmers frowned impatiently. All right, if that’s how the man wanted it, let him learn the hard way! he mused.

He glanced at his watch. “The aircraft will be arriving shortly so I’ll talk to you again later. We will be working very closely together from now on so I want us to understand each other perfectly.”

They stood up.

“The first thing you must do,” said Chalmers briskly, “is to have four guards posted around the aircraft when it lands and two stationed at either end of the airstrip. I know we haven’t done it before, but from now on, I want it to be routine procedure. Understood?”

Masikela opened his mouth to speak.

“Please let me finish, Masikela,” he said in a curt voice. “And I also want the airstrip quickly checked for mines—*now*!”

Masikela coughed politely. “I can hear the plane coming, sir,” he said.

“I’m not deaf, thank you, Masikela,” said Chalmers with mounting irritation as he moved towards the door. “Get the men out quickly—we’ll just have time. In the meanwhile, I’ll radio the pilot and tell him to hold off a minute or two while you organise the men.”

Masikela didn’t move.

Chalmers, impatient of all slowness, raised his voice. “For God’s sake, Masikela, get moving!”

A slow smile played about the African’s lips. “The airstrip was checked about half-an-hour ago, and the guards are already waiting for the aircraft by the gates, sir.”

Chalmers stopped abruptly and turned to stare at him. There was a moment’s silence.

“Who told them to?”

“I did, sir. I thought that, as the plane was coming, we should do it for security.”

The sound of the aircraft grew louder as it made a low-level reconnaissance pass over the base.

Chalmers stared at the African in disbelief. A host of questions raced through Chalmers mind, the uppermost being as to how on earth the man had known that the aircraft was coming? He had only just learnt that himself!

Brushing aside a sudden chill of suspicion that swept over him, Chalmers was intrigued. “And did you have any trouble with the men?” he asked incredulously.

“No, sir—none at all,” replied the African with a knowing smile.

“Well!” said Chalmers, completely dumbfounded. “We haven’t time to talk now, Masikela, but just tell me—how on earth did you manage it?” he asked.

Masikela’s eyes sparkled with amusement. “When I give an order, I expect to be obeyed, sir. I was a sergeant for 11 years in the Rhodesian African

Rifles. I fought in the jungles of Malaya," he said with quiet pride.

CHAPTER 24

Walking to the main gates with Masikela, Chalmers saw four smartly dressed DSAs standing at the ready on the edge of the airstrip, waiting for the aircraft to touch down.

"Two men are in cover down there—" Masikela pointed towards one end of the airstrip, "and two more are at the other end."

Chalmers looked, in turn, in the directions indicated and murmured approvingly: "Excellent, Masikela."

He still couldn't get over his good fortune. The man appeared to be a perfect second-in-command, he thought delightedly. Admittedly, it was little enough to go on, but if Masikela was really as competent as he seemed to be, Chalmers realised that most of his troubles as regards the men appeared to be over.

With Masikela, Joshua and himself—what couldn't they accomplish? he thought, with a sudden lifting of his spirits.

He turned to Masikela. "I think I owe you an apology, Masikela. I'm sorry," he said, looking straight into his eyes.

"Thank you, sir," Masikela said simply.

They moved over to the edge of the runway together and watched the small plane as it banked sharply over Assegai Kopje. It straightened up and gradually lost height. There was a puff as, tail up, the aircraft touched down and came racing along the airstrip in a mounting cloud of dust. It crossed in front of them and came to a standstill at the far end of the strip. Chalmers watched as the pilot turned the plane and slowly taxied back towards them.

As it drew near, Chalmers screwed up his eyes and turned his face away as a sudden blast of hot wind from the propeller sent up a flurry of dirt and loose grit. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the DSA's red-banded hats bowling wildly over the ground in the slipstream. Chalmers chuckled.

The pilot switched off the engine.

There was complete silence.

Chalmers strolled over to the aircraft. The door opened, and Rob, smiling

broadly, climbed down.

"Hi, Mike. That was a damn sight better than last time, eh?" he said with a laugh.

Chalmers laughed, recalling Rob's previous hair-raising landing.

Without waiting for an answer, the young man said: "Hell, it's nice to see that, I can tell you." He nodded towards the DSAs who were already taking up their positions around the aircraft. "It does me poor heart good, indeed it does!"

Chalmers laughed. "And would you believe me if I told you that there were others lurking at either end of the airstrip?" he said.

Rob whistled. "My, my, my, things are certainly looking up!" He shook his head, suddenly serious. "If the chap in charge up at Umsholo last year had bothered to do that, we might never have lost the other aircraft and pilot."

"So I gather," said Chalmers, looking hard at Rob. "What *really* happened there?"

"The terrs just sat at one end of the airstrip and let fly with an RPG 2 rocket just as the plane was taking off. God, what a mess! Mind you," he added, reflecting, "Umsholo is a lousy spot anyway. The airstrip is right in among the hills—that's one of the reasons why the helicopters use it." He laughed. "It always gives me the creeps when I have to go there."

"I'm not surprised," said Chalmers sympathetically. "I can't say I want to go there again very much myself—certainly not by road, thank you!" He turned and looked at the aircraft. "I see you've got a passenger," he said, a note of surprise in his voice.

Rob, with a click of his fingers as if remembering something, turned round quickly.

"Gosh, sorry, Lawrence. I'd forgotten you were there," he called out loudly with a laugh. He turned back to Chalmers. "That's Lawrence Winters. I gather he's come here to repair the damage from the last attack," he offered by way of explanation.

A small, fair-haired, cocky-looking man ambled round the wing of the aircraft and walked over to them.

"No need to apologise. I was just getting my things together, anyway," he said.

He held out his hand to Chalmers. "Lawrence Winters," he said. "I've come to turn this place into a five-star hotel for you—swimming pool, restaurant,

golf links—the works!"

For a fleeting moment, Chalmers thought of Claire, the district commissioner's secretary, and her light-hearted quip three days ago about making his hotel booking at Chitangwe. It felt more like three months ago now, not three days!

Chalmers smiled at the newcomer. "Well, that sounds very nice. I'll be able to invite people up here for a holiday, then. We could even rope in the Department of Tourism, too!"

"Yes, how about: 'Come to breathtaking Chitangwe—a paradise for tourists and terrorists alike!'" chuckled Rob.

Winters regarded him seriously. "It's funny you should say that," he said. "I knew a chap once—I forget his name—no, I remember now: James Vickers it was. No," he paused, pursing his lips. "It wasn't Vickers—it was Wickstead, I think. Or was it?" He shrugged his shoulders. "I don't suppose it matters really, does it?" He laughed. "Well, anyway, this chap …"

Chalmers' heart sank as he listened politely to the man's long-winded pedantry. Oh God, he thought with a sinking heart, Lawrence appeared to be one of *those* …

Rob winked at Chalmers, an impish grin on his face. "Sorry to interrupt, Lawrence," he butted in, "but I'm afraid I've got to be going."

Chalmers quickly grabbed the chance. "Where are you headed for now, Rob?"

The young pilot pulled a face expressive of distaste. "Umsholo! I promised Dave—the guy in charge there—a couple of weeks ago that I'd drop a few supplies off for him." He looked up at the sky. "Fortunately, it's not too late and it doesn't take long to fly there."

Chalmers, reminded of his own, almost-bare larder, clicked his tongue in irritation. "Damn, what a pity. If I'd known you were coming, I would have asked you to drop off some for us too. We're running helluva short," he said.

"I'm sorry, Mike. What a pity," said Rob sympathetically. "Will you be able to manage for now?"

Chalmers shook his head. "No, not for much longer. I only brought enough food for me originally—and even that turned out to be far too little!" He chuckled, trying to put a good face on it. "Never mind. We'll just have to take a run into Urungwe. At least the DSAs will enjoy that!" He looked at Rob. "But if I end up full of bullets, I'll know who to thank!"

Rob grinned. He thought for a moment. “I tell you what—If you radio a shopping list through to me direct sometime, I’ll try and squeeze in an unofficial trip for you. But, whatever you do,” he warned, “don’t let them know anything about it at headquarters or I’ll be in for the chop!”

Chalmers smiled appreciatively. “That would be fantastic if you could do that, Rob. I must admit I’ve not been looking forward to having to drive into Urungwe.”

“*Ja*, I’ve heard that it’s not a fun trip that. Actually, they say it’s bloody hair-raising to say the least!” agreed Rob.

Chalmers grinned. “Rather like flying with you!”

Rob burst into laughter.

Chalmers glanced at his watch. “Come on, Rob. You’ve just got time for a quick cup of tea.”

The young pilot hesitated a moment. “OK, that’d be nice—but it’ll have to be a very quick one.”

Chalmers turned to Masikela who was still standing nearby. “Masikela, could you get someone to carry Mr. Winter’s things in for him, please.”

“They’re just coming now, sir.”

Chalmers eyes twinkled appreciatively. It was almost too good to be true, he thought.

“Right then! Let’s go to the lounge,” he said briskly to the others.

The men walked through the camp making desultory small talk.

As they passed the kitchen, Chalmers put his head around the door. “Three teas, Misheck—as soon as you can, please. Boss Rob is in a hurry.”

The cook thrust his head out through the window. Incredibly, he was almost smiling. “Right, boss. But the tea’s nearly all gone. We need more—*chop-chop!*”

“OK, Misheck, we’ll try and get some—chop-chop!”

The three men went into the lounge and sat down. Chalmers offered cigarettes around.

“No, not for me,” said Lawrence, holding up his hand in the air as if stopping traffic. “I used to smoke a lot at one time. In fact, when I was stationed at Chirundu as Chief Irrigation Officer there, well, I had …”

He droned on, and Chalmers and Rob exchanged glances.

“By the way, Mike,” said Rob, interrupting the newcomer somewhat impatiently, “I heard that there was another guy here. Who is he?”

“Ah, that’ll be Wally—a very nice chap. He drives the Pookie.”

There was a tap at the door, and Misheck walked in with the tea tray and put it down on the table.

Chalmers thanked him, then pouring out a cup, said to Rob: “Been doing anything exciting since I last saw you?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact I have. I’ve just got engaged—two days ago. How cool is that!” he said with a satisfied grin.

“Congratulations!” said Chalmers warmly, leaning over and putting a cup and saucer down on a small table next to Rob’s chair.

Lawrence tutted. “You’ll be sorry. Women!” he said, shaking his head knowingly.

They ignored him.

“So, when are you planning to get married? Or is that rushing things a bit?” asked Chalmers.

“Well, I’m due some leave next month so we thought it would be nice to get married around Christmas. Jane’s parents live in South Africa—Durban—so we’re going to have the wedding down there,” he answered happily.

“And the honeymoon?”

“We thought we’d drive up the Natal coast. I’ve been told it’s a beautiful route.”

Chalmers nodded. “Yep, so I’ve heard. I believe the scenery is magnificent—not that *that* will particularly interest you, I imagine!” he added with a chuckle.

Lawrence leant over and lifted his cup. “Where you *should* go is the Cape. Don’t bother with Natal—it’s not a patch on the Garden Route. I was there last year—no, sorry, I’m lying—the year before. I remember that now because …” he rambled on.

Chalmers frowned impatiently.

Rob, hastily draining his cup, stood up to leave. “Sorry, Mike, gotta go. Thanks for the tea,” he said, a twinkle in his eyes.

He turned to Lawrence. “You must tell me that story some other time.” He gave Chalmers a meaningful glance as if to say: *When I’ve got a couple of weeks to spare!*

Chalmers grinned.

“By the way, I’ve got a few newspapers if you want,” said Rob as he and Chalmers made their way out of the lounge and walked across to the airstrip.

Chalmers thanked him, then, with a shake of his head, said: “Gee, I hope that Winters guy is not staying long!”

Rob laughed. “What with the terrorists and now him, you’re in for a tough time, I reckon!”

“You can say that again!”

“What with the terrorists and now him …!” he began, jokingly.

The four DSAs, seeing them approach, walked back and stood by the camp fence to watch the aircraft take off.

Rob climbed into the aircraft, strapped himself in and then passed a folded bundle of newspapers out of the cockpit window. “Now you can see what’s going on in the big, wide world.”

Chalmers took the newspapers from him. “Thanks, Rob. I hope the wedding goes well. Oh, but I was forgetting—hopefully I’ll be seeing you before then with the supplies. I’ll radio you my shopping list tomorrow sometime.”

Rob nodded and then, giving the thumbs up, started the engine.

“Cheers, Mike,” he shouted, sliding the window shut.

Chalmers backed away and watched the aircraft as it trundled down the airstrip. It took off and climbed gracefully away, growing smaller and smaller until it was a mere dot against the darkening blue of the sky.

Chalmers turned and after a few words with the guards, walked back to the staff lounge. He poured himself another cup of tea and sat down. He looked at Lawrence who was skimming through a magazine.

“I must say, it’s nice to see a newspaper again,” he said conversationally, unfolding the bundle of newspapers. Lawrence grunted, engrossed in an article.

Chalmers glanced at the front page. ‘Governor in soon’ announced the lead story’s headline:

> ‘The British Governor, who has been charged with the task of overseeing Zimbabwe/Rhodesia’s transition to internationally acceptable independence, is expected to arrive in Salisbury within two weeks, according to a spokesman for the Minister of Justice …’

Chalmers turned to another item. He detested politics.

> ‘A Combined Operations HQ communiqué reports that another 72 people, including 41 terrorists, three members of the security forces

and three white farmers, who were murdered in an attack on their farms in the Hartley area, have been killed.

'Terrorists have murdered six black civilians. On Sunday evening in the north-eastern operational area, a man who had refused the demands of a terrorist group for food, was bayoneted to death. In the same area, a boy was killed when he trod on a terrorist landmine. The communiqué said that in the south-eastern operational area, security forces located the bodies of 12 men who had been accused of being 'sell-outs', and were stabbed to death by terrorists.

'On Sunday evening a gang of terrorists went to a village in the western operational area where they ordered the people to assemble for a political meeting. They lined the people up and then shot them with automatic fire. The bodies were then burnt.'

Chalmers turned the page over with a sigh. Sadly, such communiqués were routine nowadays.

He looked up from the page as he heard a knock on the door. "Come in," he called.

It was Kenneth. "You're wanted on the set, boss."

"Who is it, Kenneth?"

"Umsholo, boss."

It must be Rob, thought Chalmers, wondering why the young pilot was calling. He got up and followed the radio operator to the radio room.

"Charlie Tango Four Zero—Oscar Kilo."

To Chalmers surprise, the message was not being relayed by an African operator but by Dave himself. The voice was urgent.

"Mike, the base has just been attacked—the cyclone was hit. Do you copy?"

Chalmers heart missed a beat. He hastily pressed the handset switch. "Copied. Any casualties? I repeat: any casualties? Over."

The set crackled. There was a long silence.

The reply, when it came, was faint and indistinct. "Affirmative. Affirmative. Two DSAs and the pilot of the cyclone have been killed. I repeat: two DSAs and the pilot of the cyclone have been killed. Copied?"

Chalmers went cold. "Copied," he said in a controlled voice. "Can we be of any assistance? Over."

There was a burst of static. “Affirmative. Please pass message on to 113[39]. I cannot get any response from the Relay Station. Copied?”

“OK, Dave, I’ll see to that straight away. Is that all?”

The set fell silent. He waited a few seconds, but there was nothing further. Dave had obviously gone.

Chalmers turned to Kenneth, his face set and rigid. “Relay that message to 113 immediately.”

He turned on his heel and walked out of the room towards the camp perimeter. He stood there for some moments, looking at the distant hills through the rusty mesh of the security fence with unseeing eyes.

Some people believe that evil is best conquered by understanding and forgiveness.

Chalmers, however, was not one of them.

CHAPTER 25

On a low kopje near Nyakende kraal, the group of Freedom Fighters, some lying, some sitting, spoke among themselves with lowered voices.

"Only 15 of us will go to Nyakende kraal," said Black Satan, looking at the attentive men gathered around him. There were muted groans of disappointment. He ignored them and went on. "Nine will stay here but well spread out, and the remainder will surround the kraal—but," he cautioned, "keep a good distance away. There are security forces around."

He cleared his throat softly and then spat on the ground.

"But what about the women—those that were at the base? You said we could have fun with them," said one of the men nearby.

"Yeah," chimed in another, "and tonight I really want it—badly!" he leered.

The others laughed.

Black Satan smiled briefly. "Sure, we'll have 'em, but first we show Comrade Moyo that he's not the only one who knows how to deal with these pigs of informants. After his victory at Magunya, he seems to think he's the Big Boss around here!" He laughed derisively.

"Yeah, we'll show him who's in charge, Blacko," said another, looking at Black Satan.

Black Satan stood up and hitched up his trousers. "OK, comrades. After we've finished with our little bunch of sell-outs, we'll bring the bitches here and celebrate."

Several laughed and rubbed their hands in anticipation.

The guerrilla leader bent down and picked up his rifle. "Get your weapons. It's time for us to teach the fools about the Struggle for Liberation!" he said, shaking his AK in the air above his head. "Forward the war of Liberation! Forward with the people of Zimbabwe! Forward ZANU-PF!" he said, chanting the popular guerrilla slogans.

*****

The sun had almost set and the first stars were already beginning to shine softly. The slender, yellow moon floated serenely over the distant hills from a crystal-clear sky. Except for the insistent, high-pitched chirps of myriads of crickets, hardly a sound disturbed the hushed and slowly darkening scene.

Marita Makwara and her friend, Susan, sat on the ground outside the hut enjoying the cool of the soft, peaceful evening. They talked quietly in subdued voices. A brown-coloured, mangy dog lay at their bare feet, stretched out lazily, its head resting on its front paws.

Marita leant forward and fondled one of its ears.

"I do not want to stay here anymore. I am frightened," she said slowly. She turned and looked at Susan. "Will you come to Salisbury with me?"

Susan stroked her leg thoughtfully. "It is no good in Salisbury," she said, shaking her head from side to side. "There is no work there. What would we eat? Where would we sleep?"

Marita looked at her feet, a disappointed look in here eyes. "We would manage somehow," she said in a pleading voice.

Susan shook her head disbelievingly.

There was a long silence.

Marita scratched her arm "Don't you care if the terrorists come back? Aren't you frightened of them, Susan?" she asked, her eyes serious and troubled.

Susan absent-mindedly picked up a small stone and threw it in front of her. The dog pricked up its ears and looked at her enquiringly. Then, reassured, it rested its head back on its paws, sighed and breathed out heavily.

"No! Why should I be?" answered Susan with quiet conviction. "They won't hurt us. We have done nothing!" She looked at Marita. "Anyway, perhaps the Freedom Fighters will win the war, and it will not be good if we have not helped them. They will remember and punish us," she added, nodding her head significantly.

Marita stretched one of her legs out before her and, leaning forward, brushed the sand off her foot. She regarded it contemplatively, but she was thinking about what Susan had just said. A look of disquiet crossed her face.

"I wish the boss had let us stay at the camp. It was nice there. He was a good man," she said after a thoughtful silence.

Suddenly coming to a decision, and with a toss of her head, she said: "Well, *you* can stay here if you like, but I am going to go to Salisbury!" She ran her

hands up her leg, puckering her dress up slightly. “Besides,” she added with an arch smile, “plenty of the men will look after me. I can find a nice boyfriend,” she went on, “and then—” She stopped suddenly as the dog lifted its head alertly and looked towards a large tree. Then, rising quickly to its feet, it started barking furiously, its hackles rising menacingly.

Walking slowly and silently towards them, the women saw a line of men, AKs cradled in their arms, their faces harsh and unsmiling. The women knew immediately who they were.

Marita reached out her hand and placed it on Susan’s forearm. As they watched, their hearts beating fast, the men stopped and one of them walked up to the group’s leader and softly said something to him. He looked directly towards the two women and pointed at them. Black Satan nodded and started walking over to them.

The dog watched him nervously, whining quietly, and then slowly cringed down on the ground with flattened ears.

“So—” said Black Satan as he came up to the two women and stood looking down at them, “here are our two sell-outs.” He paused. “You like it better sleeping with the whities at the base than with your people here!”

Susan looked up at him, defiantly. “We are not sell-outs! We were *forced* to go to the camp—we had to. They made us.”

Black Satan sneered. “Yeah? You lying bitch!” he said contemptuously. He pressed the barrel of his AK against her cheek. “We’ll deal with you two later. But, first, go and tell the kraal head to get everyone out here,” he commanded. “We are going to have a little talk with everyone.”

The women got up and ran towards a nearby hut.

Black Satan sat down and, pulling out a packet of cigarettes, took one and lit it, carefully watching the huts all the time, his rifle nestling in his lap.

One by one the villagers, mostly old men, women and children, silently assembled in a straggled semi-circle around him, shuffling their feet and looking anxiously at each other. Black Satan stared at them for a long time. He saw the fear in their eyes and smiled slowly in satisfaction.

Finishing his cigarette, he flicked the butt away into the dust. Then he lifted his rifle and, slowly and deliberately, moved the safety catch to the automatic position. Looking around him, he casually nodded to the guerrillas who had quietly positioned themselves at various points around the huts.

CHAPTER 26

That same evening, Chalmers was sitting in the staff lounge with Masikela.

"Tomorrow, Masikela, we'll go on another patrol to Nyakende kraal. Now that the two women have had time to think about it, maybe they'll be willing to tell us more about the terrs. Besides," he added after a short silence, "I want to make sure they got back safely."

Masikela shook his head. "I don't think they will tell us anything more, boss. They're too frightened."

Chalmers sighed. "Maybe you're right. Most of the locals seem to be very afraid—and I don't blame them, really." He paused, a thoughtful look on his face. "It must be terrible for them. They're scared of us and they're scared of the terrorists." He chuckled. "I'd keep quiet too if I were in their place!"

Masikela scratched his arm as he considered Chalmers' words. "It's not easy, boss. I was talking to a villager a few days ago—he has two sons: one in the security forces, the other is a terrorist or—" he hesitated, an enigmatic smile playing around his mouth, "Freedom Fighter!"

Chalmers nodded his head and leaning forward, stubbed his cigarette out in the tin lid ashtray.

"Yes, it's easy to be brave and openly condemn them when one is sitting safely at home in the city, but it's a different thing altogether when there's a terrorist standing over you with a AK rifle pointing at your head," he said. "It's always the same, Masikela—other people's sorrows are easy to bear."

He bent forward and picked up a small notebook that was lying on the table.

"Anyhow," he said briskly, "let's get down to business. Apart from the patrol to Nyakende, I also want to bring in a few more locals for questioning. It may be a waste of time, but you never know—we might just get a hint as to where this Black Satan is hiding out." He looked at Masikela. "I think we ought to try down there for a start," he said, turning round and pointing southwards towards the Mazweru Hills. "According to the map, there are two large kraals down there. Is that right? You know the area far better than I do."

Masikela nodded. “Yes, boss. Magomba and Tasai.”

Chalmers nodded. “Good. Judging by their position near the foothills, I imagine it’s pretty certain they’re harbouring plenty of these guys.”

Masikela nodded. “A *lot*, boss,” he said knowingly.

Chalmers looked at him enquiringly, eyebrows raised. “Really? And how do you know that?”

The African smiled but didn’t answer.

“Come on, Masikela, spit it out! Where did you find that out?”

Masikela looked at him for a few moments, his face expressionless. “I just know, boss.”

Chalmers stared at him in silence and then, taking another cigarette out of the packet lying on the small table nearby, lit it thoughtfully. A saying he had once read by the Roman Emperor, Tiberius, suddenly came to mind: ‘Watch those closest to you. They are the most dangerous because they are the last ones you suspect.’

“OK, Masikela,” he said, deciding to let the matter drop. He wouldn’t forget, however. He looked down at his notebook. “As from tomorrow, I want to start daily patrols to all the kraals in the area. We’ll start with Nyakende early tomorrow morning, and in the afternoon, you can take some of the DSAs down to Magomba and Tasai yourself.”

“OK, boss.”

“We’ll gradually work our way round the whole area over the next few weeks. By that time, we should have a pretty good idea of just what we’re up against—how many terrs there are, what groups they’re split up into, and where they’re hiding out.” He paused. “And once we know all *that*, we should be in a good position to start making life a bit unpleasant for some of them!”

Masikela smiled. “How long do you think that will take, boss?”

Chalmers pursed his lips. “It’s hard to tell—so much depends on what we find out, but it’s a good idea to set a deadline to work to, otherwise we’ll never get anywhere.” He looked up at the scenic Swiss calendar pinned to the opposite wall, considering. “Let’s make it three weeks from today. That’ll also give us time to knock the DSAs into some sort of shape.” He looked at Masikela. “OK by you?”

The newly promoted corporal nodded.

“Good.” Chalmers picked up a sheet of paper covered in his handwriting.

“I’ve already drawn up a training schedule so there’s no reason why we shouldn’t make a start first thing tomorrow morning after we get back from patrol.” He leant forward and handed the page to Masikela. “You can keep that one for yourself—I’ve got a copy in my room.”

Chalmers sat back in his chair. “Now, Masikela, the most important thing is this: are you absolutely clear in your own mind exactly what I’m trying to do?”

“Yes, boss—perfectly.”

“Good, because you and I will be working very closely together from now on, and it’s vital that there aren’t any misunderstandings between us. I know it’s not really our job to go out hunting for terrorists, but that’s not my view. We’re here—the terrorists are out there, and I’m certainly not going to just sit around for the next few weeks and do nothing.”

Masikela nodded.

“As far as I’m concerned,” Chalmers continued, “we have only one goal now and that is to: *Get terrorists!* And I want that hammered into the head of every single man on this camp. I don’t want any of them to be in any doubt whatsoever as to why we’re here or what we’re going to try and do.”

Chalmers leant forward, giving the African a significant look. “Black Satan is number one on my ‘Most Wanted List’ and,” he added significantly, deliberately emphasising every word: “I don’t care whether he gets to know that or not. He’s had everything his own way so far—now it’s *our* turn!”

CHAPTER 27

Time: 05h25. November 23

Walking in single file, Chalmers kept his eyes fixed on the backs of the men ahead of him, but he wasn't really seeing them.

Although he constantly warned the DSAs to remain alert at all times when on patrol, he himself was as guilty as the next man of allowing his thoughts to drift. He sometimes wondered whether it was even physically possible for anyone, walking for miles at a stretch, to keep alert every single moment.

He stumbled over a small stone causing Masikela, who was next in line ahead of him, to glance back enquiringly.

Although the sun had only just risen, Chalmers was already feeling hot and sticky, and despite a good night's sleep, his eyes felt heavy. Without slackening his pace, he fumbled for his water bottle and took a short drink, then wiped the perspiration from his forehead with a bare, sunburnt arm. The weight of his rifle was making his muscles ache.

As he walked along, he found himself remembering for some reason, a long-passed summer's day on the island where he had lived as a youngster. He had asked Pat, his girlfriend, if she'd like to go on a picnic with him on the Downs, and …

"Excuse me, boss." Masikela spoke softly, jarring his thoughts back to the present.

"Yes, Masikela, what is it?"

"Nyakende kraal is just ahead. Perhaps we should post guards now—but I think the terrs have been here already."

Chalmers looked at him sharply. "What makes you think that?"

Masikela shook his head. "I just feel it," he said simply.

Chalmers chuckled softly. "Go on with you! However, you're right—we can't be too careful. Get the men in position, and then the four of us—you, me, Joshua and Choma—will go to the kraal and see what's what. I just hope you're wrong, that's all."

At a signal from Masikela, the patrol spread out and disappeared into the bush. Chalmers watched in fascination. Even though he knew they were close at hand, he could see no trace of them. It was almost as if they had vanished into thin air so completely had they merged with their surroundings. It was a valuable, if disquieting, object lesson to him. If his own, untrained DSAs could do it so skilfully, the bush-hardened terrorists must be consummate masters of concealment, he thought.

As the four men reached the top of the small hill, Masikela pointed—but Chalmers had already seen.

"Oh God, not again …" he murmured, his stomach twisting sickeningly.

The first body they reached was that of a child. He couldn't have been more than four years old. As Chalmers stared down at the blood-soaked remains already swarming with flies, out of the corner of his eye he noticed a thin, wiry dog slink guiltily away between two of the huts, a bloody piece of flesh dangling from its mouth.

Chalmers looked at Masikela who was shaking his head in disbelief.

Chalmers broke the silence. "Please go and search the huts, Masikela. See if you can find out any of their names from their registration certificates[40] —we will need to make a list …"

"Yes, sir."

As he watched the corporal walk away, Chalmers turned to Joshua and, signalling to him to follow, he walked over to one of the huts and went inside. An old man and woman were sitting on the earthen floor, leaning against the mud wall of the hut. The woman turned her eyes and looked at them with a blank, expressionless face. The old man continued to stare at nothing.

Chalmers squatted down on his haunches in front of them. He half turned to Joshua who was standing close by. "See if you can get them to tell you what happened, Joshua."

Joshua squatted down and spoke a few words to them. Chalmers watched their faces carefully. After a long silence, the old man slowly shook his head without looking at them. Joshua repeated his question, his voice taking on a sharper note.

Suddenly, the woman—her voice high-pitched and harsh—broke into a flood of words which she emphasised at times with her thin, veined, bony

hands.

When she fell silent, Joshua shook his head and then turned to Chalmers. “It’s no good, boss. She says that nothing happened.” Joshua grimaced in disgust. “She says she doesn’t know why the people are lying down out there!”

Joshua stood up.

Chalmers shook his head and quickly got to his feet. He swayed momentarily as everything went black before his eyes.

Joshua quickly grabbed him by the arm.

Chalmers took a deep breath. “Thanks, Joshua. I’m ok now—I just stood up too quickly.” As he turned to go, he said: “We’ll obviously get nothing out of them. Let’s see if the corporal has found out anything.”

They went out of the hut. Chalmers looked around and seeing Masikela a few huts away, walked over to him.

He was sitting on a tree stump writing in a small notebook. In front of him stood an elderly woman who was speaking excitably at him, gesticulating wildly. He looked up as Chalmers and Joshua approached.

“Have you managed to find out anything, Masikela?” Chalmers asked without ceremony.

Masikela shook his head. “Nothing of importance, sir, but I have found one of the women who left the base yesterday.”

Chalmers looked at him sharply. “Is she alright?” he asked with concern.

Masikela shook his head. “Her body is over there, boss,” he said, pointing towards an overturned petrol drum.

Chalmers turned and looked. It was the body of Susan Chipungare.

“And the other one?”

“This woman says that the terrs took her away with them.”

“Right,” said Chalmers with sudden decision, “as soon as you’ve finished what you’re doing, radio back to the base and tell Kenneth to report this. In the meanwhile, Joshua and I will try and find out which direction the terrs went when they left here. With luck, we might be able to pick up their tracks.”

Masikela cleared his throat, checking his notes.

“Apparently they went towards that low *gomo*[41] over there,” he said, turning and pointing in a westerly direction. “Shall I get the men together?

I’ve got all the info I can, boss.”

Chalmers nodded. “Good. We’ll go immediately.”

*****

They came across the beheaded remains of Marita Makwara scattered on the ground between two large boulders.

As he looked briefly at the mutilated, tortured body, Chalmers recalled her last beguiling words to him: “If you let me stay, I clean, I cook—” Such a simple request. How could he have known that her very life had depended on his answer? Would she and her friend have lived if he had said they could stay on the camp for a few more days, he wondered?

Or was it, perhaps, as the Arabians said long ago: ‘What is forbidden will not happen unto thee, nor will that which is appointed fail to befall thee’?

Chalmers shook his head sadly. It was an unanswerable question.

CHAPTER 28

The same evening.

Glowing like a large, wine-red ball, the setting sun sank behind the dark hills in a flood of lurid fire. Long shadows crept across the camp bringing welcome relief after the exhausting heat of the day.

And still the rains had not come.

The DSAs, barely clothed, lounged idly around, some talking, some smoking, others just stretched out full-length on the small rectangle of parched, brown grass in front of the squat guard tower.

The cooling air was refreshingly soothing.

Chalmers strolled languidly across to the radio room and looked through the small pile of transmissions that Kenneth had noted down in his almost illegible scrawl.

He noted that, thankfully, they were all routine reports requiring no response.

He turned to the yawning radio operator. “By the way, Kenneth, we’re going to fire the mortar when it gets dark so don’t go sending out any distress signals.”

Kenneth turned his head, his arm casually draped over the back of his chair. “Should I inform anyone, boss?”

Chalmers thought for a moment. “No, there’s no need. There’s no one in the area—except the terrorists.” Then, with a slight smile, he added: “And I don’t think we need concern ourselves with *their* feelings!”

Kenneth looked at him, his face expressionless.

As Chalmers went out of the door, he stopped and, looking back, asked: “Do you know where Masikela is at the moment?”

“I think he’s in his room, boss.”

Chalmers nodded.

Making his way to the corporal’s room, he knocked on the green, crudely painted wooden door, and half-opening it, looked inside. Masikela was sitting

in his battered armchair, his medical bible in his hands.

He stood up respectfully as Chalmers asked: “May I come in?” Then, without waiting for an answer, Chalmers announced: “Masikela, the time has come. *Prepare to meet thy doom!*”

Masikela looked at him uncertainly, not understanding Chalmers’ cheerful, light-hearted humour.

“Yes, boss,” he answered in a flat, nonplussed voice.

Chalmers laughed, delighting in the corporal’s bewilderment. “It’s mortar time, Masikela. We’re going to blow the camp up!”

“Pardon, boss? Now?” he said, his bafflement deepening.

“Yes, Masikela, now—well, later tonight, that is!” Chalmers became serious. “We need to test the mortar—I gather it’s not been used since it was captured by the Security Forces. I also think that it would be a good opportunity to mount a surprise ‘attack’ on the camp at the same time. I want to see how the DSAs perform in a sudden emergency.”

Masikela’s face broke into a broad smile as Chalmers’ intentions became clear.

“Come over to the staff lounge in five minutes—and bring Joshua and Patrick with you. We’ll need three others as well; I’ll leave it up to you who to pick, ok?”

“Yes, boss,” he said happily.

Crossing the quadrangle, Chalmers remembered that he hadn’t told Wally or the new chap, Winters, what he was planning to do. For a moment, he debated whether to let them know or not. It would be amusing, he thought, to surprise them as well—especially Lawrence Winters! Then, feeling it was a little unfair on them both, he decided on a compromise: he’d warn them that they’d be firing the mortar—but keep the dummy attack up his sleeve! The idea of having a bit of unexpected entertainment at their expense appealed to him. He could almost hear Wally’s incredulous cry of: *Are you on drugs or something?*

Re-passing the radio room, Chalmers noticed a little yellow bird sitting on the cassia tree that grew near the shed. As he stopped to watch it momentarily, he noticed for the first time that the slender branches of the tree were covered in tiny green buds. The bird hopped to a neighbouring branch that swayed gently as it alighted.

As Chalmers moved, the bird suddenly flew off over the camp and

disappeared into the darkening evening sky.

Humming softly to himself, Chalmers walked over to Wally's room, three rooms down from his own. The door was open. Wally was lying stretched out on his bed, hands behind his head. He was listening in a bored way to Lawrence who was sitting on the end of the bed.

As Chalmers entered the room, Wally sat up, calling out brightly: "Hi, Dad, how goes it? Take a pew."

Winters looked up and nodded briefly.

Chalmers chuckled softly and sat down on the opposite bed. "How's the Pookie going—mended yet?"

Wally nodded. "Yep, I'm all ready to hit the road, I'm sorry to say!" he added with a laugh.

Chalmers lit a cigarette and offered one to Wally.

"Just to let you both know that I've decided to test the mortar and let off a few shells this evening. I want to make sure it works. Want to watch?"

"You bet, Mon Capitaine," rejoined Wally with enthusiasm. "Give us a shout when you're ready. I don't want to miss that!"

Lawrence turned and looked at Chalmers. "It's a large one—81mm, isn't it? Have you ever fired one of those things before?"

To Chalmers, his tone seemed slightly offensive. "Thank you, I know what to do," he said coldly. In fact, he hadn't fired one before—and certainly not a Chinese one—but he wasn't about to admit *that* to Winters!

There was a short silence.

"But if you want to watch, you are welcome to come along," he added. He felt as if he were offering the man an invitation to attend a royal fireworks display at Buckingham Palace!

He glanced at his watch, then got up and went over to the door. "Anyway, Wally," he said, turning and looking at him, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes, "I'll leave you in peace now—I'm sure you two have plenty to talk about!"

Wally's eyes flickered, and a ghost of a smile momentarily passed across his face. "Well," he said, "at least one of us has!" he muttered softly.

Absorbed in his own convoluted thoughts, Lawrence Winters didn't hear Wally's remark—or the implied insult.

After Chalmers had gone, the two sat in silence for a few moments.

"Strange fellow, that," said Lawrence, stretching his arms above his head

and yawning artificially. “What do you make of him?”

Wally swung his feet off the bed and started putting on his shoes. “The best,” he replied shortly.

“Do you think so?” Winters shook his head. “Between you and me, I don’t like him at all, personally. Seems to think he’s a cut above everyone else,” he said derogatorily.

Wally looked at him in surprise. “Utter bloody rubbish!” he snorted. He picked up his towel. “I’m going to have a shower now.”

He went out of the room, banging the door loudly behind him.

*****

Chalmers and the six Africans sat around the long table in the deepening gloom, talking softly as if reluctant to disturb the heavy silence that had imperceptibly fallen over the camp with the coming of nightfall.

Chalmers looked at them and then, clearing his throat, said: “OK, let’s get down to business. So far, we’ve been very lucky as regards to attacks on the camp. But the rains can’t be too far off now, and once they start, it’s almost certain the terrorists are going to favour us with a visit.”

The DSAs shifted uneasily in their seats and cast anxious looks at each other.

“However, by then we’ll be ready for them. But, first, we’ve got a lot of work ahead of us if we want to teach those savages a lesson.”

Joshua sniggered.

“I know the men have already been shown their stand-to positions in the event of an attack, but it’s important to see whether they still remember what they’ve got to do. And,” continued Chalmers, “the only way to find that out is for us to carry out our own dummy attack on the camp.”

Chalmers looked at their suddenly alert and interested faces.

“By the way,” he added, “I’m not sure yet how well you all speak English. Do you understand what I’m saying, or do you want the corporal to explain it to it in your own lingo?”

“No, we all understand, boss,” said Masikela, acting as their spokesman.

“Good. Now here’s what we’re going to do.” The Africans leant forward eagerly, expectantly. “In about an hour’s time—when it’s completely dark—we’re going to fire the mortar. While that is happening, I want you two—” he

turned to Joshua and Mutsata, “to fetch the two Bren guns and take them over to the security fence near the main gate. But try not to let anyone see you, ok?”

The two nodded their heads enthusiastically, their eyes shining in anticipation.

“At the same time,” Chalmers continued, “I want you, Patrick, and you, Samangure, to take your rifles and position yourselves on the far verandah over there.” He pointed to his right. Then, turning to Masikela, he said: “I want you, corporal, to take control of the mortar. We’ll select a target for you to fire at when we’ve finished here.” He paused. “I think you’d better have a couple of men to help you since this is the first time we’ll be testing it out,” he added as an afterthought.

Masikela nodded in agreement. “OK, boss.”

Absent-mindedly scratching a mosquito bite on his leg, Chalmers looked over at Masikela. “How many mortar shells have we got, do you know?”

Masikela frowned. “I think we’ve got 18, boss. But they look very old. I expect many of them are duds.”

“OK,” said Chalmers, straightening up, “in that case, we’d better only use three. We don’t want to run out, and we’re not likely to get any more—not from China, anyway!” He looked up as a sudden outburst of angry voices floated over the quadrangle from the African quarters.

“What on earth is going on over there, I wonder?” he said, looking towards the open window.

Masikela pushed his chair away from the table and went across to the open door. He listened for a moment.

“It’s nothing, boss,” he said, returning to his seat. “A fight over a belt or something!” He sat down, an amused smile on his face.

Chalmers nodded, and as the voices subsided, he turned to Matola, a thin, tall African who was reputed to be the best shot on the camp. “Matola, I want you up in the tower in charge of the Browning, *but*,” he emphasised, looking at him sternly, “whatever you do, don’t open fire until I give you the signal.”

Matola rubbed his hands together. “Eh-eh” he said gleefully.

Chalmers grinned. “When I want you to fire, I’ll shout out your name—you needn’t worry, I’ll be near the tower so you’ll be able to hear me clearly.”

Matola nodded. He was grinning broadly. “Yes, boss.”

Chalmers turned to the others. “As soon as you hear Matola start firing the

Browning, I want you all to open fire—exactly as if we were really under attack."

He paused and looked around at their expectant faces. "Now, are you sure you all know what you've got to do?" There were animated nods and murmurs of assent. "Don't—whatever you do—say a word to any of the others. The whole point of the exercise is that it must come as a complete surprise, ok?" He paused, a slight grin on his face. "What with the two Brens, the machine gun and the rifles on automatic, I think we should be able to manage that!"

The Africans banged the table with their hands, laughing uproariously at the prospect—a prospect that, Chalmers suddenly realised with misgiving, might make a real terrorist attack seem like a peaceful diversion in comparison! He looked around at their eager, exhilarated faces. While it had seemed a good idea at first, he wasn't nearly so sure anymore.

He leant forward. "I want you all to listen to me very closely," he said earnestly. "This is a serious exercise. It isn't a game." He spoke slowly, looking at each of the men in turn. "No one, under any circumstances whatsoever, is to fire *into* the camp. Point your weapons upwards and away at all times. Have you got that?"

A couple nodded their heads.

"Can we use tracer bullets, boss?" Mutsata asked, eyes gleaming.

They all looked at Chalmers in anticipation.

Knowing how fond Africans were of tracers—as, indeed, he was himself—Chalmers assented. Besides, and more importantly, he would be able to see exactly where his 'gun-happy' musketeers were firing! he rationalised.

"Yes, I don't see why not."

"How many rounds can we use, sir?" That was Patrick.

Chalmers did a quick mental calculation. The camp might be short of most things, but he had discovered that Chitangwe possessed large reserves of ammunition—at least 300,000 rounds of 7.62s. He felt he could be generous!

"Seeing as it's getting near Christmas, you can use 500 rounds each."

There were exclamations of surprised delight.

"Masikela will give it to you a little later," added Chalmers. Despite the ample reserves on hand, the DSAs were normally strictly rationed now that new supplies were becoming so much harder to obtain.

Chalmers stood up. "Right, I think that's all. But I warn you again—fire

away from the camp." He turned to Matola who was to be in charge of the Browning in the tower. "And if I happen by chance to see a stream of pretty orange tracers come tearing through my bedroom window from the Tower of London there, I'll personally come up and hang you from the belfry with my own bare hands, Matola!"

There were roars of laughter.

"OK, off you all go," Chalmers said.

The DSAs made their way excitedly to the door.

Chalmers watched them leave with amusement. The atmosphere on the base was definitely changing—and very much for the better, he thought with satisfaction as he watched the rollicking men making their way across the quadrangle.

He turned to Masikela who was still sitting at the table. "OK, Masikela, let's go and look at the map and pick out a suitable target for you, then we must dish out the ammo." He took out a cigarette and lit it. "I think we're going to have some fun tonight—for a change!"

Masikela got up from the table, smiling. "I think so too, boss!"

"Oh, and by the way," added Chalmers, "If you see the cat anywhere, please bring her to me, will you? I'll shut her in my room for the evening. I don't want her scared out of her poor wits—even if the rest of the camp is going to be!"

CHAPTER 29

Back in his room, Chalmers lay on the bed, taking advantage of the rare opportunity to grab a few moments' solace while he waited for darkness to fall. Living under such alien, comfortless conditions, he inevitably found the need to escape occasionally and reading was always a welcome retreat.

He reached over to the small bedside table and picked up his well-worn copy of 'Bleak House'.

> 'Fog everywhere … Fog on the Essex marshes, fog on the Kentish heights …'

There was a soft knock. Chalmers frowned in irritation and replaced the book on the table before crossing the room to open the door.

It was Masikela. He had Belinda in his arms.

Chalmers smiled warmly and reaching out, gently took the cat from him. "Thank you, Masikela," he said.

Chalmers glanced outside, looking over the corporal's head. It was almost dark.

"I think give it another half an hour, Masikela, then you can start with the mortar."

"Yes, boss, I've got the three shells," he said, "but I'm afraid, they all know we're going to fire the mortar." He nodded his head in the direction of the barracks.

Chalmers, cradling the cat in his arms, turned and went across to the bed.

"Never mind, that doesn't really matter," he said, putting Belinda gently down on the blanket and stroking her. "It's just our own mock attack that I don't want them to know anything about," he explained, eyes sparkling. "And you've handed out the other ammo, have you?" he asked as Masikela turned to go.

Masikela inclined his head. "Yes, boss, everything's ready."

*****

Darkness had fallen. Tips of cigarettes glowed, momentarily throwing black features into relief as the talking, laughing crowd of DSAs grouped themselves around the wide, sandbagged mortar pit. The hole was of an impractical depth and had obviously never been intended, or so Chalmers assumed, for the purpose that it was presently being used. Looking at it now, he realised that the mortar was quite useless where it was. He made a mental note to have it moved to a more effective position first thing in the morning.

As Chalmers, Wally and Winters walked towards the pit talking quietly, the happy and expectant Africans moved aside, clearing a passage for them.

The three men carefully felt their way over to the edge of the pit and looked inside.

"It's dark, be careful, boss!" one of the DSAs said. It was 'Killer' Sixpence. "There's plenty Big Nasty Devils down there!"

Chalmers turned towards the voice with a chuckle. "And there's plenty Big Nasty Devils up here, too!"

The Africans roared with laughter.

Chalmers turned back to the pit and looked down.

An almost gutted candle was flickering fitfully in an empty tin, giving out just enough light for Masikela and the two DSAs with him, to work by. As far as Chalmers could make out, they were all kneeling around the big mortar tube, manfully pushing stones under its heavy base plate to steady it.

"Is that you down there, Masikela?" Chalmers called.

"Yes, boss. I'm here," he said, standing up. "But we've got a problem. It doesn't seem to have a bipod or anything …"

Wally laughed. "Maybe the Chinese just hold the thing tight and hope for the best!"

Chalmers chuckled. "OK, Masikela, I'm coming down. I'd like to have a look," he said.

At that moment the candle went out. Chalmers eased himself down onto the edge of the pit and, dangling his legs over the side, jumped down into the void colliding with one of the kneeling Africans.

"Sorry," he murmured. "Who's that?"

"It's me, boss."

"Who's 'me', you idiot?" he responded affably.

"Chipandambiri, boss."

Chalmers grunted. “God, you’re bony, Chips-and-damn-fishy,” he said good-naturedly, rubbing his leg vigorously. The African laughed. “You should have brought a lantern or something, Masikela—it’s no good at all like this,” remarked Chalmers. He took a box of matches out of his shirt pocket and striking one, bent down to take a closer look at the Chinese-made weapon. It was the first time he had seen it close-up.

“God, what a relic!” He ran his eyes down the tube and noticed a thin, oblong instruction plate bonded onto the barrel. The match went out and he struck another, peering closely at the printed letters on the plate.

“Hey, Wally,” he called up. “Can you read Chinese? The instructions are in Mandarin or something!”

Wally leant over the edge of the pit. “Of course—I’m fluent in it! It says: ‘Man who not know how to fire king-size mortar collectly go long way!’”

Although not understanding the humour, as overall Commander of Chitangwe’s Heavy Artillery Forces, Masikela felt that some comment was probably required from him.

Looking up at Wally, he said flatly: “Yes, sir, it was made a long way away—in China.” He paused. “By the Chinese,” he added, somewhat superfluously.

“Alright then,” said Chalmers, “let’s get on with it, Masikela—you’re obviously an expert on Chinese inter-continental ballistic missiles so I’ll leave it all to you!” He gave him a friendly pat on the back.

With Chipandambiri’s assistance, Chalmers heaved himself out of the pit.

As he stood up, Winters exclaimed in surprise: “You’re not going to leave *him* to do it, are you?”

Chalmers turned in his direction. ”And why shouldn’t I?” he asked coldly. “Masikela is one of the few people I have come across who can be relied on to do a job well—which is more than can be said for a lot of whites I’ve come across!”

He turned towards Wally. “I’m just going over to the fence to see where the shells land. Are you coming, Wally?”

The young man nodded. They strolled off over the quadrangle, hands in pockets. Reaching the security fence near the guard tower, they stood talking quietly in the darkness waiting for the mortar to be fired.

After two or three minutes, Wally said fretfully: “I hope Masikela really *does* know what he’s doing!”

Chalmers laughed, recalling the withering remark he had earlier directed at Winters. “God, so do I!”

His remarks were interrupted by a faint whizzing sound overhead, followed a few moments later by the distant sound of a blast as the first shell exploded with a dull orange-red flash about a kilometre away.

“Hell!” exclaimed Wally. “I wouldn’t like to be standing anywhere near that little lot!”

“Neither would I! I hope there are a few terrs down there. That will give them something to think about,” rejoined Chalmers with a chuckle.

He took out his cigarettes, offered one to Wally and lit one for himself. Flicking the dead match through the wire fencing, he said innocently: “Let’s go over to the tower and watch the next one from there.”

When they reached it, they both stood in silence peering into the pitch darkness. They heard Matola cough above them.

After a few moments, a small flash flickered in the distance, much further away than the first.

“Crikey,” said Wally, “that was a good one! I wonder—”

“Excuse me a moment, Wally,” said Chalmers, interrupting the younger man.

He walked a few steps away from the tower wall and, turning round, looked up into the darkness, eyes straining to make out the silent guard above.

This was the moment he had been looking forward to!

“Matola!” he called out sharply.

Immediately, the stillness was shattered by an ear-splitting burst of machine-gun fire as the Browning broke into frenzied life. A stream of yellowy-orange tracer bullets went curving gracefully away into the pitch darkness.

Chalmers smiled appreciatively as he watched them. “Well done, Matola!” he thought with satisfaction.

Almost immediately, the two Brens and two G3s opened up in answer. The combined noise of all the weapons being fired simultaneously was far more thunderous than even he had anticipated.

Wally, frightened out of his wits at the unexpectedness of the sudden onslaught, frantically grabbed Chalmers by the arm and tried to pull him down. “*Get down! Get down!* We’re being attacked!” he shouted, throwing himself to the ground.

Chalmers burst out laughing. “It’s ok, Wally, it’s ok,” he said reassuringly between laughs. “It’s only an exercise; they’re practising. You can get up!”

Although Chalmers couldn’t see him, he heard Wally roll over before jumping to his feet.

“Bloody hell!” the young man exclaimed slowly, turning towards him. “You lousy, bloody bastard!”

Still laughing, Chalmers patted him consolingly on the back. “I’m sorry to give you such a fright, but it really is in a very good cause!”

Wally shook his head. “God, just you wait, Dad! I’ll get you back for that one of these days!” he spluttered with a laugh.

*****

In the mortar pit itself, things were not going quite as planned.

At the precise moment that Matola in the tower had enthusiastically ’let loose’ with the Spitfire’s Browning, Masikela had gently and calmly dropped the third shell down the heavy mortar tube.

He was pleased. Things were going well, he thought with satisfaction.

But this was a mistake.

Chipandambiri, who was tightly holding the thick casing of the mortar barrel steady while Masikela loaded the final shell, was completely taken by surprise by the sudden eruption of concentrated gunfire from various points around the camp. Unaware it was a mock attack, the terrified DSA thought his end had come and jumping violently at the unexpected outburst, jerked the mortar barrel into an almost perfectly vertical position.

As the bomb’s detonator activated with a soft, dull noise, the shell soared straight up into the darkness. Masikela, his eyes opening wide in disbelief, stared up into the star-studded night sky for a few moments in stunned silence.

“Fucking arseholes!” he uttered in an awestruck voice, clearly emphasising every syllable.

The next instant, Masikela and the two DSAs, galvanised into frenzied action, frantically clawed their way out of the deep pit. They scattered across the confined quadrangle, their shouts ringing in the air: “Get under cover, you bloody bastards! The bomb’s coming! The bomb’s coming!”

However, by then, the quadrangle was already completely deserted and, for

the space of a few seconds, perfect stillness reigned until, with unerring precision, the high-fragmentation bomb returned to its point of departure.

*****

Chalmers had been right—one way and another, they *had* managed to practically destroy half the camp.

In fact, as he and Wally inspected the field of battle the following morning, it looked to be slightly more than half, he thought modestly.

"How the hell are you going to explain away this little lot?" asked Wally with misgiving, as they surveyed all the broken windows and other debris scattered around the quadrangle.

Chalmers pulled a face. "God only knows!" He looked at Wally. "Do you think they'd believe it if I said that we'd been attacked?" he suggested, somewhat doubtfully.

Wally jeered. "Not a chance. Besides, our friend 'Wimpy' Winters will make jolly sure that everyone at headquarters hears all about this little Armageddon of yours!"

"Oh well," said Chalmers, trying to be optimistic, "it's not *that* bad, really. In any case, it'll give Winters something to do. He said he was going to turn the place into a five-star hotel. Now's his chance to be really creative!"

"I know what!" exclaimed Wally brightly, clicking his fingers. "Blame it on that Chip-pan-dam guy, or whatever his bloody name is—he'll never know!"

Chalmers burst out laughing. "God, you're a nice bastard, aren't you!" He hesitated a moment. "Besides, when they get their independence, suppose he's made president or something? Imagine what he'd do to me then!"

Wally grinned broadly and patted him consolingly on the back. "Never mind, Dad—he'll be too busy pinching everyone's money to care!"

CHAPTER 30

In the weeks that followed …

"Fire!" shouted Chalmers.

A volley of shots rang out, echoing in the silent hills.

"Get it right. Are you all blind! Now—ten rounds rapid."

The men settled themselves again.

"Steady—wait for it," he bellowed suddenly as a single shot was fired by one of the over-eager DSAs.

"Wait for the order, Thousand!" he called out in anger.

There was a long pause.

"Fire!"

*****

"Ambush! Ambush!" roared Masikela.

The exhausted DSAs leapt off the back of the lorry for what seemed the hundredth time. Crouching low, they ran off into the bush.

"Come back here!" yelled Chalmers impatiently. He turned to Masikela. "Make them do it again, Masikela—they're far too slow."

Masikela waited as the men wearily climbed back on the lorry.

"Now do it again. And this time, get a move on!" barked Masikela.

"*Ambush! Ambush!*" he screamed after a few moments.

Chalmers frowned as he watched them then, slipping his rifle's safety-catch, he let off a short burst of automatic fire into the air.

Electrified, the startled DSAs shot off into the bush.

"That did it," said Chalmers with a grin.

*****

"However many times have I got to tell you, Chikono? *Always* count the

number of rounds you fire," Chalmers explained patiently.

He turned to the others: "If you have any difficulty remembering, make your last second or third a tracer. I can tell you right now, if a terr hears a click, you're a dead man!"

He turned back to Chikono: "Take that piece of grass out of your mouth!"

Chalmers waited a moment before continuing. "Here's the picture, Chikono: you're ambushing a group of terrs and—God help us!—you're in charge. Now, 'show us here the mettle of your pasture.'"

Chikono's face wrinkled up in puzzlement. "What, boss?"

"Oh, just get on with it, you bloody ignoramus!" said Chalmers, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, boss, thank you, boss!"

*****

"Does it hurt very much, Joseph?" Chalmers asked, leaning over the bed.

"Yes, boss."

"OK, I'll get you something for it. Then get a good night's rest—it should be alright by morning."

"Thank you, boss."

*****

"If you don't climb that tower quicker, Kona, I'll fire a bloody round into your fat backside. Now, *move it!*" shouted Masikela angrily. He watched the man shin up the ladder. "Faster! Faster! You're like an old man!" he yelled.

Chalmers grinned. "That'll get the fat off him!"

The watching DSAs roared with laughter.

"What the hell are you laughing at?" Chalmers shouted suddenly in a swift change of mood.

One of the DSAs, his hand covering his face in an effort to hide his merriment, spluttered uncontrollably.

Chalmers turned and stared at him. "Right, Sewera, you seem to find it all very funny—it's your turn. Let's see how long it takes *you*!" he said. "And if it's longer than two seconds, we'll take the ladder away and you can spend the rest of your bloody life up there with the birds!"

“Two seconds, boss?” exclaimed Sewera in a stunned voice.

Masikela laughed. “A monkey like you should be able to do it easily.”

*****

Chalmers examined the riddled tin can. “Well done, Mashiri. We’ll make a soldier of you yet. Excellent!” Chalmers handed it to the marksman. “Show it to the others.”

Mashiri beamed with pleasure and strutted off proudly.

“Now, Sixpence, let’s see you do the same.”

Sixpence shook his head in doubt. “I’m no good, boss,” he said simply.

Chalmers looked at him seriously. “Never speak or think badly of yourself, Sixpence—it’s like making holes in your own umbrella. I *know* you can do it!”

Sixpence didn’t succeed on that occasion, but he did eventually.

*****

Day in, day out, Chalmers and Masikela drove, cajoled, humoured and encouraged the men. Evening after evening, the DSAs—tired, dirty and exhausted—trudged back to the base after hours of intensive training.

But they were happy.

“Boss, the terrorists aren’t killing us—*you* are!” said Chipandambiri, shaking his head.

Chalmers, who was marching along by the side of the column of men, turned and looked at him. “Good. I’ll be glad to see the back of the lot of you,” he retorted.

He listened to their laughter with pleasure.

As they marched through the main gate, he said: “Don’t forget to clean your rifles. And I don’t mean tomorrow or the next day. I mean *tonight!* Anyone who doesn’t will run round the camp ten times with full pack.”

The DSAs groaned.

“I’ll inspect them at nineteen-hundred tonight.”

As they dispersed, he called out: “And don’t forget we’re going on another early morning patrol—I want you all out here at oh-four-hundred *sharp*!”

Chalmers, smiling to himself, ignored the groans.

*****

“Boss, we don’t want you to go.” The speaker was Joshua.

Chalmers, who was sitting on the ground at the rifle range, looked at him. “Well, I’m not going yet. Besides, we’ve still got to go and knock the hell out of Black Satan and all his merry men—or had you forgotten?”

The DSAs, who were clustered round him, greeted his remarks enthusiastically.

“When do we start, boss?” said Sixpence, rubbing his hands.

Chalmers smiled. “Very soon now, you bloodthirsty hound!” He looked around at the men. “You’ve all done very, very well. I know I must be mad but, actually, I’m quite proud of you.”

He stood up, dusted his trousers and walked away with a brief wave of his hand.

“By the way, thanks for the meat last night,” he called out, turning back briefly to the men, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “What was it you shot —a hyena or a rhino?”

“Elephant, boss!” called out Chikono with a laugh.

“I thought so,” Chalmers shouted back. “Even you couldn’t miss one of those!”

BOOK TWO

Nemesis

CHAPTER 31

Time: 09h45. December 14, 197-

Sitting at the rickety wooden desk that stood on the verandah, notebook in front of him, Chalmers eyed the cloudless sky.

"If the rains don't start soon, it'll be very bad for all you people," he said, looking at Patrick who was sitting on the low verandah wall. The DSA jumped down, wiping the seat of his khaki shorts with his hands.

"True, boss, but it will also be very bad for the terrs," he said with a knowing smile. "They get all their food from the villagers. If there's no rain, there'll be no crops—and if there are no crops, there will be nothing to eat. They will starve to death." He laughed. "I think they're getting plenty hungry now!"

Simple. The logic was flawless, almost Teutonic, thought Chalmers.

"Yes, Patrick, you're absolutely right. The trouble, though, is that *everyone* will starve—good and bad alike. Drought doesn't discriminate," he replied. "However," he added reflectively, "at least there's one consolation—it's given us a welcome breathing-space. We haven't seen anything of the terrorists for quite some time now. We must be thankful for that."

He stood up and walked over to the edge of the sun-filled verandah and idly contemplated the distant hills of Zaunga and Mazweru shimmering in the heat-haze. The view had become as familiar to him as the one from his own front door at home—more so, in fact, he thought with a sigh.

Yet it was there in those distant heights in front of him that they'd most likely find the terrorists hidden away somewhere in the intricate network of caves which riddled their lower slopes—of that he was convinced. It was the perfect hiding place. He was, also, all too well aware that it was a long way from the base and would be real 'Indian Territory'. For him and the DSAs to go there without any military back-up would be foolhardy in the extreme.

Not that *that* would really deter Chalmers.

All he wanted was one hint, one clue—that was all that he needed. Then it

would be worth every risk, every hardship. And yet, he thought with irritation, he sometimes felt he had as much chance of getting that vital scrap of information from any of the locals as he had of becoming King of England!

In many ways, he could understand their reasoning. Why would anyone risk their life or that of their children in order to help the security forces eliminate a few terrorists? Their reasoning, like Patrick's, was simple and straightforward: even if you helped to kill ten, fifty or even a hundred of them, what difference would that *really* make? There were always many more gullible, disaffected people ready to take their places.

"Shall I go and get the woman now, boss—the one who wanted to see you?" Patrick said, suddenly breaking into his thoughts.

Chalmers turned round and nodded. "Yes please, Patrick."

Walking back to the desk, he sat down and lit a cigarette. He had barely smoked half of it when, looking along the verandah to his right, he saw Patrick coming towards him accompanied by an African woman of about 35. On her back, supported by a tartan blanket tied across the woman's chest, was a sleeping baby.

The woman had an open, friendly face.

Chalmers smiled at her. "Good morning," he said and, indicating the bench opposite him, added: "Would you like to take a seat?"

She looked at him shyly and after dropping a small curtsy, went over to the bench and sat down. She arranged her long, shabby yellow dress over her legs.

"And your name is?" he asked gently.

"Josephine Matiwa." Her voice was soft.

Looking at her, Chalmers decided that she was definitely not the sort of person who would respond to the usual routine questioning. He felt that, ultimately, he would probably learn more by just letting the conversation take its own leisurely course. He took out his packet of cigarettes, and to Patrick's barely concealed surprise, offered her one. The gesture was so unexpected that the woman was disconcerted.

Chalmers fleetingly wondered with amusement what Falon would have thought had he been there to witness it!

She shook her head slowly, a quizzical little smile on her face.

There was a long silence. Neither spoke, each seemingly content to sit there

as if alone. The incongruity of it amused Chalmers. His eyes twinkled as the silence stretched out.

Turning to the back page of his report book, Chalmers picked up his pencil and started shading in a sketch of the surrounding hills that he had begun drawing a few days earlier.

After a while, he glanced up at the woman. She was looking at him with calm, steady eyes.

"Boss," she said quietly, unexpectedly breaking the silence.

"Yes, Josephine? What is it?" he asked.

"The terrorists came to the kraal the night before last."

Chalmers raised his eyebrows slightly. "Did they?" His voice was non-committal.

No further words were spoken for several moments, but although Chalmers' thoughts were racing, he went on with his drawing with apparent indifference. He knew he had to be very careful. Informers were often coerced by the terrorists into giving false information in the hope of luring unsuspecting security force patrols into deadly ambushes.

Almost off-handedly, Chalmers asked: "What kraal do you come from, Josephine?"

She looked at him for a few moments and then turned slowly and pointed towards the Maunga range of hills. "I come from Magomba kraal, boss—over there."

Chalmers heart started beating a little faster. *That*—if it were true—was what he wanted to know; now, perhaps, he'd learn the vital clue.

He turned to Patrick. "Be a good chap and fetch a map, will you? You'll find one on the table in my room."

"OK, boss," replied Patrick before going off jauntily down the verandah.

Chalmers turned to the woman. "Alright, Josephine, would you like to tell me exactly what happened?"

He leant back and stretched his legs out under the desk.

"About 25 terrorists come to the kraal, and they say they will kill us if we do not give them food. They had rifles and machine guns and other big things —I don't know what they are—that they carried in their hands." She looked at Chalmers almost apologetically.

He nodded and smiled encouragingly. "Go on."

"Then they ask my husband and the other people of the village how many

you are on the camp here and how many guns you have."

At that moment, Patrick reappeared with a large ordinance survey map of the area. He unfolded it and laid it across the desk in front of Chalmers. The DSA pointed to a spot in the bottom right-hand corner to indicate where the kraal was.

Chalmers nodded. "Thanks, Patrick."

He looked at Josephine again. "And what did the people say to the terrorists?"

"They say we do not know how many soldiers there is here, boss, but we think there are plenty guns."

That would be helpful, thought Chalmers. If the terrorists thought that the base had recently received more equipment, it might just deter them from attacking. Appearances, he had learnt long ago, were often as important as reality.

He nodded encouragingly. "Alright. Go on."

"The terrorists say they are going to kill everyone here."

"Where? On the base or at Magomba kraal?"

"Yes, boss—here," she said, pointing at the ground. "They say that soon all the white people will be gone and then we will all be free."

Chalmers smiled grimly. "Did they say when they were going to attack the base, by any chance?"

She shook her head. "No, boss."

Chalmers lit another cigarette. "Did they say anything else?"

"They spoke to my husband for a long time, but he is not telling me what they say."

There was a long silence.

"Is that all, Josephine?"

"Yes, boss, that is all."

Chalmers looked at her for a few moments. "But tell me, Josephine—why have you told me all this?"

She leant forward and scratched her foot. "I do not like the terrorists. They are bad people."

Chalmers smiled at her and stood up. "Well, thank you, Josephine. Now, when you go home, you must not say that you have been here. You must not tell *anyone*. It is dangerous for you. I don't want the terrorists coming after you."

She stood up and gave him a slow, cryptic smile. “I know, boss, but I do not think that they will come back yet.”

As she started walking away, Chalmers called after her: “By the way, Josephine, you’re a long way from home—why did you come all this way today?”

She stopped and turned round. “My baby is sick and needs *muti*[42]. I go to the clinic and then come here.” She then curtsied and clapped her hands together in the traditional African gesture of thanks.

Chalmers watched her as she slowly walked down the verandah.

After a few moments, he turned to Patrick: “I didn’t know there was a clinic around here,” he said.

Patrick shook his head. “There isn’t, boss. But a man comes on a motorbike to St. Michael’s school once a month with *muti*.”

“Oh …” Chalmers paused. “He must be very brave!” He walked over to the desk and folded up the map.

As they walked off the verandah, Chalmers looked at Patrick. “Do you believe what she said about the terrorists?”

The DSA thought a moment. “Yes, boss, I think she told the truth.”

Chalmers nodded in agreement. “Yes—so do I.”

CHAPTER 32

A few minutes later.

On his way to the staff lounge, Chalmers put his head around the kitchen door. Misheck was bending down over the antiquated stove tending it with wood from a pile of dead branches that were stacked in one corner of the room.

"Misheck," he called.

The arthritic old African stood up stiffly.

"Could I have a cup of tea, please? I'll have it in the lounge."

"Yes, boss, excuse me, boss—but we haven't any tea left."

Chalmers pulled a face. "Oh!—ok, Misheck."

As he turned to go down the verandah, the cook called out after him: "Excuse me, boss."

Chalmers sighed and turned round. "Yes, Misheck, what now?"

"What should I cook for lunch?"

Chalmers followed him back into the kitchen. "Well, what have we got?"

The cook walked over to a shelf on which there were a few oddments of food in various nondescript packets and containers. There was a single small tin standing by itself near the end of the shelf.

Misheck took it down and painstakingly read the label. "Spaghetti," he announced solemnly and then added: "In tomato sauce, boss." He looked back at the shelf and studiously ran his eyes along it. "We have some rice—a little, and I think we have a potato."

He crossed the kitchen and peered into an old metal bucket, a frown of concentration on his face. He then looked up at Chalmers with a smile of delight. "No, boss, we haven't got one potato—we've got *two*! Small ones," he added.

"God," muttered Chalmers. "Is that all? I thought we still had some of that kudu[43] meat that Matola shot the other day."

Misheck shook his head. “No, boss. It’s all finished.”

Chalmers sighed. It’s not only the terrorists who are going to starve, he thought wryly.

“OK, Misheck,” he said, “we’ll have the spaghetti—in tomato sauce,” he stressed the tomato sauce, “plus rice and two potatoes. How’s that?”

“Yes, boss, no, boss!” said Misheck noncommittally

As Chalmers turned to go, the cook stopped him again. “Excuse me, boss—do you want mashed potatoes or boiled potatoes?”

Chalmers looked at him for a few moments, a sparkle of amusement in his eyes. “Chips!” he said jokingly.

Misheck didn’t laugh—it was a serious matter to him. “We haven’t any cooking oil, boss.”

Without replying, Chalmers walked away down the verandah shaking his head. He sometimes wondered if he would ever understand Africans at all.

As he was about to enter the lounge, his attention was caught by the sound of Masikela’s voice, clear and authoritative, ringing across the parade ground: “Squad dis-*miss*!”

There was a low murmur of voices and laughter and the scuffling of boots on hard, stony ground.

Wanting to hear how the morning’s patrol had gone, Chalmers strolled over to the small patch of bare, uneven ground that lay in front of the flagpole where Masikela was standing. A smartly dressed young African man was standing next to him.

As Chalmers approached, he called out to the corporal.

Masikela turned and then spoke a few brief words to the man at his side who smirked knowingly.

“’Morning, boss,” said Masikela, turning to Chalmers. His face was covered in dirt and perspiration.

“Good morning, Masikela. You look as if you’ve had quite a time this morning. Did you run into trouble?”

“Not really, boss. We saw some terrs down by the dried-up stream over there,” he said, pointing in a direction beyond the tower. “They got away,” he said, shaking his head. “They were too quick for us.”

“Was that anywhere near Magomba kraal?” asked Chalmers.

“In that direction, but not so far. I think they must be the same terrs that that woman was talking about this morning.”

Chalmers looked at him sharply. “How do you know about the woman? You weren’t even here when she came to the camp!”

Masikela hesitated and then smiled enigmatically. “I know these people, boss.”

Chalmers frowned. Masikela’s evasive remark told him everything—and precisely nothing!

As he scrutinised the corporal’s bland face, all the doubts that he had managed to set aside over the past three weeks, suddenly resurfaced. It seemed to him that, at the very least, Masikela knew infinitely more of what was going on than he had ever admitted.

“OK, Masikela,” he said, then looking at the African who was standing slightly behind and to one side of Masikela, asked briskly: “And who is this?”

Masikela turned. “We picked him up at Umsasa kraal. I think he knows a lot, boss.”

Chalmers looked back at Masikela, narrowing his eyes. “Well, if you say so, Masikela. But if you ask me, you seem to know more about the terrorists than any of these people!”

Without giving the corporal time to reply, Chalmers turned on his heels and walked away.

CHAPTER 33

The same day. Lunchtime.

Wally stared down at his plate. “Christ!” he exclaimed.

Chalmers laughed. “Don’t complain. This is a feast in comparison with what you’ll be getting tonight!”

Wally looked up in disgust.

Chalmers took a mouthful of his small portion of spaghetti. “Well, whether we like it or not, we’ll *have* to go into Urungwe tomorrow,” he said. “We’ve now run out of food completely.”

Lawrence looked at him across the table. “Couldn’t the DSAs give us some of their sadza?” he asked.

Chalmers shook his head. “Nope. Even they’ve almost run out.”

Lawrence pulled a face.

“So I’m afraid we’ll all have to be up bright and early tomorrow morning. Will that be ok for you?” Chalmers asked Winters politely, even though he knew there was no other option. He was also, in a way, trying to make amends for his recent coolness towards the man. They hadn’t got along very well from day one.

Lawrence cleared his throat noisily. “Yes, that’s hunky-dory. I’ve finished all the work I can do at the moment, anyway. But,” he added, looking at Chalmers accusingly, “there’s still quite a bit to do!”

Wally, recalling the night they’d test-fired the mortar, laughed. “Thanks to you-know-who!” he said, looking pointedly at Chalmers.

Chalmers grinned. “Well, disastrous as it was—and I don’t deny it,” he conceded, “it turned out for the best in the long run. Thanks to all the hard work you and Lawrence and the DSAs put in, the camp is far more secure than it ever was. I congratulate you both!”

Wally laughed. “God, wasn’t that a night to remember!” he said reminiscently. “It’s a wonder we weren’t all killed what with that bomb going off and those crazy guys of yours going around shooting everything in sight!”

“I’ll say,” agreed Lawrence, “it was terrifying!”

The three men fell silent as they recalled the events of that extraordinary evening.

“Anyway,” said Wally brightly, reverting to the following day’s trip. “I’m glad we’ve got to go. Just think of it: steak and chips, beer and a gorgeous, sexy blonde—*yeah!*”

Lawrence stared at him. “You’ve obviously never been to Urungwe before,” he said. “It’s got one street, one ramshackle hotel and, if you’re lucky, you might see a car go through the place. It’s the only cemetery in the world that’s got street lighting!”

They laughed.

“Anyway,” Lawrence added, “who wants anything to do with women—they’re nothing but trouble with a capital T.”

Wally jeered. “Rubbish!” he protested, then turning to Chalmers, he said: “We don’t seem to have seen much of you these days, Dad—which has been very nice, I must say,” he added with a grin. “You and Masikela have certainly been putting these guys through their paces. Hell, I reckon they’re ready to take on the whole Russian army now!”

Chalmers eyes twinkled with amusement. “Yep. Just shows what can be achieved when you’ve got high-quality leadership! I’ll have to start on you next—although, coming to think about it, that would probably be a complete waste of time!” he added with a sly grin.

Wally sniggered. “Watch it, Dad!”

Lawrence sat back in his chair and looked at Chalmers speculatively. “You must be pretty fit yourself by now,” he commented. “You look as if you’re burnt to hell.”

Chalmers smiled ruefully. “I am—and talk about stiffness, I feel as if I were 110!”

“No comment!” muttered Wally softly. “Which reminds me—for no reason at all” he went on, “when does the great onslaught against the terrs begin, Mon Capitaine?”

Chalmers absent-mindedly watched as Wally picked up the pepper pot and started twiddling it in his fingers.

“Just as soon as I can get some definite info.” He leant his elbows on the table and rested his chin on his hands. “Actually, I’m hoping that the woman I was speaking to this morning will spill the beans with a little bit of

encouragement. I think she knows more than she told me. It's a question of 'Softly, softly, catchee monkey!' But," he went on, drawing the word out with emphasis, "once I know for sure—" He left the sentence unfinished, his eyes twinkling in anticipation.

"Oh, Christ, here we go again!" groaned Wally. He turned to Lawrence. "And will *you* be coming to Daddy Napoleon's funeral?" he asked with a broad grin.

Lawrence sniggered unpleasantly. "Well, I'd …"

Chalmers eyed him narrowly, wondering what his response would be.

There was a sudden knock at the half-open door.

It was Kenneth. He was holding a piece of paper in his hand.

"Yes, Kenneth, what have we here?" said Chalmers, holding out his hand for the message.

The radio operator, feeling self-conscious in front of them all, walked across to him and bending down deferentially, handed him the paper.

Wally and Lawrence watched Chalmers' face closely as he read the message.

"Well, well, well," murmured Chalmers. "Urungwe say that army units have sighted another group of plus-minus 35 terrorists a few kilometres from the base—this time near Chegoma dip. Things are warming up indeed!"

He placed the paper on the table by the side of his plate. "Thank you, Kenneth," he said, turning to him.

There was a short silence as they waited for the African to leave the room.

Lawrence shifted in his seat uncomfortably. "I must say I'm very glad I'm leaving here." He gave a short laugh: "I wouldn't be in your shoes for all the tea in China!" he said, looking at Chalmers.

"What about me?" chirped Wally sardonically. "Don't I count?"

Chalmers looked at him. "No, you don't," he said with a chuckle, pushing his chair away from the table. "Although I must say, I'd feel a bit more comfortable myself if we had a couple of panzer divisions tucked away somewhere!" He stood up. "I think we'd better start about four-thirty tomorrow morning. I don't want to leave it any later than that as it looks as if we may be in for a rough time."

Lawrence looked at him slightly apprehensively. "If I remember rightly from when I was out this way before, we have to go past Chegoma dip on the way through, don't we?" he asked, trying to appear casual.

Chalmers nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid we do. Never mind,” he added brightly, “It’ll be more good training for the DSAs!”

“Oh, Christ, *another* fucking Kamikaze mission!” said Wally, chucking his fork onto the table disconsolately.

CHAPTER 34

After Wally and Lawrence had gone to their rooms that evening, Chalmers sat in the staff lounge listening to a play on the radio. When it ended, he switched the set off and sat back in the uncomfortable armchair, smoking a final cigarette. He had just stubbed it out when he heard a tap at the door, and turning round, he saw Joshua standing looking at him hesitantly.

"Excuse me, boss," he said. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but I have no cigarettes."

Chalmers exhaled in irritation. The DSAs were always running out and asking him for some of his.

"For goodness' sake, Joshua. Why can't you fellows buy in a supply when you get paid and then ration yourselves? Why do I always have to give you mine? If I run short, I don't come running to you and take yours, do I?"

Joshua grinned sheepishly.

Chalmers sighed and opening his cigarette box, held it out towards the African. Joshua walked across to Chalmers and, reaching into the box, scooped out several cigarettes. He smiled broadly and with a hurried "thank you, boss," turned and quickly left the room.

Chalmers looked down at his depleted box and then, muttering mild imprecations under his breath, walked across to the map pinned to the wall in order to check the route the convoy would be taking the next day.

As he traced the long, winding dirt tracks with his finger, he smiled as he recalled Wally's graphic remark at lunch. Wally was right, he mused. It probably *would* be a suicide mission—or something very close to it! Despite his nonchalant air at lunch, secretly, Chalmers was not a little apprehensive, and like the others—especially Winters—he would have avoided going if he'd had any other option.

As it was, it was not as though they were making the trip for some important military reason. In fact, all they were doing really was putting their lives at risk because they were getting hungry—just as Rob, the pilot, had done. Although in *his* case, Rob had died performing an act of kindness for

someone else who was feeling hungry, mused Chalmers. What a noble epitaph, he thought bitterly: ‘He laid down his life for some potatoes and eggs’ …

On the other hand, perhaps tomorrow would offer some unforeseen opportunity that he might be able to turn to his advantage somehow. One just never knew, he thought, shrugging his shoulders. He had long ago learnt that nothing in life ever turned out as one expected! The prospect filled him with renewed resolve, and pulling back his shoulders, he walked to the door, switched off the light and stepped out into the darkness.

He jumped as someone on the other side of the quadrangle suddenly shouted. A moment later, a single rifle shot rang out. It echoed briefly against the concrete buildings.

Chalmers frowned, every muscle tense, as he frantically tried to work out what was happening.

Almost immediately, he heard the sound of several of the DSAs shouting urgently. Chalmers realised the furore seemed to be coming from the direction of the radio room.

He broke into a run and, sprinting across the quadrangle and around the now empty mortar pit, followed the sound.

In the pool of yellow light spreading out from the open window and door of the radio shed, Chalmers could see an animated group of DSAs standing around something on the ground.

As he slowed his pace to a fast walk and approached them, their excited chattering died away, and in a hushed silence, several of the men moved aside to make way for him.

Wally and Lawrence were already there, kneeling beside the still body of an African lying spread-eagled, face down on the ground. The man’s shirt had a small dark stain on it where a high-velocity bullet had entered his back.

Wally looked up at Chalmers and then stood up, a puzzled look on his face. “Have you ever seen this guy before, Mike? I haven’t.”

Chalmers recognised the clothing immediately and nodded. “Yes. It’s the fellow Masikela brought in from Umsasa kraal this morning,” he said.

“Did you see what happened?” asked Lawrence tensely, standing up and looking at Wally.

“No. I was in my room reading when I suddenly heard a shout—and then a shot. It nearly made me jump out of my skin,” he said, looking at Chalmers.

“You were here quickly—Lawrence and I only just beat you to it.”

Chalmers turned to the DSAs. “Did any of you see what happened?”

There was a confused murmur of various voices as, with shakes of their heads, the Africans denied any knowledge of what had happened.

“Well, somebody shot him—he didn’t shoot himself!” Chalmers exclaimed with considerable irritation.

The Africans were silent and uneasy.

At the sound of hurrying footsteps behind him, Chalmers turned round quickly. It was Masikela. He waited for the corporal to reach them.

“Do you know who shot this man?” he asked.

Masikela bent down to look at the body then, straightening up, said: “No, boss. I was asleep.”

Chalmers didn’t hesitate. “Alright, corporal,” he said decisively, “I want you to get *everyone* out in the quadrangle immediately with their rifles. And that includes you as well, ok?”

Noting Masikela’s uncharacteristically slow response, he added: “And I mean *immediately*, corporal. As he started walking away, he stopped, and turning around, added: “Oh, and once that’s done, please have the body moved. I think the generator room would be the best place for the time being.”

“Yes, boss,” Masikela said—almost reluctantly, thought Chalmers.

The inspection didn’t take long.

The DSAs lined up, their rifles at port arms position, while Chalmers went down their ranks feeling and smelling the tips of the barrels. Not one of the rifles had been fired recently.

Chalmers dismissed the men and walked back to his room with Wally and Lawrence who had watched the inspection.

“What a bloody weird business!” exclaimed Wally.

“Yep,” said Chalmers shortly. “What *I* can’t understand is what rifle was used. There aren’t any others on the camp except yours and mine and the spare ones I’ve got locked up in my room—” He had a sudden thought: “You didn’t happen to bring one with you and leave it lying around somewhere, did you, Lawrence?” he said, turning to Winters.

“No ways!” the man replied emphatically. “The less I have to do with those things the better.”

Wally shrugged his shoulders. “It just doesn’t make sense, does it? We’ve

obviously got a ghost on the camp—it's kind of spooky!" he added with an uncertain laugh.

They stood for a few moments discussing the affair until Chalmers, looking at his watch, said: "It's getting late and we have to be up at sparrow-twit tomorrow. I think I'll just go and write a report about this and then call it a night."

Wally nodded. "OK, Dad. See you in the morning."

Chalmers turned and walked back to his room. As he opened the door and switched on the light, almost immediately he noticed that one of the spare rifles was missing from the rack.

He sat down on his bed, thinking hard.

The whole incident was not only inexplicable but also decidedly unnerving to say the least. Not for the first time in his many years in Rhodesia, Chalmers felt that, beneath the sunny surface of life in Africa, mysterious and very sinister forces were at work about which he knew absolutely nothing.

To a man of his temperament—who loved order and method above all things—the thought was deeply disturbing.

CHAPTER 35

Time: 03h40. December 15

It was still pitch dark when Chalmers woke up, stiff and cold. He sat up, struck a match and lit the candle that he now always kept by his bed. A candle was far more convenient and, somehow, its soft light seemed to make the inhospitable room cosier.

He looked at his watch. It was twenty to four.

Leaning back against the chill, hard wall, he found his thoughts beginning to dwell on last night's disquieting events.

No. Better to *not* think—about anything!

He swung his legs onto the cold slate floor and sat on the edge of the bed for a few moments, listening to the miscellaneous noises coming from the African quarters as the DSAs prepared for the day ahead: the click of a rifle magazine being rammed home; the sound of cold water being poured into a basin; a yawn followed by the creak of a rusty bedstead; and, inevitably, some angry words and the occasional laugh.

After a few moments, he pulled on his trousers, picked up his towel, soap and razor, and walked to the washroom two doors away down the verandah. As he shaved in the dim light, he mentally ran over the things he needed to take with him: official reports; a letter to his wife; money for food—

An unexpected tap on the door broke into his thoughts.

"Yes, who is it?" he called out.

"It's me, boss—Misheck. What shall I cook for breakfast?"

Chalmers frowned in irritation. Misheck knew full well that there was nothing to eat.

"But we haven't *got* anything, Misheck," he called out.

"No, boss!"

Chalmers wiped his razor dry on the thick, coarse green towel.

"Then why are you asking me what I want for breakfast?"

Silence.

“It doesn’t matter, Misheck. I don’t want anything anyway, thanks.”

“OK, boss.”

Suddenly remembering that he wanted to see Masikela, he shouted: “Misheck!”

He heard the sound of returning footsteps.

“Yes, boss?”

“Could you find the corporal, please, and ask him to come to my room as soon as possible.”

“Yes, boss.”

Back in his room a few minutes later, Chalmers was straightening the blanket on his bed when he heard a gentle tap on the door.

He turned round. “Good morning, Masikela. Come in.”

As the African stepped inside the room with a bright greeting, Chalmers noted with approval that he was immaculately dressed and that the trousers of his uniform had a razor-sharp crease.

“I’m very sorry that I have to leave you with so few men on the base, Masikela, but as you know yourself, I’m afraid there’s nothing I can do about it,” he said.

“It’s alright, boss. We’ll manage ok,” Masikela replied confidently.

“Well, I certainly hope so, but it won’t be much fun if the terrorists decide to attack while we’re away.”

To Chalmers, it seemed almost inevitable that they would. The odds were that the terrorists knew already—or would do shortly—that half the men on the camp were going into Urungwe. What better chance would they have of achieving two goals simultaneously—that of wiping out the convoy and over-running the base? It seemed so obvious to him that it was just a question of which came first, the convoy or the base.

“Anyway, we must all just do the best we can,” said Chalmers fatalistically. “By the way, is everything organised for the convoy?”

“Yes, boss. The DSAs will be ready to leave—” he glanced at his watch, “at half past four.”

“Good. Now, don’t forget to take the body of that African back to Umsasa, will you? I’m leaving you one of the Leopards—you’d better use that—but don’t take too many of the guys with you, otherwise,” Chalmers added with a grin, “there’ll be *no one* left in camp!”

Masikela smiled at this rather self-evident truth.

Chalmers picked up his list of things to buy and do while in Urungwe and, folding it in half, put it in his shirt pocket.

"Right," he said, looking around the room, "I think I've got everything." He turned to Masikela. "Is there anything I can get you in Urungwe?"

"No thank you, boss. Joshua is getting some shopping for me."

Chalmers nodded, picked up his rifle and, slinging his magazine pouches over his left shoulder, walked over to the door.

"Oh, yes, Masikela," he added casually "There's a note there on the table with a rifle serial number on it. I want you to make a thorough search of the camp while I'm away and see if you can trace that particular one. It must be here somewhere."

Masikela walked across to the table and picking up the paper, looked at it closely. His face betrayed no emotion at all. "Yes, boss. I'll try," he said simply.

Chalmers smiled. "OK, Masikela. Look after the camp for me. If all goes well, we should be back sometime tomorrow—probably towards late afternoon. I'll try and get a message through to Kenneth to let you know for sure." He smiled. "I'll keep fingers crossed that you have a peaceful time here!"

Masikela grinned. "Thank you, boss. I hope the same for you." He hesitated and then added: "I think I'd rather be staying here than going, boss!"

Chalmers laughed. "Me too, Masikela, me too!" he said, nodding as they left the room.

CHAPTER 36

Time: 07h00 hrs. December 15

It never failed to surprise Chalmers.

Although, like everyone else, he talked as if he hated patrols and convoys—and, in fact, always felt apprehensive beforehand—when he was actually *on* them, he invariably found that he was enjoying himself. And, despite the heat, dust, noise and continual jolting and jarring as the Leopard lurched and rolled over the corrugations and ruts in the road, he found he was enjoying himself now.

It felt good, too, to have a break from the monotonous routine of the base where he was beginning to feel he'd lived most of his life!

He turned and looked briefly at Joshua who was sitting slightly behind and to his left, his rifle standing upright on the floor between his legs. A shaft of sunlight from the rear was glinting on the barrel.

"Not long before we reach the police camp now," he shouted.

Joshua, his whole body swaying with the bumpy movements, looked at Chalmers and nodded with a smile.

Chalmers squeezed his sore eyes and worked his shoulder muscles to try and ease his aching back. Then, pulling out the inevitable packet of cigarettes from his shirt pocket, he held it over his shoulder towards Joshua.

"Light me a cigarette please, Joshua," he shouted, "and I suppose you'd better have one yourself, too!" he added with a knowing smile.

Joshua grinned, took the cigarettes and lit two and then, with winks and nudges, surreptitiously passed the packet to Sewera who was sitting next to him. From there, the packet was quickly passed from hand to hand by the other DSAs with suppressed grins.

They were too busy enjoying the light-hearted conspiracy to notice that Chalmers, an equally amused sparkle in his eyes, was quietly snatching the occasional glance at them in the rear-view mirror. He didn't say anything but started humming softly to himself.

So far, everything had gone well. They had made good time, there had been no incidents and, with luck, they should be at Hermes in about an hour, he reflected with satisfaction. That would see a good third—even more—of the journey behind them. He didn't plan on staying long there—just time enough to re-fuel, exchange situation reports with Hermes' member-in-charge, and have a quick cup of tea.

However, he reminded himself, before *that* little pleasure, they still had to negotiate Devil's Pass and 'Landmine Alley'—two of the most notorious spots on the whole journey according to the graphic reports he'd heard in recent times.

Chalmers mentally reviewed what he'd heard about the terrain ahead. He knew that they were nearing the Pass now, and that soon the dirt road would start climbing steeply, and they would begin the tortuous, three-kilometre ascent through densely wooded hills. Wally had warned him that it was all uphill and that they would have to drive mostly in lower gear. Straining engines would quickly overheat.

Chalmers found himself grinning as he recalled Wally's parting words: "It's perfect for ambushes—it'll just be like Guy Fawkes' night, except this time there'll be all sorts of pretty rockets and bazookas to watch!" Very comforting, he thought.

Then, once through the Pass and a couple of kilometres further down the road, was 'Landmine Alley', a ruler-straight stretch of track that ran for about one and a half kilometres over flat, featureless ground. For some unknown reason, the road had become a favourite spot for the terrorists to mine and, as a result, was deeply cratered. The black, burnt-out skeletons of several abandoned vehicles littered the sides of the road down its entire length.

Chalmers coughed as some dust from a small gap near the ill-fitting dashboard caught in his throat. Leaning over, he tucked a loose piece of oily rag into the opening.

The minutes ticked by monotonously.

As the Leopard reached the beginning of the Pass, it gradually lost speed. Chalmers changed gear and, leaning forward over the steering wheel, scanned the surrounding slopes of the hills that, in places, seemed to overhang the dirt road. In the early morning sunshine, they looked fresh and verdant despite the lack of rain.

Every nerve and muscle in his body was tensed and alert.

The five DSAs, three on one side of the vehicle, two on the other, their faces set in rigid immobility, shifted uneasily, nervously checking magazines and fingering the safety catches on their rifles.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Joshua craning forward and looking upwards through the windscreen, his narrowed eyes calmly searching the steep slopes for any telltale sign of terrorist movement.

As the Leopard's speed fell to a crawl and the cloud of dust from the Pookie thinned, Chalmers caught a fleeting glimpse of the mine detection vehicle in the distance as it slowly and painfully crawled up the winding slopes ahead of him. He looked in the wing mirror. The lorry hadn't yet come into sight behind them.

After what seemed ages, the Leopard crawled round a steeply-inclined corner onto a small platform of level ground, and Chalmers realised with relief that they had safely reached the top of the Pass. He brought the Leopard to a standstill and breathed out deeply. It was very quiet and still.

For a few moments, despite his dislike of heights, he sat back and surveyed the wide expanse of gently rolling countryside spread out far below him. Once rich and fertile farmland, the whole area was now almost deserted. In the clear, sparkling sunshine, he could see several toy-like farmhouses and their ruined barns and abandoned outbuildings, a reminder of a once-thriving farming community.

He turned and studied the road in front of him, following it with his eyes as it fell away steeply down the Pass in gentle curves until finally it was lost to sight in a large clump of tiny-looking trees which marked the start of 'Landmine Alley'.

Wally had not stopped at the top as he had done but driven straight on down the hill. While Chalmers could not see the Pookie itself from his elevated vantage point, its position was clearly marked by the minute billowing column of brown dust streaming out behind it which then lazily drifted away across the trees and fields far below.

A slight breeze was blowing, and Chalmers pulled his shirt wide open to cool his hot, sweaty body.

After a few moments, he cheerily called out: "OK, that's the first hurdle over. Hold tight everyone. Now we'll have some fun!"

Releasing the handbrake, and with his foot covering the brake pedal, Chalmers let the Leopard roll gently and creakingly over the crest of the hill.

As it gathered speed and the cool air started rushing through the vehicle and blowing on them all, it seemed to take with it all the built-up tension and strain. The DSAs, relieved to be on the move again, suddenly relaxed and started laughing and chattering loudly among themselves.

Chalmers smiled broadly as the Leopard, quickly gathering speed, bucked and bounced down the steep incline. Recklessly pushing the Leopard to its utmost and abandoning himself to the sheer exhilaration of speed, wind and sunshine, he pushed his foot down on the accelerator.

As the vehicle responded, Chalmers had only a blurred image of trees and bushes as they flashed past on either side of the road. He caught a fleeting glimpse of a flock of squawking chickens and, further on, a young African woman with a red tin precariously balanced on her head going into a thatched mud hut. As the Leopard careered past her, she turned her head in alarmed surprise, gripping the tin frantically with her hands.

As they neared the bottom of the hill and the road levelled out, Chalmers saw the Pookie parked a little further along in the shade of a gaunt, twisted msasa tree. He braked and brought the Leopard to a halt a few metres behind the Pookie. Their dust overtook them and slowly drifted across the road. He switched off the engine, and for a few moments, no one moved or said a word.

Suddenly, Matola broke the silence. “*That* was good, boss!” he said, laughing loudly.

Chalmers looked round at the DSAs. To him, those few exhilarating moments had already made the whole trip worthwhile.

He grinned. “Shall we go back and do it again?”

There was a noisy chorus of protests. “No, boss, once is enough!”

Chalmers laughed, and the men began climbing out lazily, stretching themselves and talking excitedly. Chalmers followed them out and, jumping onto the ground, looked at them in mock disgust.

“Come on, you idiots. Have you forgotten *everything* you’ve learnt? What if the terrs attacked now?”

The men hastily scrambled to take up ‘on guard’ positions on either side of the road. Chalmers watched them for a few moments as they disappeared into cover and then started walking towards the silent Pookie.

Reaching it, he banged loudly on its dust-covered side. The metal was hot. “Anyone at home?” he called facetiously.

Hands appeared at the top, and with a muffled groan of exertion, Wally heaved himself up through the turret opening and sat balanced precariously on the thin metal edge. He looked down at Chalmers with a boyish grin.

"Hell, you took your time, Dad. Did you push the bloody thing down?"

Chalmers chuckled and straightened his wind-blown hair. He bent down and snapped off a tall, dried, yellow stalk of elephant grass and started breaking short pieces off which he threw aimlessly and languidly at the Pookie.

"That was fun, wasn't it? The bloody Leopard nearly fell apart!" he said, his eyes sparkling.

Wally laughed. "I'll say! I nearly took off at one corner—thought I was going to end up in a mud hut or something!"

"And there was an African woman back there," added Chalmers laughing. "You ought to have seen the look on her face—her eyes were standing out like a prawns!"

They both looked back up the road as the low, distant sound of an engine drifted down the hill.

"Ah, that must be the lorry," said Chalmers. "I wonder how your friend, Lawrence, liked it coming down there!"

Wally gave a short laugh. "*My* friend? I bet he's just loving every moment of it—I *don't* think!" he replied.

They watched as the lorry gradually came into view and trundled slowly towards them. It pulled over and stopped behind the Leopard. The 16 DSAs, dishevelled and dust-covered from sitting exposed on the truck's open back started jumping down onto the road, shouting and calling to the others.

Chalmers watched them with barely concealed amusement. He shook his head. "What a mob!" he said with a grin.

Wally looked at him. "Yeah, it doesn't say much for you as an instructor, Dad!"

Chalmers chuckled. "Hopeless, isn't it? Mind you," he added, "I know how they feel—I couldn't care less about the terrs myself at the moment, either!" He smiled tolerantly and started walking back towards the lorry.

Lawrence climbed stiffly down out of the high cab and walked over to him. "What have we stopped for?" he asked, a note of uneasiness in his voice.

"Just for a stretch and a breather," said Chalmers. "We've made good time. There's no hurry."

“I don’t think we should stop at all. There are terrs all around these parts,” he said, glancing anxiously around him.

Chalmers eyed him with amusement. “Never mind, we’ll soon get you back to Urungwe, safe and sound!” he replied in a soothing voice.

Lawrence looked at him wordlessly for a moment and then, turning on his heel, strode back to the lorry. He climbed back into the cab, pulling the door shut with a loud bang.

Chalmers shook his head. He found Winters’ tense and humourless manner extremely irritating. He walked over to the group of DSAs, his hands in his pockets. They crowded round him eagerly.

Mashiri took out a battered packet of cigarettes, his face wreathed in smiles. “Have a cigarette, boss,” he said with enthusiasm.

Chalmers opened his eyes wide in mock astonishment. “A miracle!” he exclaimed.

Amid their general laughter, he took the proffered cigarette and, crumpled as it was, put it between his lips. Mashiri lit it for him ceremoniously and then stood watching him as Chalmers inhaled and immediately started coughing violently, the tears starting in his eyes.

“Good God! What’s in this thing,” he spluttered.

The DSAs doubled up in delighted laughter.

Chalmers handed it back. “Thank you, Mashiri,” he gasped, “but why don’t you just shoot me instead—it’d be quicker!”

A movement behind him made him look around. Lawrence, still sitting in the lorry, was silently watching him, a look of disdain on his face. Chalmers frowned, his light-hearted mood suddenly evaporating. He turned back to the DSAs.

“OK, you guys, we haven’t got all day. Time to get moving,” he said briskly. Ignoring Lawrence, he walked back to the Pookie.

“Are we off?” called Wally as he approached.

Chalmers nodded, glancing down the flat stretch of road. “How much do you bet we *don’t* hit a mine?”

“Nothing doing, Dad!” replied Wally. “Somewhere down there, there’s a little tin with a big ribbon round it, and a *To Dear Dad, with love from Black Satan* written all over it!” He hesitated, eyes twinkling, “Or perhaps it’s from Lawrence Winters!” He laughed and slid down inside the Pookie.

A moment later, his head re-appeared. “Hey, Mike, it’s useless weaving

from side to side of the road trying to guess where the bloody things are. I'm just going to drive straight down the middle and hope for the best. Keep in my tracks, that's all!"

Chalmers nodded. "OK, Wally. Best of luck—see you in hospital."

A disembodied voice drifted up over the top.

"*Ja*—but just think of all those gorgeous nurses!"

CHAPTER 37

Settling himself on the hot metal seat behind the Leopard's steering wheel, Chalmers watched as Wally started up the Pookie and slowly manoeuvred it into the middle of the road. The vehicle's warning lights flashed on as Wally stopped and made some last minute adjustment, then it eased forward, slowly gathering speed.

When it was about 100 metres ahead, Chalmers released the handbrake and slowly steered the Leopard onto the broad tracks left by the Pookie in the thick layer of dust that covered the road.

Leaning forward and looking straight down over the Leopard's distinctive steep green front section, Chalmers glanced intently from the tracks in the dust, up to the Pookie's warning lights, and then back to his rear-view mirror to check the position of the lorry following behind. It had become routine procedure for him over the last few weeks.

He looked round at the strained faces of Joshua and the other DSAs and smiled.

"When we get to Hermes, Joshua," he said in a relaxed voice, "remind me to ask if they've got any spare mortar bombs, will you?"

Joshua leant forward. "Yes, boss. But I don't think they will have."

Chalmers knew for a certainty that they wouldn't and was merely making conversation to ease some of the tension that they all felt. "No, I'm sure you're right, Joshua—" He broke off suddenly as he saw the Pookie's lights flash on.

He braked and sat watching, his fingers tapping the hot, sticky steering wheel.

Slowly the seconds ticked by.

The lights went out again, but the Pookie remained motionless in the brilliant sunshine. A faint breath of wind stirred the tall grass on either side of the road and then died away. Above the gentle ticking noise of the idling engine, Chalmers could just hear the faint and intermittent sound of a dog barking in the distance—probably, he mused, from some nearby kraal or

farm. The interior of the Leopard was stiflingly hot and there were lots of flies.

And still they waited.

He frowned impatiently and sighed. He had always hated waiting. It sometimes seemed to him that life was nothing more than one long, continual process of waiting for something—or someone.

"What on earth is he up to?" he muttered softly.

Almost as if in answer, the Pookie began to move forward again.

Chalmers sighed in relief, then clicked his tongue irritably as, almost immediately, the red lights flashed on again and the Pookie came to a halt. Chalmers switched off the Leopard's engine to prevent it over-heating.

Then, once again, the Pookie moved forward.

Chalmers re-started the engine and inched forward a few metres.

The Pookie's lights flickered, went out and came on again.

Finally, growing curious as to what was causing the delay, he undid his safety belt and, climbing out of his seat, squeezed past the DSAs.

They watched him questioningly.

"Stay here. I'm just going to see what's up," he said curtly as he unbolted the heavy rear door.

As he jumped down onto the road, he saw the lorry come to a standstill further back.

He strode over to the Pookie.

As he did so, Wally's head appeared above the turret and he started lifting himself out, the mine prodder and detector held awkwardly in his free hand.

He glanced round as Chalmers came up. "What are you doing out here, Dad?" he asked in surprise as he jumped down.

"I just wanted to see what the hell *you're* doing. Your brakes were flashing like the lights on a Christmas tree!"

Wally gave a tense laugh. "Well, you can thank the terrs for that—there's a bloody mine down there," he said, pointing vaguely with his prodder to a spot on the road.

Handing the prodder to Chalmers without ceremony and walking carefully over to the spot, Wally started running the detector over the surrounding ground.

Suddenly he stopped. "Ah! Here's the bugger," he said softly.

They squatted down on their haunches, and Wally began scooping the dust

and sand away with cupped hands.

After a few moments, he suddenly stopped, shaking his head. “Damn! The cunning bastards have put two mines in the same hole—one on top of the other.”

Wally turned and looked down the road as if weighing up their options.

“We’d better be *really* careful with this one,” he said. “The top one’s plastic and it’s helluva sensitive. It would probably be best if we all just backed down the road, and then I’ll detonate the bloody things at a safe distance.” He looked at Chalmers: “OK by you, Dad?”

Chalmers nodded. “Fine, I’ll just go and get the two wagons moved.” He stood up and started to walk away, then stopped and turned round. “Anything I can do?”

“No thanks, Dad. After these past few weeks, I’m an old hand at this now. You just go and have a cup of tea and put your feet up for awhile—this is delicate work requiring someone with brains and nerves!” he said grinning.

Chalmers laughed. “Where the hell are we are going to find someone like that out here?” he rejoined.

“Ha-ha, very funny!” jeered Wally.

As he walked back to the Leopard, Chalmers could see the men on the back of the lorry standing up and craning their heads to see what was going on. Lawrence was leaning out of the cab window, his hand shielding his eyes from the sun.

“Please tell Leonard to drive back down the road,“ Chalmers shouted out to him, “and quite a long way, too,” he added. “Wally’s going to detonate the mines—there’s two of ‘em!”

Lawrence nodded and, pulling his head in, spoke to the driver.

Chalmers heard the lorry’s engine start up.

He turned to Joshua and Matola who were standing on the Leopard’s rear engine housing. “Alright, you nosey-parkers. Let me get in,” he said briskly.

“Yes, boss,” said Joshua, moving aside a little and then extending a hand to help him up.

Chalmers shook his head. “No, thanks, Joshua,” he said, heaving himself up onto the back wheel and into the body of the Leopard. “There’s still a bit of life in the old man yet!”

*****

The mines successfully detonated, Chalmers eased the Leopard forward and drove onto the verge, carefully skirting around the large crater the explosion had created in the road.

As he drove back into the centre of the road, his heart sank as he saw the red lights on the Pookie flash on again.

He sighed. “This is going to be a very long day,” he said with resignation.

“I hope so, boss!” replied Joshua.

Chalmers turned and looked at him, a puzzled expression on his face. Then as his meaning suddenly dawned on him, Chalmers burst out laughing. “Well, that’s certainly one way of looking at it, Joshua!” he said.

Chalmers turned back and, looking through the windscreen, saw Wally climbing out of the Pookie and walk around to the rear of the vehicle.

“Looks as if he’s got a bit of engine trouble now!” muttered Chalmers.

After a few minutes, Wally climbed back into the Pookie. The lights went out but, a few seconds later, flashed on again. Wally climbed out again.

Chalmers slowly drove the Leopard closer to the Pookie and, undoing his seatbelt, stood up and, lifting the canvas top above his head, called out to ask what was wrong.

“I can’t start the bloody thing,” shouted Wally in an angry voice.

Chalmers thought for a moment. “OK, get in and I’ll give you a push.”

Wally nodded and waved a hand in acknowledgement.

The two vehicles connected with a slight bump, and with engine whining in protest, the Leopard started pushing the Pookie. As the vehicles built up speed, Wally let the clutch out.

The Pookie’s engine fired, spluttered fitfully, and then suddenly roared into life. A cloud of oily, black smoke spewed out and enveloped Chalmers’ leopard with acrid fumes.

Relieved that Wally had managed to get the Pookie going again, Chalmers sank back into his seat with a heartfelt “Thank God for that!”

The Pookie jerked forward a few metres, and then the engine coughed and died.

*****

Some two hours later, the Pookie, pushed from behind by the Leopard, gently

rolled to a stop underneath the giant palm tree that stood in front of the little, white-washed Charge Office at Hermes police camp.

As it creaked to a standstill, a large white Alsatian that had been resting in the tree's shade got to its feet and stood watching the newcomers alertly.

A Sunday-like quietness and somnambulance filled the deeply shaded camp.

On a small, well-trimmed rectangle of lawn, bordered on one side by yellow cannas and red geraniums, a garden sprinkler was on and, in the gently drifting veil of fine spray, minute rainbows glistened in the rays of the sun. Pigeons were calling softly in the nearby trees.

Chalmers eased himself stiffly out of the Leopard and walked over to the Pookie as Wally clambered down.

"Well, that was quite something, wasn't it?" said the young man tiredly, stretching his arms above his head and yawning.

Chalmers nodded. "God, what a carry-on!" He turned and looked at the Pookie. "Well, it doesn't look like we'll be having the pleasure of your company for the rest of the trip."

Wally shook his head disconsolately, swearing softly under his breath. "If it's just a fuel blockage, it shouldn't be too much of a problem, but if not … God knows how long it'll take." He kicked the wheel irritably.

Chalmers nodded. "Well, whatever it is, I don't think we'd better wait for you. It could take hours to fix, and we've still got a helluva long way to go." He stood thinking for a moment in silence. "But, all being well, we should be back here before midday tomorrow. Hopefully, you'll have managed to get it going by then," he added, trying to sound optimistic. Inwardly, however, he knew that the loss of the Pookie was a very serious matter—so serious that he hardly dared think about the possibility.

"Well, I'll certainly give it a go," said Wally with determination. "Anyway," he went on, "let's go and see if we can wheedle a drink and a bite of something from Steve first—I'm bloody starving!"

Hands in pockets, the men strolled towards the low, corrugated iron-roofed building followed by the attentive Alsatian.

After a moment, Chalmers stopped and looked around at the tranquil surroundings. "Gosh, isn't it beautiful here?" he said appreciatively. "A bit different to our place!"

"Yeah, some people have it cushy, don't they?" said Wally with a laugh.

“What’s this Steve like?” asked Chalmers as they resumed their slow walk. “I’ve never met him before.”

“Oh, he’s a great guy—you’ll like him a lot,” replied Wally enthusiastically.

Chalmers smiled to himself. That was exactly what Findlay had said to him about Falon, he recalled with amusement. Although hopefully, he thought, Wally would prove to be a better judge of character.

His thoughts were interrupted by Wally who, looking at the seemingly deserted camp, said with a laugh: “So where is everybody? Knowing our luck, what’s the betting they’ve run out of beer!”

CHAPTER 38

The same day.

John Tapere sat in the deep shade under the encircling trees, waiting for the Comrades to arrive.

As the minutes ticked by, he listlessly began throwing stones into the nearby bushes. He had waited a long time and was hungry and thirsty.

Suddenly he tensed, his heart racing. Nervously, he glanced over his shoulder as he heard the crack of a dry twig nearby.

White soldiers?

He peered into the bushes, and although he could see nothing, a wave of fear swept over him. There was a fleeting flash of green camouflage, a rustle of leaves and grass. With pounding heart, he jumped up and ran for cover towards the dense bushes, letting out a sharp cry as a pair of powerful arms suddenly reached out and seized him in a vice-like grip and threw him violently, face down, onto the ground.

He lay there panting, his thin, under-nourished body shaking with fear. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the dirty boots of someone standing over him.

Unexpectedly, the silence was broken by a derisive laugh.

“Well, my little friend,” Black Satan said with an amused sneer. “You’ll never make a good Freedom Fighter. If we’d been whities, you’d be dead now.”

John Tapere rolled over cautiously and then slowly sat up, a sheepish smile of relief on his pinched face. He started wiping away a trickle of blood on his knee from a small gash where a sharp stone had cut him.

He looked up at Black Satan and then turned his head to one side quickly as several guerrillas from the group materialised out of the surrounding bush. They walked into the clearing and threw themselves down wearily, grunting morosely in tiredness.

Black Satan walked away and sat down heavily next to his lieutenant,

Aaron Letson, and leaning back against a tree, took out a cigarette and lit it.

John Tapere, not daring to speak, didn't move a muscle.

After a while, Black Satan flicked his cigarette away and turned and looked at the *mujiba*.

He jerked his head. "Come here, you," he said.

Nervously, the little boy got to his feet and approached the big man.

The terrorist leader looked at him, considering. "Well, what have you found out for us, swine-boy?"

John Tapere rubbed a foot awkwardly up and down against the back of his leg. "They have gone to Urungwe—the new boss, with lots of them from the camp. They need food."

Black Satan looked at him with sudden interest. "When did they go?" he demanded.

"This morning, early. Just before the sun came." He looked around apprehensively as some of the men, hearing the note of urgency in their leader's voice, came and stood around him.

Black Satan turned to Letson. "Did our comrade at the camp tell *you* about that?" he barked, eyes narrowing. "*I* knew nothing about it!" he scowled.

Letson shook his head. "Maybe he couldn't get word to us, Blacko. It's hard now that Janos has gone. He has no one to carry messages for him." He pointed a finger in Tapere's direction. "Perhaps we could use this one in future?"

Black Satan thought a few moments and then glanced up at Tapere.

"How long are they going for?" he asked, his tone of voice softer, more persuasive.

"I think they come back tomorrow—in the middle of the day, or maybe the afternoon. The Pookie is *stukkend*[44]."

Black Satan laughed softly. He turned and winked at Letson. "So he managed it after all—now they've got no Pookie!" he said with grim satisfaction.

Aaron Letson grinned broadly. "I thought he would. It's easy to stuff up one of those bloody things if you know what to do." He chuckled. "Maybe our comrade will be able to help us plenty more," added Letson cryptically.

Black Satan laughed cynically then, shaking his head, looked at his Number Two. "The bastard was shot last night—at the base."

Letson turned and stared at Black Satan. “Who shot him?” he asked in astonishment.

Black Satan scowled and shrugged his shoulders. “Dunno, but it’s a pity—that one might have been very useful.”

They fell silent, preoccupied with their own thoughts.

After a few moments, Black Satan turned back to Tapere. “How many are left at the base?” he questioned.

John Tapere frowned and shuffled his feet uncertainly. “About ten—maybe nine,” he said, fingering his nose.

Black Satan sniffed and pushed his sunglasses firmly back onto his nose with a finger. “That would be about right—” He paused and looked at the little African boy. “Good, very good,” he said, then added good-humouredly: “You’ve done well! Come back later. I may have more work for you as a reward, little swine-boy.”

Tapere, relieved and happy at having seemingly won the leader’s favour, smiled broadly and nodded rapidly. “I come back later—just now,” he said.

As he slipped into the bushes, he glanced behind him and, to his mystification, saw two dark figures furtively enter the clearing that he had just left.

*****

The leaders of the three main terrorist groups in the Chitangwe Tribal Trust land—Black Satan, John Moyo and Cephas Mlonga—sat on the ground in the dying light, talking quietly in subdued voices.

“Well, now that they’ve gone, I say we do it tonight,” said Moyo eagerly. “It’s our big chance. We can surround the camp and then attack on all sides.”

Mlonga nodded enthusiastically. “I agree. Lay down a heavy barrage and under cover of that, we can cut the fence and the base will be ours.” He slapped his knees with his hands gleefully.

Black Satan, who was picking his teeth in silent anger, scowled. Chitangwe Base Camp and its surroundings was *his* stamping ground, not Moyo's or Mlonga’s. Chitangwe Base was going to be his prize and his alone. He would make the plans, he would give the orders, and *he* would decide whether to attack or not, not Moyo and Mlonga.

“You are forgetting something,” he said frowning darkly. “This is my

territory, and I give the orders here—not you," he glared at Moyo. "Nor you," he added, turning to look at Mlonga.

Moyo narrowed his eyes. "I don't take orders from you," he said, his voice full of contempt. "You know nothing, comrade. You're scared of them—otherwise you'd have taken the base a long time ago. You lack the spirit of us true fighters." He puffed out his chest and laughed derisively. "We all know the new white bastard is out to get you—and you're running scared! You're just full of big words and threats. You fight only against women and children and old men!" he sneered.

Black Satan jumped up, his eyes blazing. "Clear out, you fat pig," he shouted in rage. He grabbed his AK that was leaning against the tree trunk beside him. "And that goes for you too, Mlonga—*get out!*" His voice rose to a scream.

The two leaders, momentarily taken aback by the younger man's fury, scrambled to their feet.

Moyo eyed Black Satan malevolently. "We won't forget this," he said angrily. "We'll get the base tonight, and who knows," he added threateningly, "maybe we get someone else too at the same time," he hissed.

The veiled threat was not lost on Black Satan. He took a step forward and levelled his AK at Moyo's chest.

"You try, and you won't even live long enough to regret it, *comrade,*" he spat the word contemptuously.

At a slight signal from Black Satan, several guerrillas emerged silently from the dense bush and surrounded Moyo and Mlonga.

"Now, bugger off, you bloody baboons—while you still have the chance," Black Satan growled.

Nervously, the two men backed uncertainly towards the bushes and then turned and disappeared amid the scornful jeers of Black Satan and his men.

Laughing suddenly, Black Satan pointed his rifle to the sky and fired off a long burst of automatic gunfire. "That'll make the bastards run! We'll show them who's the boss of Chitangwe."

Letson laughed and raised a clenched fist in the air. "Yeah, we'll show 'em, Blacko!"

Black Satan guffawed. "Come, Comrade Aaron—we've got work to do. We must think and plan," he said, his voice calm and calculating.

The two moved apart from the rest of the group to confer.

Black Satan rubbed his chin thoughtfully and, after a few moments, said: “We can do several things—remember: ‘A lion has only one life, but there are many, many ways to take it’.”

Letson nodded, a cunning grin spread over his face.

The guerrilla leader continued: “We can attack the base tonight and then wait for the pigs to arrive back from Urungwe and give them a nice welcome home. Or we can ambush them on the way in and *then* take the base.”

“But what if Moyo or Mlonga attack the camp tonight, Blacko?” Letson queried. “They have lots of men and plenty weapons.”

Black Satan nodded, a flicker of worry crossing his face. “I know—and we’re running short of ammunition and food.”

He narrowed his eyes and then, coming to a decision, said: “If we ambush the convoy when it’s coming back from Urungwe, we can take all *their* weapons and food. That’ll help. Besides,” he continued, “I want to show that white bastard what it’s like to fight *real* warriors like us!”

He laughed suddenly. “I can’t wait to see his stupid bloody face grinning from the branch of a tree!” he said, a look of eager anticipation in his eyes.

“Bloody white bastard!” exclaimed Letson, rubbing his hands together with relish at the prospect.

CHAPTER 39

District Commissioner's Office
Urungwe
Time: 14h15. The same day.

It was hot and airless in the district commissioner's office—just as it had been nearly a month ago when he'd last been there.

Chalmers looked impatiently at his watch and frowned in annoyance. He was tired out and filthy after the long, exhausting, and very stressful journey, and he was in no mood to waste his precious few hours in Urungwe, sitting around waiting for the district commissioner to finish a leisurely lunch.

He stood up and whiled away the time, idly looking around the immaculate office.

Two massive elephant tusks were arched against the wall behind the commissioner's highly polished, mahogany desk. Between the tusks was a large, sepia-coloured photograph of a middle-aged man in a pith helmet, his rifle crooked under his arm, one foot negligently resting on the carcass of an elephant, while nearby in the shade of a large baobab tree were grouped four African safari trackers.

Chalmers walked across to take a closer look at the photograph. As he studied it, he suddenly heard the door behind him being opened.

"Ah—hello, Michael, sorry you had to wait," the district commissioner said with a friendly smile, crossing the room and holding out his hand. "It's good to see you in one piece!"

Chalmers turned, smiled and shook the outstretched hand. "Good afternoon, Mr. Gilmour."

"And how was the run in? Any trouble?" the DC asked as he walked over to his desk and eased himself into his chair. He switched on the electric fan that stood nearby.

Chalmers sat down.

"No, no trouble—well, not from the terrorists that is, but I'm afraid the

Pookie broke down again. We had quite a time with it and, in the end, we had to leave it behind at Hermes." He paused. "Is there any chance of us getting a replacement, do you think?"

The DC sighed and shook his head, smiling ruefully. "Not in a million years, I'm afraid. You know yourself what the situation is like. We're running out of everything—men *and* equipment."

Chalmers eye's twinkled as he recalled what Wally had said about the Jacaranda Festival and the drum majorettes. No wonder the young man had been so incensed.

The DC, wrapped up in his own thoughts, didn't notice Chalmers amusement, but went on: "I am not a pessimist by nature, but, one way and another, I don't think this country's got much of a chance—politically, that is. It's going to be just handed over to the terrorists, come hell or high water." He shook his head resignedly. "But what can we do? We're the bad fellows in all of this apparently, and no one—let alone a small country like Rhodesia—can fight the whole world for ever."

Chalmers nodded. "Yes, I suppose so." He sighed. "'The old order passeth'," he said, turning his head slightly to look at the large photograph of the reigning British monarch, Queen Elizabeth, that was hanging, rather incongruously, on the wall near the window. The commissioner followed his glance but didn't say anything.

They sat in silence for several moments.

"Well, I've received your reports," the commissioner said suddenly. "I must congratulate you. You seem to have achieved something that nobody else has to date," he said with a smile.

Chalmers looked at him enquiringly. "Have I? What on earth is that?"

"You have apparently succeeded in turning a bunch of undisciplined hooligans into something remotely recognisable as soldiers," the DC replied with a smile.

He picked up a copper, dagger-shaped paper knife and twiddled it in his fingers. "I wish the same could be said for the chap at Umsholo," he went on pointedly. "He seems to have lost all interest in everything. Spends all his time in his room reading, I gather."

Chalmers looked away, slightly embarrassed. That must be Dave, he thought.

The district commissioner tapped the point of the paper knife on his

blotting pad.

"Tell me, Michael, what's your overall impression of the situation up at Chitangwe? Apart from the drought, that is. Are we winning or losing?" he asked, looking at the man in front of him keenly.

Chalmers laughed. "I think we're losing!" he replied, eyes twinkling. Bald statements like that always amused him, but the commissioner did not share his often-mischievous sense of humour.

"That's my impression, too" he replied seriously.

"Well, be that as it may," Chalmers added without waiting, "I hope, before I leave the camp, to be able to do a *little* something to redress the balance, at least. That's one of the reasons why I've been putting the DSAs through their paces over the last few weeks."

The commissioner coughed and looked at Chalmers with an air of gentle reproof. "Ah, yes, I rather suspected that that might be your motive."

Chalmers detected a faint trace of disapproval in his words.

The commissioner went on: "Actually, I've been wanting to talk to you about that," he said. "I'd be the last one to decry your efforts—in fact, as I've already mentioned, they've been noted with approval in several quarters, but I think—if you don't mind me saying so—that you are rather over-looking the purpose for which you are there. It's not to fight the terrorists—that's the army's job. Our role in Internal Affairs is purely a defensive one. We're merely administrators—*not* a military force. Although I sometimes wish we were," he sighed, "but there it is."

Chalmers sniffed disapprovingly. He was familiar with the official line and its total lack of logic always irritated him.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm not prepared to just sit back and be picked off at leisure by a bunch of murderous barbarians," Chalmers said. "I'm not very good at turning the other cheek, I'm afraid. Besides, are we supposed to pretend we don't see when the local villagers are burnt and hacked to pieces on our very own doorstep—just because we're so-called *administrators*?" he asked. "I mean, you yourself criticised the chap at Umsholo just now because he wasn't doing anything," he added, looking the DC straight in the face.

The commissioner raised his eyebrows and looked down at his desk.

"Well, I can understand how you feel," he replied evasively after a few moments, "but let's talk about this some other time when you're not so tired.

You'll feel a lot better when you've had a meal and a good night's rest." He got up from his chair. "For now, just relax and forget about Black Satan and his gang of cut-throats for a few hours!" he said with a smile.

"Ah!" rejoined Chalmers, standing up, "now *that's* someone I really want to see behind bars—or somewhere!" he added, turning to look at the commissioner.

The DC looked at him closely. "Well, I can't quarrel with that," he said, "but just a word of caution—don't forget the old Chinese saying: 'When out hunting tigers, be careful tigers aren't hunting you'!" He patted Chalmers on the back. "We don't want to lose any more good chaps—especially," he stressed the word, "and this is strictly between you and me—for a lost cause."

"A lost cause?" repeated Chalmers in a slightly astonished voice.

The DC nodded. "'Fraid so. The terrorists have, in fact, already won if the truth be known—thanks mainly to our own people back in England." He paused, his eyes veiled. "I imagine the British Government must be feeling rather pleased with itself right now," he added dryly.

Chalmers grunted.

"The sad thing is," the commissioner went on, "they'll only realise what a terrible mistake they've made when it's too late and the country's in ruins—and then, being typically English, they'll conveniently forget their role in all this," he said slowly, "assuming, that is, they even give a damn what happens after we've all been kicked out."

He shook his head and then accompanying Chalmers to the door, added: "All they want is to see the place handed over to Mugabe and his gang, and then they can happily wash their hands of the whole miserable affair!"

He held out his hand to Chalmers. "Well, it's been good to see you again, old chap. Good luck." He smiled briefly and shut the door abruptly in Chalmers' face.

Chalmers shook his head and smiled to himself. Eccentric old boy! he thought. Although, as old-fashioned and peculiar as he appeared, for the first time, Chalmers had the sneaking suspicion he was not such a fool after all.

CHAPTER 40

As the door closed behind him, Chalmers turned towards the adjoining office where Claire Pearson, the commissioner's secretary, worked. He tapped gently on the door and looked in.

She was standing at the metal filing cabinet with her back to him, sorting papers into various folders.

Would she even remember him? he wondered.

"Hello, Claire," he said a little uncertainly.

She turned round quickly and instantly recognising him, broke into a big smile.

"Hello," she said in a warm, friendly voice. "Gosh, what a lovely surprise!" she said, putting her papers down on top of the cabinet and walking towards the desk. "When did you get here?"

He walked into the room.

"About an hour ago. I popped into your office earlier, but I think you must have been at lunch or something," he said, moving over to the armchair that stood by her desk.

"Oh, sorry—let me move those things out of the way for you," she said, quickly leaning over to the chair and scooping up a pile of papers that were lying in the seat. Chalmers smelt a faint whiff of perfume.

"That chair's my unofficial filing basket," she said, laughing.

She put the papers down on the corner of her desk.

He smiled his thanks and sat down wearily, watching her as she pulled her swivel chair out from the desk and made herself comfortable. There was an easy silence.

"I can't believe that it's only just over three weeks since I was here last," he said after a few moments. "It's incredible—it seems more like three years to me!"

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. "Goodness me, did you miss me *that* much?" she said archly.

He laughed, watching entranced as the light from the window played over

her wavy, golden hair.

"Well, Chitangwe is not exactly teeming with beautiful women like you!" he replied with a chuckle.

She looked at him teasingly, the tip of her tongue just showing between her slightly parted even teeth. "You old flatterer, I'll write and tell your wife! Besides, I don't believe you. I know *exactly* what you're *really* after. You just want a few more Bren guns—or rather," she added with a very knowing look, "some mortar shells!"

He burst out laughing. "How did you know about *that*?" he asked with surprise.

"Ah!" she said mysteriously. "The terrorists aren't the only ones with a Bush Telegraph system." She laughed gaily. "You'd be surprised what we know about you, Mr. Michael Chalmers!"

He pulled a wry face, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

He nodded towards the district commissioner's office. "And does 'his nibs' know about my little fireworks display?"

She nodded, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Oh yes, indeed! I would be surprised if the whole *country* didn't know about it!" she said, giving him a sidelong glance.

"Oh!" he said, abashed. "I'll obviously have to be very much more careful in future. I didn't know my comings and goings were known about in such exalted places!"

"Oh, you needn't worry," she said smiling sweetly, her voice soothing. "Everything that's been said has been highly complimentary—well, *almost* everything," she added with a giggle.

That would soon change once Lawrence Winters had had a chance to report back to the commissioner, thought Chalmers sardonically.

"Do you realise," she went, changing the subject, "that it's only ten days to Christmas?"

He glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall by the side of her desk. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed, shaking his head. "I'd quite forgotten." He was genuinely surprised. He looked at her enquiringly. "Are you doing anything special over the holidays, Claire?"

"Yes," she said brightly. "I'm going home to spend Christmas with my parents on the farm. I can't wait," she added enthusiastically.

"That should be lovely," he replied. "Whereabouts do your parents live,

then?”

“They’ve got a place not too far from Chindara.” She stopped as if thinking of something. “If I remember rightly,” she went on, “it’s not all that far from where you are at Chitangwe.”

“Then the farm must be quite near St. Mark’s Mission?” he said.

“That’s right,” she answered quickly. “In fact, it’s on the next property.”

“I should know it, then,” he said with interest. “What’s the name of it?”

“’Good Hope Farm’.”

He wrinkled his forehead in an effort to recall the name. Suddenly it came to him. “Oh, yes. I took a patrol up to those parts fairly recently. Gosh, if I’d known it was your parent’s place, I’d have popped in and said hello!” he said.

She smiled. “What a shame you didn’t. They’d have loved to have seen you—especially as there are so many terrorists in the area now,” she added with a chuckle!

“Has the farm ever been attacked at all?”

She shook her head. “No, thank goodness. But I can’t help worrying. Our neighbour, John Swanepoel—he’s on the far side of us—was attacked last month.”

Chalmers creased his forehead. “Was anyone hurt?”

“No, but I heard that the farmhouse itself was badly damaged by rockets,” she said. Lost in thought for a moment, Claire picked up a pencil and tapped it gently on her lips. “I hope we’ll be left alone at Christmas. The whole family will be there.” An anxious look came into her eyes.

“I’m sure it’ll be alright,” said Chalmers reassuringly.

They were silent for a moment.

“How many are there in your family?” he asked, trying to direct her attention onto more a pleasant topic.

She put the pencil down.

“Let me see: there’s David—he’s my eldest brother. He’s 18. Then there’s John—he’s 12. And I have two young sisters, Jennifer and Ruth. They’re eight and six.” She leant her head to one side and, smiling coyly, added: “And, finally, there’s little me—and not forgetting Mum and Dad, of course,” she added with a chuckle.

He smiled.

“And you?” she said, looking at him. “Will you be able to get home at all, Mike?”

He pulled a wry face and shook his head. “Not a chance!” He hesitated, then added: “Unless you can persuade the Big White Chief next door to let me go.”

“I wish I could,” she said earnestly.

She stood up, walked over to the filing cabinet and taking the lead of the old electric kettle, bent down and plugged it into a nearby wall-socket and switched it on.

“You will have a quick cup of tea, won’t you? It won’t take a minute,” she said, turning round and looking at him enquiringly.

“No, thank you, Claire. I would love to, I really would, but I must get going. I’ve got an awful lot to do still—and then I *must* have a wash and a clean up. At the moment, I’m not fit for civilised society and, by the way, I must apologise to you for looking like Robinson Crusoe—or more accurately—his parrot!”

Claire laughed, and then, absent-mindedly straightening her dress, she looked over at him, hesitatingly.

“I’ve just been thinking, Mike,” she said, following him to the door. “Couldn’t you try and to get up to the farm on Christmas Day? We’d love to see you.”

He turned to look at her, quickly considering her charming and totally unexpected invitation.

“What a lovely idea!” he said enthusiastically. “Of course, I *shouldn’t* really, but after all—” he added with a mischievous smile, “it would only be neighbourly for me to take a patrol to ‘Good Hope Farm’—just to make sure that you’re all alright, wouldn’t it!”

She laughed softly. “Of course—just out of pure good neighbourliness!”

He stood by the door looking at her, his fingers on the door-handle.

“But you won’t think I’m being rude if something does turn up and I can’t make it though, will you?” he asked apologetically. Then breaking into a wry smile, he added: “As you know yourself, the terrorists don’t seem to be as interested in Christmas as we are!”

She chuckled at his gentle sarcasm. “No, of course we won’t think you’re being rude. We’ll understand. But do try hard—my parents would love to meet you, and I’ll make sure we have a place all ready for you, Christmas stocking and all! It’ll be like home from home.”

He smiled warmly. “It‘ll be wonderful. I shall look forward to it,” he said.

They said their goodbyes and Chalmers, humming contentedly to himself, went off down the corridor. He hadn't wanted to come into Urungwe—indeed, wouldn't have done so at all had it not been for their dire lack of food—and yet, he thought, look how everything had so unexpectedly changed for the better? He shook his head: one never could tell what would happen, he thought philosophically.

He made the rounds of the various offices, collecting a batch of new report books, ball-point pens, new radio batteries, two new aerials for the portable radios, ordering medical supplies, handing in leave forms for two of the DSAs and attending to a number of minor errands which had piled up while he had been at Chitangwe.

Only a couple more things to see to and then, at last, he would be free for a few hours, he thought with satisfaction. He looked at his list: collect mail; say goodbye to Lawrence; and then send off the DSAs.

Lawrence Winters was in the radio room, sitting at a spare desk reading a newspaper.

He looked up as Chalmers walked in.

"Ah! 'The conquering hero cometh'," he said in a rather unpleasant voice without smiling.

Chalmers, who had intended thanking him again for the repair work he had done at the camp, merely nodded his head in acknowledgement of the man's presence and turned to one of the two African radio operators who was sitting at a table, doodling on a piece of paper.

"Is there any mail for me, please? The name's Chalmers."

The African got up, apparently annoyed at being disturbed at his doodling and ambled over to a wooden desk tray at the end of the room.

"There's three," he muttered with indifference, placing them on the edge of the table and walking away.

In reaction, Chalmers eyed him with disfavour. How infectious rudeness is, he thought. It spreads quicker than the 'flu! He picked up the letters and glancing briefly at the handwriting on the envelopes, turned and, without a word, walked out of the office.

The DSAs were waiting impatiently for him on the small gravel square that lay to the side of the long, colonial-style building. As he walked over to them, they crowded around him.

"Right, you horrible lot. You can all push off now, *but*— " he held up his

hand, “you must all be back here tomorrow morning by no later than nine o’clock—sharp! If anyone isn’t here by the time we leave, they’ll be left behind and put on a charge. I’m not going to wait for *anyone*—is that clear?”

There were loud calls of assent.

He looked around at their eager faces, beaming with pleasure in anticipation of a wild ‘night on the town’.

“And,” he warned them, “you needn’t think I don’t know about the tricks you get up to,” he went on with a knowing smile. “If any of you spend the night in jail, you needn’t think I’m going to get you out—and another thing: don’t think you can do anything to ‘fix’ the vehicles. They’re going to be under guard—so you’ve been warned!” He relaxed. “OK, sermon’s over. Off you go, and have a good time—”

They rushed off, shouting and laughing, before he could even finish his sentence. He watched them for a few moments.

“God help us!” he muttered with an envious laugh.

He went back to the armoury where he’d left his handgrip and rifle and then leaving the building, set off down the quiet and almost deserted street to the town’s only hotel.

He felt at a loose end and, suddenly, very lonely.

CHAPTER 41

The hotel was a large, rambling, single-storey building that dated back to early colonial days. It was set in spacious grounds and its white-painted bedrooms, high-ceilinged and airy, had doors that opened out onto a wide, columned verandah built along three sides of the building.

In the long, cool and almost empty lounge, three immaculately white-uniformed African waiters, red fezzes on their heads, stood quietly talking at the far end of the room beneath a large, slowly-rotating fan set into the ornate Victorian-style ceiling.

Chalmers sat down in one of the comfortable armchairs and leant back.

Seeing him, one of the three waiters, a round silver tray tucked under his arm, leisurely made his way among the empty tables and came up to him.

"Good afternoon, *mambo*[45]," he said with a wide, friendly smile.

Chalmers returned the smile. "Good afternoon. Could I have a pot of tea and some sandwiches, please—beef, if you have."

As the waiter wandered off, Chalmers took his letters out of his unbuttoned shirt pocket and, lighting a cigarette, sat back with a sigh, savouring the quiet, restful atmosphere. Drawing out the moment of happy anticipation, he placed the unopened letters on the table in front of him and waited for his tea and sandwiches.

He glanced around the lounge.

A few tables away, a group of Africans sat drinking beer, talking in a desultory fashion. By one of the long windows, underneath a luxuriant potted palm, sat a middle-aged European woman in a pink floral dress. She was knitting a blue baby's jacket, her eyes lost in reminiscent thought.

Chalmers looked at his watch. It was twenty-five past three.

After a few minutes, the waiter returned and placed the tea things, together with the bill, on the table in front of him.

Chalmers paid him.

He poured out a cup of tea and then, picking up the letter from his wife,

opened it slowly.

It was a long one, full of ordinary, yet comforting, family news. It was redolent of another, and to Chalmers, now very distant world—about his son; the swimming pool; Tigger, their dog; the garden and other everyday matters.

He finished the letter, folded it up and replaced it carefully in its envelope.

The second one—an airmail—was from a former colleague, Helen, who had moved overseas a couple of years earlier. He always loved getting letters from her as they were usually breezy and light-hearted. She had an infectious sense of humour and they both shared the same love of the absurd. This letter was typical and ended with a quip: “Did you hear about the cross-eyed teacher? She couldn’t control her pupils!”

Despite the hushed atmosphere of the lounge, Chalmers burst into laughter. The woman who was knitting looked up at him somewhat reprovingly.

The final letter was from his mother in Norfolk. One passage in particular caught his attention.

> ‘I am afraid England is no longer the place you knew and loved, dear, and I think you would be heart-broken if you ever decided to come back. Our government’s treatment of Rhodesia is so heartless that it is nothing short of a tragedy when one thinks of all the many gallant young men who have given (and still are giving) their lives there, upholding the very ideals which we, at one time, held so dear and which formerly made us Great.
>
> ‘To this day, I still find it incredible that the British government under Harold Wilson considered sending in the RAF to bomb your beautiful country. Our own kith and kin! I cannot believe that we could do such a thing to our very own people. Instead of backing you in your struggle, we seem determined to do everything we can to bring you to your knees. It is so sad and shaming. I think it is mainly due to ignorance—if only the true story could be told, I am sure it would bring understanding. Maybe one day—but by then I suppose it will be too late.’

He read the passage a second time, then folded it and put it back in the envelope.

He sat back, thinking about her words, but, after a while, he dismissed the subject, anxious to phone his wife. He was looking forward to surprising her!

Leaving the room, Chalmers walked to the deserted reception desk and rang the bell for attention. No one came and he rang it a second time.

“Just a minute,” a woman’s voice rang out from behind a half-open door. He waited, idly looking at a framed, colour photograph of the Victoria Falls that hung on the wall over a large safe.

After a few moments, the door was pushed open and a blonde woman in her early forties came to the desk and leant on the counter. She smiled attractively.

“Hello, what can I do for you?” she asked. Her voice was alive and vibrant.

“Good afternoon. A couple of things—first I’d like to book a room and secondly, I’d like to call my wife in Salisbury. Is there a public phone box I could use?”

“Right,” she said, pulling the hotel register towards her. “How long will you be wanting the room for?” she asked, looking up at him enquiringly.

“Just for tonight, please—I’ve got to leave first thing tomorrow.”

She looked down at the book, considering. ”Ah, you’re in luck. Room 6 is vacant at the moment—I’ll put you in there. It’s our best one!” She turned round to a rack of keys behind her, selected one and handed it to him with a smile.

“Super—thanks!” he said taking it from her. “And the phone? Is there one I can use?”

The receptionist pointed behind him. “If you go down that passage on the right—there by the bar—you’ll see a public call box.”

“Thanks very much,” he said smiling.

“You’re welcome.”

Following her directions, he found the phone box and direct dialled his home number. As he listened to it ringing, he had a strange feeling that no one was going to answer it. To his complete surprise, however, he suddenly heard a man’s voice come on the line.

“Hello?” the voice said enquiringly.

Chalmers, taken off guard, hesitated for a moment not knowing what to say. “Er … sorry. I seem to have got the wrong number. I wanted Salisbury 993-2178.”

There was a pause. “Yes. That’s right. Do you want to speak to Mrs. Chalmers?”

Chalmers frowned, puzzled. “Yes. This is her husband.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the man. “It’s you, Mike. This is Gordon—Mary’s brother,” he added tentatively.

He must be staying over to keep her company, Chalmers realised. Although, for one wild, improbable moment, he had thought—

“Hello, Gordon. You gave me quite a surprise. Is Mary there by any chance?”

“No, Mike, I’m afraid she’s out at the moment. I’m not sure what time she’s coming back.”

Chalmers felt annoyed and disappointed. The surprise he had hoped to give his wife had been completely spoilt.

“She’s alright though, isn’t she?” he asked anxiously.

“Oh, yes. I think she’s just gone to visit some friends, that’s all.”

Chalmers bit his lip, thinking. “Could you ask her to give me a ring when she gets back, please, Gordon—I’ll give you the number. It’s a call box in the hotel.”

“Hold on, Mike. I’ll just have to get a pencil.”

There was a long silence. The pips went. Chalmers toyed with the telephone lead, twisting it absent-mindedly.

“Right, I’ve found one,” said the voice.

Chalmers gave the number and after a brief, trivial conversation, put the receiver back on the hook.

Feeling slightly sorry for himself, he walked back to the reception desk and rang the bell again. No one came and he rang it a second time.

“Just a minute,” the woman’s voice called out.

He waited and re-studied the picture of the Victoria Falls.

The door was pushed open. “Oh, hello again,” the woman said cheerily as she emerged from the inner office. “Did you find the phone ok?”

“Yes, thanks. Look, my wife wasn’t in, unfortunately. I left her a message so, hopefully, she’ll ring back later. I gave the call box number. Would it be possible for someone to give me a shout when the call comes through, please?”

“Yes, of course,” she replied. “I’ll send one of the waiters along.”

He thanked her and then, making his way along the dim, softly carpeted corridor, he reached his room.

And now, he thought with eager anticipation as he unlocked the door, a bath!

*****

Lying in the hot, steamy water, Chalmers sank back relishing the sheer luxury of it, but, after a while, his thoughts turned again to his mother's letter and, in particular, her remark about the true story of the war being told one day.

He had often thought the same thing and had, indeed, now and again even toyed with the idea of writing a book on the subject himself.

He groped around in the water, absent-mindedly trying to find the bar of soap.

Were he to write such a book, he ruminated, he would cast it in the form of a novel and make it about ordinary people on both sides of the conflict—black and white. Above all it would be truthful and show what life in the operational area was *really* like.

He suddenly burst into laughter as he recalled something he had read somewhere:

> '… as my fellow author William Shakespeare so aptly put it, the book would "hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure."'

Exactly! Top of the class, Master Will! He chuckled and slipped down in the water for a last wallow.

After a few moments' splashing around, he stood up and climbed out of the bath. He had come to a decision. He *would* write a book after all.

He dried himself perfunctorily and, going into the bedroom, went across to his handgrip and pulled out a large notebook.

Sitting on the bed with the towel thrown around his shoulders, still damp from the bath, he turned to the first blank page of the book and started writing:

> 'The small, single-engined aircraft bounced violently in the turbulence …'

He stopped, a frown of concentration on his face. No, that was too abrupt. An explanation was needed—he had to start right from the very beginning.

The words began to flow—

> ‘“That’s where you’ll be for the next six weeks, Chalmers,” the district commissioner said, pointing to a spot on a large, brightly coloured map that covered one entire wall of the hot, airless room. He paused significantly. “Frankly, I don’t envy you …”’

He wrote for a long time, lost to his surroundings, and it wasn’t until much later that he glanced at his watch on the table next to him. To his amazement he saw that it was almost eight o'clock. He had been writing for nearly three hours.

Suddenly he became aware of how hungry he was and, anxious not to miss dinner, put his pen and book in his handgrip and got dressed. As he gave his hair a quick brush, he remembered with disappointment that Mary had still not rung.

He picked up his copy of Dickens and made his way to the empty dining room.

CHAPTER 42

The large, dimly-lit dining room was deserted and, to Chalmers, the stillness of the shadowy emptiness had an immediately depressing effect.

He walked across to a small table, pulled out a chair and sat down.

After a few minutes, a waiter materialised by his side and handed him a menu then stood boredly by while he made his choice.

"I'll have soup and the roast beef, please," he said, handing the menu back to him.

The waiter wrote down his order and went back into the kitchen, kicking the door open with his foot. As it swung open in front of him, the sound of angry voices and the banging of pots and saucepans drifted out into the dining room.

Chalmers grinned. It sounded as though the kitchen was full of Mishecks! He moved the plastic pepper and salt pots nearer to him, opened his book and propping it against them, started reading.

He was interrupted a few minutes later by the waiter who placed a bowl of thin, greasy, lukewarm soup in front of him. Chalmers regarded it with distaste.

He looked around the table for a soup spoon but not finding one, called to the waiter: "May I have a spoon, please."

The waiter stepped over to a nearby table and, selecting a spoon from a small pile, wiped it with his none-too-clean cloth and, walking across to Chalmers, clumsily put it down next to his plate.

Chalmers took a sip of the soup, pulled a face and turned his attention back to his book.

Suddenly, to his utter amazement, he heard his name spoken close behind him. The voice—a woman's—was full of delight.

He turned round enquiringly.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, pushing his chair rapidly away from the table. "Pamela! What a wonderful surprise. What on earth are you doing here?" he asked with undisguised pleasure.

The woman laughed softly. “Well, I could ask you the same thing!” she said, moving round the table to face him. “Would you mind if I joined you for dinner—or will I be interrupting? I remember how much you dislike company when you’re reading.” She smiled teasingly.

He clicked his tongue. “Of course you can! What a ridiculous question,” he replied, pulling the other chair out for her to sit down. “I mean, it’s not often a gorgeous woman asks me if she can have dinner with me!” he added gallantly.

They both sat down and looked at each other for a few moments.

He’d known Pamela for years. At one time they had been close friends—too close, perhaps, for a married man with a family. As he looked at her, he realised once again just how deeply attracted to her he had been in those days—in fact, still *was*, he realised with a shock.

After a short pause, they both began talking at the same moment, both feeling a little embarrassed in view of their past, unspoken, feelings for each other. They laughed.

“You first,” he said politely but, nevertheless, went on immediately: “I just can’t believe it. It must be at least two years since I last saw you,” he said.

She wrinkled her forehead. “Um—at least that.”

There was another silence and Chalmers looked down at his plate.

“Do you mind if I carry on?” he asked, covering his embarrassment by taking a spoonful of soup. He made a wry face and pushed the plate away from him with a dismissive laugh. “On the other hand, I wouldn’t bother with the soup if I were you. It tastes like washing-up water. I thought our camp cook held the honours for the worst soup in the Southern Hemisphere but I see I was wrong!”

She chuckled. “Oh dear, in that case I think I’ll skip it. But ‘camp cook’ …?”

“Yes,” he grimaced. “I’m here on call-up—fighting for queen and country—well, in a manner of speaking, that is! Actually, I’ve only just got in from Chitangwe Base—it’s way out in the sticks, miles from anywhere, and most of the time I just sit and look at the birds and trees and twiddle my thumbs!” he said evasively. He had the typical English dislike of talking seriously about his own affairs. He shrugged. “But never mind all that,” he went on. “Tell me what you’re doing with yourself these days?”

“The same old thing—investigative journalism.”

“And do you still like it?” he asked with interest.

“Yes, I love it. Always have—as you well know,” she said archly.

“And how’s the Fourth Estate these days—anything interesting going on? I’m a bit out of touch down here, I’m afraid,” he said with a light laugh.

“Well, the old ‘Bang Gang’[46] has gained a rather illustrious new recruit recently,” she replied.

Chalmers lifted an eyebrow enquiringly. ”Oh? And who may that be that?”

“Lord Richard Valentine Gascoyne-Cecil, son of the 6th Marquess of Salisbury[47] no less!” she said, almost triumphantly.

“Goodness me! What’s *he* doing over here?” Chalmers asked, intrigued.

“Apparently, he’s out here filming a documentary on the Rhodesian War for British television. He’s already been nicknamed ‘Young Winston’ … I actually met him a couple of days ago at a security briefing. He’s a real sweetheart—just turned 30. Quite the dashing young adventurer!” she laughed.

Despite himself, Chalmers felt a twinge of jealousy as he listened to Pamela’s enthusiastic account of the young Lord’s virtues.

“Hmmm, well, it all sounds unnecessarily dangerous, if you ask me,” he said gruffly.

Pamela laughed lightly. “He said they might be coming up this way soon, scouting for suitable locations, so perhaps you might be seeing him in your neck of the woods one of these days. Just don’t forget to use his correct title when introducing him to anyone, though!”

“Which is?” he asked shortly.

“Captain the Lord Richard—although he generally prefers to be called just Richard!” She grinned mischievously.

“’Just Richard’ it is, then,” laughed Chalmers, sitting back, an amused expression in his eyes. Who did she think he was going to introduce Captain-the-Lord-Richard to out here? he wondered. He could just imagine it: “Ah, my Lord, allow me to introduce Sixpence—Killer Sixpence, that is. And this is Chikono of ‘Dress off to your right, you bloody black bastards’ fame! There’s High Society for you, Africa-style, he thought with a chuckle.

Their talk was interrupted by the waiter. “What will you have, madam?” he asked.

She held out a hand for the menu and glanced down the limited list of

dishes. While she did so, Chalmers studied her classic profile admiringly, noting again the finely chiselled features and delicately curved neck and broad forehead.

She gave her order and turned back to him.

"But tell me," he went on eagerly. "What on earth are you doing in such a God-forsaken place as this?"

She laughed softly, wrinkling her nose playfully and glancing around the dining room quickly.

"It's awful, isn't it? Actually, I'm just on my way to Fort Victoria to spend a few days with some friends."

He raised his eyebrows. "But surely you're not travelling alone?"

"Yes, of course I am," she replied with a touch of surprise. "Why not? It's not far."

"It's not safe—*you* ought to know that," he replied with concern. "A car was ambushed just a few kilometres down the road from here only two days ago, or so they told me at the DC's office earlier. Everyone was killed."

She looked at him, a reproving smile on her lips. "But one can't just give up doing things simply because of a few incidents like that," she said in marked understatement. "I'll be alright."

Chalmers frowned. He found her attitude slightly irritating. He had no patience with what he regarded as empty bravura. Coming from a man it was bad enough, but from a woman, it was ridiculous.

She saw his annoyance and smiled warmly. "The same dear-old, protective Michael. You obviously haven't changed a bit!"

He smiled bleakly. "And you're the same dear-old, headstrong— " he hesitated, "lovely Pamela!"

"Thank you, kind sir," she said coquettishly. "Flattery will get you everywhere!"

"Ooooh! Will it indeed?" he replied with a broad grin, his moment of irritation passing. "I must remember that!"

Their eyes met.

"Tell me," he resumed after a long pause, "what does your husband think about his young wife running off into the bush on her own for a few days?"

She leant her elbow on the table, raised her arm and fingered one of her small, pearl earrings. Chalmers watched her in fascination.

"Oh, John and I parted company a few months ago," she said lightly.

He shook his head. “What on earth went wrong? He must have been a complete idiot,“ he said.

She gave him an appreciative smile. “It just didn’t work out,” she replied, looking down at the tablecloth. “Actually, it was a disaster right from the start. I don’t know what possessed me in the first place.” She shrugged her shoulders slightly. “Anyway, let’s not talk about that. It’s ancient history now.” She paused and looked up at him. “But tell me more about camp life, Michael—what’s Chitangwe like?” she asked with interest.

He leant forward and lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It’s lonely and very quiet—would you care to come and spend a few days with me instead of with your friends in Fort Victoria. We could have a marvellous time!”

Her eyes sparkled with amusement. “Um, sounds gorgeous—I must say I’m almost tempted. The only trouble is, I’ve hardly brought any clothes with me!”

He pretended to look shocked. “Oh, things get better by the minute!” he said teasingly. “It would be a real Garden of Eden!”

She laughed softly. “I think you’d soon get bored with me. I’m not a very nice person really, if you remember.”

He laughed. “No, I don’t remember anything of the sort. On the contrary, I recall quite the opposite. In fact—” he stopped abruptly, as he suddenly realised that her heady presence was stirring up all sorts of long-buried feelings.

She stared at him, a half-questioning, half-inviting look on her face.

He glanced away quickly, and as he did so, he noticed the waiter coming towards their table.

“Ah, here’s the food,” he said with forced eagerness.

The waiter put the plates before them and, retreating to a respectful distance, stood leaning against the wall, a finger picking at his teeth.

They started their meal.

“And how are your wife and family?”

Although she spoke casually, to Chalmers her words seemed to imply far more than just a passing interest.

He didn’t answer but, stalling for time, said: “Er … sorry, Pamela, but I was just wondering—would you like something to drink with your food?”

She smiled. “Yes, that’s a lovely idea.”

He turned round and beckoned the waiter. “Could we have the wine list,

please?”

When it was brought, he ran his eyes down the meagre list of inferior-quality drinks.

“Have you any imported wines?”

The African shook his head.

Chalmers turned to Pamela. “Do you want to risk one of the local offerings, then?”

“Yes, why not? You know me, I’ll try anything once,” she replied with a flash of her eyes at him.

Chalmers heart skipped a beat. He turned back to the waiter. “We’ll try that one,” he said, pointing to the name of a local red wine.

The waiter went off.

“Sorry, Pamela,” he resumed, pretending not to have remembered her last question concerning his wife. “You were saying?”

“I was just asking how your wife and family were,” she said, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

He put a piece of meat in his mouth and chewed it, thinking quickly. “Oh, we chug along slowly,” he replied, trying to sound casual. “Do you know that my wife and I have been married for over twelve years now?”

She stared at him in mock surprise, putting her hand to her chest. “Oh dear, you poor thing!” she exclaimed, a comical look on her face.

He laughed. “Well, it’s not as bad as all that. But I must admit it’s not exactly exciting in some ways.” As he uttered the words, he felt a sudden spasm of guilt at his disloyalty and blushed. That, he thought, was a horrible thing to say about his wife and their marriage.

She noticed the shadow of ill-ease that passed across his face and leaning over the table, put a hand gently on his.

“What’s the matter?” she asked softly, a concerned look in her eyes. He looked at her uncertainly. Her touch sent a thrill of excitement through him. At that moment, all he was conscious of was the subtle but heady fragrance of her perfume and the closeness of her lovely, long dark-brown hair.

He shook his head. “Oh—it’s nothing,” he said, frowning slightly.

At that moment, the waiter returned with the wine and poured out two glasses.

Chalmers nodded his head towards her plate. “Don’t forget your food,” he said with forced gaiety. “It’ll get cold. We can’t have you wasting away!”

She took her hand away from his and re-arranged her napkin on her lap. “And would you care very much if I did?” she asked provocatively, deliberately ignoring his attempt to keep things light-hearted.

He leant over the table towards her.

“Pamela,” he whispered, “you are a little witch—and the most fascinating woman I have ever known!”

She smiled guilefully. “And you—” she said softly, looking at him seductively over the top of her wine glass, “you are—” Leaving the sentence unfinished, she slowly and deliberately parted her moist lips in a long-drawn out kiss. Then, without taking her eyes off him, she drained the glass and then moved her lips caressingly over its rim leaving faint traces of lipstick on its edge.

She suddenly narrowed her eyes and unexpectedly holding the empty glass out to him, said: “Fill it!”

No one but she would have dared to speak to him like that—and no one but she, using such a firm, commanding tone, could have had such a devastating effect on him. Without saying a word, he picked up the bottle and re-filled her glass, his hand trembling slightly as he did so.

She said nothing in response—no ‘thank you’, no smile, no acknowledgement of any sort. She merely put the refilled glass to her lips and, without taking her eyes off him for an instant, slowly took a long drink.

He was mesmerised.

She put the glass down a few moments later. “What time is it?” she asked.

He pulled his eyes away from her reluctantly and glanced at his watch.

“Nearly ten, believe it or not.” He paused and shook his head. “What an incredible day this has been one way and another,” he said, giving her a meaningful look.

“And for me too,” she said, her voice soft and seductive.

Trying frantically to regain his self-control, Chalmers looked around the room.

“Time we went to bed,” he said unthinkingly and then, suddenly realising what his innocent remark implied, the colour flushed up under his sunburn. “I’m terribly sorry, I didn’t mean—” His voice trailed off lamely.

She raised her eyebrows. “Goodness me, are you really *that* tired,” she said softly and suggestively.

She leant against the back of her chair and putting her hands behind her

head, arched her back so that her white blouse stretched tightly across her full breasts.

She saw his look of suppressed desire. “You mustn’t feel guilty, Michael. After all, it’s very flattering for a woman to know she is desirable.”

The waiter, hoping to draw their attention as to the lateness of the hour, started noisily laying a nearby table for breakfast.

Pamela looked up. “Shall we go along to the lounge for coffee?”

Chalmers nodded and got up. He turned to the waiter: “We’ll take coffee in the lounge, please.”

Selecting a large, comfortable settee, they sat down next to each other, closely. There was a large bowl of red and yellow roses on the long, low, table in front of them and Pamela instinctively bent forward to smell them.

“Aren’t they *beautiful*?” she said rapturously.

He didn’t answer for several moments. “They certainly are,” he said finally, “but not when compared to you.”

She slowly turned her face towards him and then, leaning over, laid her slightly-parted lips on his.

CHAPTER 43

Gently breaking free from their impassioned kiss, Pamela pulled away breathlessly and stood up, slowly smoothing her hair. She looked down at him meaningfully.

"I'm just going to have a shower. Would you be a gentleman and escort me to my room?" she said with an enigmatic smile.

As he lamely stood up, his heart racing, she took his hand and gently led him out of the lounge onto the long, dark verandah. Turning left, they strolled, hand-in-hand, until they reached a door at the end.

She leant over and whispered in his ear: "This is my room—"

Going over to the door, she slowly turned the key in the lock. Before slipping inside, she turned to him, her eyes smouldering.

"Give me a few minutes—I won't be long, I promise," she said softly, giving him a lingering glance as she gently closed the door behind her.

Chalmers, his mind a maelstrom of conflicting thoughts and emotions, unseeingly retraced his steps back up the verandah for a short distance. Stopping for a few moments, he took several deep breaths of the cool night air in an effort to regain his composure.

Free of her seductive presence, if only for a few moments, his mind slowly began to clear. As it did so, the implications of what he was so unexpectedly becoming involved in gradually dawned on him. A wave of self-disgust swept over him.

Agitatedly, he resumed walking along the verandah towards the open french doors of the darkened dining room.

As he approached, his waiter from dinner stepped out of the shadows directly in front of him.

"You left this, *mambo*," he said, holding out the book that Chalmers had taken with him to read during his meal.

Startled by the man's sudden appearance, Chalmers stared blankly at him for a few moments then, with a murmured word of thanks, he took the proffered book and retreated in confusion, back the way he had just come.

The waiter stood and watched him for a few seconds, a knowing smile on his face, until Chalmers disappeared around the corner of the verandah.

Uncertain what to do next or where to go, Chalmers continued pacing the verandah for several moments, a prey to the violently conflicting calls of duty and desire which seethed inside him. He thought of his wife and son and, suddenly reaching a decision, he turned and strode briskly along the verandah towards Pamela's room.

He knew what he had to do.

Reaching the closed door, Chalmers turned the handle and, without knocking, walked into the room.

Pamela was standing in front of the dressing table brushing her hair. She looked around in surprise and then, slowly putting down the hairbrush, began to walk languidly towards him.

As he looked at her, he involuntarily drew in his breath, transfixed by the alluring vision.

She was wearing a long, deep-blue satin robe and elegant, high-heeled gold sandals. Only a couple of the buttons of the close-fitting garment were fastened and the fullness of her creamy breasts rose provocatively from the plunging neckline. As she slowly moved across the room towards him, her gown parted, revealing lithe, bronzed legs and a fleeting, breathtaking glimpse of filmy white lingerie stretched tightly between them.

Reaching out her arms, she placed both hands behind his head, pressing her pliant, perfumed body to his chest. With a soft murmur, she then turned her face up to him and half-closing her eyes, parted her moist lips, waiting for his kiss.

His heart started beating rapidly. He clenched his jaw grimly as he struggled vainly to resist the overwhelming passion raging in him and hold fast to the resolution he had just made.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

Without releasing her arms, Pamela turned her head and frowned, calling out: "Who is it?"

"Sorry, madam, sorry to disturb you, but I saw the boss come here just now."

Chalmers muttered under his breath and, disengaging himself, strode over to the door, opening it angrily. He immediately recognised the waiter from earlier.

“Yes, what is it now?” he asked impatiently.
“You’re wanted on the telephone, sir.”

CHAPTER 44

Even before he picked up the receiver, he knew that it could only be his wife.

"Hello?" His voice sounded gruff as he tried to disguise his nervousness.

"Is that you, darling?" Mary's voice was uncertain, hesitant.

"Yes, yes—it's me."

There was an awkward pause. "Is everything alright?" she asked.

He could detect the sudden anxiety in her voice. "Yes, of course. Everything's fine, why?"

"I don't know—you just sound different, that's all. Did I get you out of bed?"

He forced himself to laugh, trying to sound natural. "No, no," he said quickly. "It's just the phone, I expect. So—how are you, darling? How's Chris?" He realised how flat his voice must sound.

He frowned. Why couldn't they have had this conversation when he'd called earlier, he thought bitterly.

"Oh, we're fine. But that doesn't matter. How are *you* doing—I've been so worried about you," she said.

He tried to talk light-heartedly. "No, you mustn't worry. I'm alright, honestly."

"Are you sure?" she asked uncertainly.

"Promise." He gave a short laugh. "It's really just like being on holiday!" he lied.

"I'm sure it's not like being on holiday at all! It must be awful for you up there."

As he suddenly thought of Pamela, a wave of loathing swept over him. How he had always despised men who were unfaithful to their wives …

"No, it's not too bad at all. You've been listening to too many silly rumours," he said banteringly. He wanted to change the subject. "And, so, where were you when I called earlier?" he said teasingly in an attempt to sound more natural. "Gadding about with some handsome young man, I suppose!"

She giggled in delight. “I’m sorry I was out, pet. I took Chris to the cinema. He’s missing you so much, I thought it would be a nice treat for him. Would you like to speak to him? He’s simply bursting to talk to you.”

Chalmers heard faint rustles and scraping noises on the other end of the phone and then Mary’s voice, faintly in the background.

“Go on, Chris—talk to Daddy,” he heard her say encouragingly. There was a long pause.

As he waited for his son to come on the line, a renewed wave of guilt swept over him. What a fine example of a father he had turned out, he thought angrily.

“Hello, Daddy.” His son’s voice was high-pitched, nervous.

“Hello, old chap. What a lovely surprise talking to you. How’s my big boy?’”

“Fine.”

“Mummy says you’ve been to the cinema. Did you like it?”

“Yes.”

“What did you see?” He heard renewed whisperings at the other end of the line as Christopher consulted his mother.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, my little man?”

“Do you know what happened this morning?”

Chalmers smiled and listened patiently to a long, rambling story about tadpoles in the fishpond at home. Chalmers responded with the occasional comment in the right places.

Rather unexpectedly, Mary came back on the line again. “Hello, it’s me again—I’m afraid Chris has more important things to attend to at the moment,” she said with a laugh.

Chalmers chuckled affectionately.

They went on talking, but after a while, hearing him stifle an involuntary yawn, his wife broke off apologetically: “Oh, I’m so sorry. I’m being selfish—you must be exhausted. You must go straight to bed and get a good night’s sleep. Remember, I love you!”

A feeling of deep affection for her swept over him. “I love you, too, darling,” he said with true feeling. There was a moment’s silence. “I can’t wait for all this to be over and to be back home again with you and Chris,” he said.

“My poor darling. Never mind, not long to go now.”

After saying their goodbyes, Chalmers put the receiver back on the hook and made his way into the darkened lounge and, sitting down dejectedly in an armchair, lit a cigarette. He felt both physically exhausted and emotionally drained. All he wanted now was to forget everything—the war, the fear, the danger and—above all at this moment—*Pamela*.

He stubbed out his cigarette and, picking up his book, stood up wearily and made his way to his room.

He knew that, at the very least, he owed Pamela some sort of an explanation and an apology, but he felt too tired now, too worn-out, to speak to her tonight. It would have to wait until the morning.

For now, all he craved was sleep.

CHAPTER 45

Time: 08h05. December 16

Chalmers, his face drawn and pale beneath his sunburn, walked the few blocks from the hotel to the district commissioner's offices. Despite his weariness, he had hardly slept at all.

As soon as he had woken that morning, he had gone straight to Pamela's room. He desperately wanted to talk to her—to explain and apologise—but although he had knocked repeatedly, there had been no response. None of the hotel staff he asked appeared to have seen her either.

He had gone back to his room to pack, paid his bill, and walking out of the hotel, had resolutely tried to put last night's shameful affair out of his mind. But, try as he might, he couldn't help being puzzled and disappointed by her absence, and while he knew that she had every reason to be extremely angry with him, he regretted that their encounter had ended in such an abrupt, discordant manner.

As he passed along the silent, deserted street in the early morning sunshine, he reflected that, in spite of everything, he had learnt a lot—even if the lesson had been a very painful one. He also felt that, however reprehensible his behaviour may have been last night, he knew he would always remember Pamela with gratitude and deep affection. And there was nothing, absolutely nothing, for him to be ashamed of in *that*, thank God, he concluded—almost defiantly—as he turned into the grounds of the district commissioner's offices.

He made straight for the radio room.

The African operator was sitting in front of the silent transmitter, reading the morning newspaper.

"Good morning," Chalmers said to him. "Have you had the morning's report from Chitangwe Base yet?"

The operator lowered his newspaper and looked at him. "No, sir." He paused. "The other three bases have radioed in, but there's been nothing at all

from Chitangwe yet.”

Chalmers felt a tremor of dark foreboding.

He frowned. “They should have been in touch by now—they have strict instructions to report in every morning at seven, as you know. Have you tried to contact them yourself?” he asked.

The African nodded his head. “Yes, sir, several times, but they don’t answer.”

Chalmers bit his lip. Of course, there could be any number of explanations for their silence: the radio could have broken down; or perhaps Kenneth had forgotten to recharge the already depleted batteries; or—and the thought made his stomach turn—the camp might have been attacked and over-run.

Chalmers fought down the hideous image that immediately sprang to mind of dead bodies lying in the dust.

He quickly tried to reassure himself, knowing from past experience just how infuriatingly lackadaisical Kenneth could be—even under strict supervision. The most likely explanation was that, left to his own devices, the man had decided the routine call was just not worth bothering with.

Chalmers turned to the operator. “Please keep trying—it is very important.”

He went over to the door, then stopped and turned round. “If anyone wants me, please tell them that I’ve just gone for some shopping. I’ll be back in about half-an-hour.”

He strolled across to a small grocery store nearby.

Pushing a trolley slowly between the aisles, he carefully selected the items he needed from the meagre selection on display. After all, it was for these assorted tins and packets that he had risked life and limb in coming to Urungwe in the first place.

He surveyed the sparsely laden shelves despondently, the large gaps a visible reminder of the harsh economic sanctions imposed on the country by the United Nations at Britain’s request several years before.

It was a depressing sight.

He paid the bill and, picking up the heavy cardboard box in which the goods had been packed, he walked slowly and laboriously back to the radio room.

Placing the box down on the floor beside his rifle and handgrip, he turned to the operator. “Any news yet?”

The African shook his head. “No, sir. I’ve asked Hermes and Umsholo to

try and raise them."

Chalmers grunted in acknowledgement. "Good," he said, wiping the perspiration off his forehead with his handkerchief. The groceries had been heavier than he had anticipated, and the atmosphere had turned surprisingly humid.

He looked up as a messenger knocked at the open door, and his heart skipped a beat as he saw the name of the hotel where he had stayed emblazoned on the African's uniform. The man was holding a blue envelope in his hand.

"Can I help you?" Chalmers asked.

"I am looking for a Mr. …" The African stopped and examined the name on the envelope, a deep frown creasing his forehead: "Mr. Cheemers."

Chalmers smiled and held out his hand.

"Seek no further—I am Mr. Cheemers!" he said, suddenly feeling light-hearted and frivolous. The messenger looked at him, a puzzled look on his face.

As he took the envelope from him, Chalmers glanced at the name to make sure, then nodded. "Please wait. An answer may be required—I hope," he added, rather wistfully.

"Yes, sir," the messenger replied before going outside onto the verandah to wait.

With a beating heart, Chalmers nervously opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of pale blue notepaper. There were only a few lines.

> 'My dearest Michael, I am so sorry about last night, but please don't worry—I understand that you must have felt that it would have been impossible for us to pick up where we left off after your telephone call, which I imagine was from your wife.
>
> 'I shall never forget our wonderful evening together. It was magical, even if very much shorter than I had hoped!
>
> 'Perhaps, when you get back to Salisbury, we could have dinner together again sometime (with proper wine!). I do hope so, but I will leave the decision entirely in your hands, my darling—Your Pamela.'

Underneath her large, bold signature, she had added the words:

> 'Please take special care of yourself for me. I shall be thinking of you —often.'

As he read, Chalmers fancied he could almost hear her speaking to him. A smile of relief lit up his face. He read it through a second time and then, putting it back in the envelope, carefully slipped it into his shirt pocket.

He pulled out a nearby chair and taking a sheet of paper, sat down at a vacant desk and wrote:

> ‘My dearest Pamela—It is I who should apologise, but I, too, shall never forget last night. Thank you for being so wonderfully understanding.
>
> ‘As for dinner—who knows? That is then, this is now.
>
> ‘You will often be in my thoughts, I know, and I shall treasure the memory of being with you even though, sadly, we had so little time together—With deepest affection, Mike.’

“Do you have an envelope I could use, please?” he asked the operator.

The African opened a desk drawer and scratched around inside, then finding an envelope, he handed it across the desk to Chalmers.

As he folded the letter and put it inside the envelope, he became conscious of a confused babble of African voices shouting loudly somewhere outside.

Chalmers stood up and going out of the room, went over to the messenger and handed him his reply.

“Please make sure the madam gets this as soon as possible,” he said, giving him a tip then, stepping off the verandah, Chalmers walked briskly round the side of the building to where Chitangwe’s two vehicles were parked.

To his surprise, he saw that not only were all the DSAs present and smartly dressed but—to his relief—not one appeared to be drunk!

The business of loading up, although an extremely noisy and exuberant affair, was got through quickly and surprisingly efficiently. In fact, Chalmers could hardly believe his luck. By five minutes to nine, both vehicles— the lorry and his own Leopard—were ready to move off. After a final, last-minute check, he went back to the radio room to collect his things and get a final report.

The radio operator’s face told him all he needed to know—neither Hermes nor Umsholo had been able to contact Chitangwe.

Chalmers walked back to the waiting vehicles with an ominous feeling in his stomach. He glanced skywards. The air had grown heavy and sultry and there was a strange, faint, coppery-blue tinge to the sky. As he reached the

Leopard, Joshua came up to him. He, too, was looking at the sky with narrowed eyes.

"It doesn't look very good, does it, Joshua?"

The DSA shook his head. "The rains—they will come today, boss." He paused. "I think the journey will be a long and very wet one," he said, adding with a broad smile: "I think we swim!"

Chalmers laughed. "Alright, Mr. Cheerful. I think the sooner we get started then, the better!"

He walked over to the lorry where the men were already sitting back-to-back. He was welcomed with an outburst of cheerful greetings.

Chalmers smiled up at them. "Good morning, you horrible lot. And what's this? You're all back on time!"

They laughed delightedly, calling down with a chorus of light-hearted, disjointed quips and ribald comments relating to their night's experiences. Whilst Chalmers did not relish the sordid accounts involving their drunken shenanigans in the local *shabeens*[48], he made an effort to remember that this was their life and a night spent in debauchery in the compounds was as satisfying to them as other things were to him.

Anyway, he reflected dryly, who was he to judge? Look at *his* evening, *his* behaviour!

He listened good-humouredly for a few minutes, bantering trivialities with them then, clapping his hands together, he said: "Right, I can't spend all day listening to your revolting stories. Are you all ready?"

There were cries of: "Yes, boss—we're ready!"

"OK, listen carefully—there's to be no messing around, alright? We've got to get back as quickly as we can. There's been no news from the base, so I want you all to be prepared. And have your rain capes ready, too—I think you're going to need 'em!"

Chalmers walked back to the Leopard and climbed inside. Strapping on the seatbelt, he turned and grinned at Joshua who was sitting in his usual position slightly behind and to his left. "And what about you, Joshua—did you have a good time?"

Joshua grimaced. "No, boss. I had plenty trouble with my girlfriend." He shook his head and whistled softly. "Big, *big* trouble." He paused. "Ai, ai, women are no good, boss," he added, shaking his head sombrely.

Chalmers chuckled. “Oh, I don’t know, Joshua. They’re very nice sometimes. But take my advice: if you ever get married again, don’t have anything to do with girlfriends!” He paused. “They’re too tiring for one thing __”

Joshua grinned. “Yes, boss, they are,” he agreed with feeling.

Chalmers switched on the engine and released the handbrake.

“Right, now let’s forget about women and get back to the war,” he said jauntily.

Joshua nodded in agreement. “A good idea, boss. It’s more peaceful!”

CHAPTER 46

Moving out onto the quiet, tree-lined road, the two vehicles made their way to the main road to Salisbury nearby. Passing a small service station, Chalmers absent-mindedly noticed that, like so many others these days, it was abandoned.

A large, black mongrel—a stray, he guessed—was lying, panting heavily with half-open mouth, in the elongated shadow of the garage's solitary petrol pump. As they rounded the corner, the dog stood up and barked at them.

The turn-off to Hermes was about eight kilometres further down the main road and as Chalmers swung the Leopard onto the deeply-corrugated dirt track, he half-turned towards the DSAs and called out: "Seatbelts on everyone!"

The men settled themselves down for the long, bumpy journey. They had nothing to look at except their companions facing them or the cramped, dark interior of the Leopard. In the already dusty, hot and noisy vehicle, conversation was too much of an effort.

Despite the strain of driving on such a bad surface, as the weary kilometres clocked slowly by, Chalmers found his thoughts drifting, lulled into sleepy inattention by the heat and the flat, uninteresting countryside through which they were travelling. His eyes grew heavy and a warm, drowsy sensation slowly crept over him. Realising that he was almost falling asleep at the wheel, he pulled the Leopard over onto the side of the track and switched off the engine.

"Come on, you guys," he said, releasing his seat belt, "we'll take a short break."

The DSAs clambered out and Chalmers, following them, started walking up and down briskly, swinging his arms around in an effort to overcome his lethargy. After a few moments, he stopped and looked northwards in the direction of Hermes.

Heavy dark clouds were massing in the distance. The tall, dried grass that covered the surrounding ground and the few stunted trees were perfectly

motionless. He looked around him, suddenly conscious of the oppressive silence that lay like a thick blanket over the hushed, yellow-brown landscape.

Even the Africans stood around in silent immobility.

The stifling atmosphere made Chalmers feel claustrophobic and as he looked at the bluish-tinged range of hills, small and low on the rim of the horizon, a feeling of unease gripped him. Africa in the raw—vast, brooding, and elemental—always made him feel apprehensive.

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped the perspiration off his face and then, turning abruptly, walked back to the Leopard.

"Come on, time we were off," he said to the DSAs with forced cheerfulness.

*****

By the time the small convoy drove into the police camp at Hermes a few minutes after mid-day, the sky overhead was already beginning to darken. A thin, silvery sheen of diaphanous water vapour misted the sun, suffusing everything in a sickly wash of pale light.

As he climbed out of the Leopard, Chalmers heard the soft, distant rumble of thunder low on the horizon.

The white Alsatian slowly padded over to him. Absent-mindedly stroking its head, Chalmers looked around him while the DSAs made their way to the African quarters at the rear of the building.

Almost immediately, he noticed that the Pookie had been moved since yesterday and was now standing, forlornly, beneath a large jacaranda tree. Its wheel-less rear axle was resting on two small piles of bricks.

He swore softly to himself.

As he turned away from the vehicle in disgust, he heard a shout and, glancing towards the Charge Office, saw Wally and Steve Bishop, the camp's officer-in-charge, both barefoot and in shorts, picking their way gingerly towards him, glasses of beer in hand. He started walking towards them.

"Well, it's alright for some of us, I must say!" he said. His voice seemed unnaturally loud in the hushed stillness.

"Too true," said Wally, smiling broadly. "Life in the tropics is sheer hell, isn't it?"

Without waiting to be introduced, Steve held out his hand to Chalmers.

“Glad to meet you, Mike. By the way, sorry I wasn’t here yesterday when you came,” he said in a friendly voice.

Shaking his hand, Chalmers immediately noticed the younger man’s piercing, dark-blue eyes.

“Let’s go and sit on the *stoep*[49],” Steve went on. “We’ve got a cold one waiting for you,” he added with a smile, lifting his glass slightly.

Accidentally treading on a bougainvillaea off-cut, he winced and, balancing unsteadily on one foot, leant down and, with his free hand, pulled a large thorn out of his heel. ”Ouch! Was everything alright on the way in?” he asked, grimacing slightly with pain as he put his foot back down on the ground.

“Yes, it was fine, thanks, Steve. No problems at all—except I nearly fell asleep at the wheel!” he added with a laugh.

They sat on the small *stoep* in wicker chairs and talked desultorily as they drank their beer.

“Well, young Wally,” Chalmers said after a while, turning to the young man. “I saw the Pookie over there. I assume you haven’t been able to fix it yet?”

Wally leant forward and put his glass down on the small, drink-stained wooden table.

“We managed to clear the fuel blockage but now the bloody brakes have gone. I think it’s the master cylinder. Steve’s radioed in for a new kit, but God knows when—or if—it’ll ever come.”

Chalmers tutted.

“The bloody thing is ready for the scrap-heap, if you ask me,” said Steve, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Chalmers tapped his glass with the nail of his forefinger. There was a silence.

“Well,” he said after a while, looking at Wally. “I suppose I’ll just have to make do without you and the Pookie from now on—” He paused and then with a grin, added: “That’ll be a pleasure in a way!”

Wally jeered in derision.

But for all Chalmers’ bantering, he was genuinely disheartened. While the loss of the Pookie was a serious blow, losing Wally’s light-hearted company was, in many ways, a far greater deprivation to him.

“By the way, Mike,” said Steve, interrupting his train of thought, “I received a sitrep from JOC HQ[50] a short while ago. According to the latest estimates, they reckon there are about 260 terrs in the Umsholo TTL[51] and at least 300 to 400 in and around the Chitangwe area.” He paused, and then, putting down his glass, looked over at Chalmers with a wide grin, adding: “That’s a hell of a lot of the bastards! So, one way and another, even without Wally, you won’t exactly be short of company up there!”

Chalmers laughed good-naturedly. “I think I’d even prefer *him* to the terrorists—and that’s saying a lot!”

Wally laughed. “But it’s been fun, hey?” he said, looking at Chalmers. “I’m going to miss you, Dad—despite everything!”

Chalmers gave him a warm smile. “Me too, Wally—me too,” he replied with feeling.

Steve, a little embarrassed at the warm exchange, took a long drink, emptying his glass. He put it down on the table.

“Headquarters seem to think that the gooks will really get going once the rains start,” he went on. “It covers up their tracks.” He looked towards the dark, threatening clouds that were slowly and gradually moving across the sky towards them. “And judging by those clouds over there, that shouldn’t be too long now!” He looked back at Chalmers. “Oh, by the way, Mike,” he added, suddenly remembering: “I’ve got a spare Bren for you, if you want it.”

Chalmers raised his eyebrows and smiled broadly in surprise. To Chalmers, the weapon was worth its weight in gold.

“That’s fantastic, Steve.” he exclaimed enthusiastically. “Thanks a million.”

“Well, you really ought to thank the district commissioner—or, rather his secretary, I gather. Can you believe it, the old boy rang personally and asked me to let you have it!” said Steve.

Wally raised his eyebrows. “Nice to have friends in high places!”

Chalmers grinned broadly and mentally sent Claire a blessing. What a wonderful Christmas present—although hardly the usual token of peace and goodwill to all men! he thought with amusement.

“Incidentally, Steve,” he said, coming to the subject uppermost in his thoughts. “I’m helluva worried about the base. Have they contacted you at all this morning, by any chance?”

Steve tilted his chair and, balancing his weight on the back legs, rocked backwards and forwards.

He shook his head. “No. As a matter of fact, I tried to raise them myself earlier, but there was no response. However,” he went on, “I expect everything’s ok. Probably your radio operator didn’t recharge the batteries or something. It’s happened more than once before!” he said with a chuckle.

Chalmers nodded. “Well, I certainly hope so. I don’t fancy getting there and finding a pile of smoking ruins!” he said, disguising his anxiety with a little laugh. “Besides, I must say I’ve got a very good bunch with me there—I’d miss them!”

“Yes, we’ve heard all about what you’ve been doing,” said Steve. “It sounds as if you’ve got the Scots Guards over there with you!”

“I’ll say,” said Wally with a laugh. “Aye, an’ this is Captain Jamie MacSixpence, ye ken, fro’ the Hielands of Balachulish and Chitangwe, mon!” he said, perfectly mimicking a broad Scottish accent.

They all burst out laughing.

Chalmers looked over at his young friend. Yes, he was going to miss Wally very much.

Steve stood up and, making his way inside, called out: “Another beer for you, Mike?”

Chalmers glanced at his watch. “No thanks, Steve. The sooner we get moving the better, I think. I don’t like the look of the weather.” He turned to Wally. “And some of us,” he went on, “have got more important things to do than just sitting around, drinking beer all day!”

Wally shrugged his shoulders. “Someone’s got to be the brains behind this war. The easy stuff is left to ancient guys like you who haven’t a bloody clue about anything—especially mortars!”

Steve came back bearing a couple of bottles. He had overheard the remark. As he put the bottles down on the table, he grinned. “Yes, I heard about that mortar business! What actually happened there, Mike? I gather the place was practically razed to the ground!”

Chalmers laughed. “God, the whole country seems to know about that. I’m never going to live it down!”

He stood up. “I’m sure Wally will tell you all about it, Steve,” he said with a chuckle. “And get him also to tell you about *his* gallant part in it all.” He looked at Wally, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “He’s the one who

really deserves to be mentioned in despatches for exceptional bravery under fire!”

Wally grinned sheepishly. “Come on, Steve, for Christ’s sake—let’s get rid of this guy!” he said, standing up.

They all laughed.

“Well, thanks for everything, Steve,” Chalmers said. “I’ll probably be seeing you sometime again,” he added as they shook hands.

Steve smiled. “That would be great, Mike—come over any time you like,” he said, adding: “I’ll just go and get the Bren organised for you.”

After he had gone, Wally turned to Chalmers. “I’m hell of a sorry about the Pookie, Mike. But I promise, I’ll be along as soon as it’s fixed. The spares may only take a couple of days or so to arrive, fingers crossed!”

“Not to worry,” said Chalmers. “I know it’s not your fault at all. It’s just damn bad luck.”

They walked down the steps of the verandah. As they stood waiting for Steve, Chalmers turned to Wally and playfully poked him in the stomach. “Anyway, there’s *one* good thing to come out of all this—at least I’ll get more to eat without you scoffing up everything like a giant vacuum-cleaner!”

CHAPTER 47

As they approached ‘Landmine Alley’, Chalmers slipped the gears into neutral and let the Leopard roll gently to a creaking halt. He sat back in his seat and looked in the side view mirror, watching as the lorry slowed down at a bend in the road and stopped some distance behind them under the shade of a large tree over-hanging the road.

He lit a cigarette and then, unfastening his safety belt, stood up and, lifting the canvas roof covering, squeezed his head out.

He looked towards Devil’s Pass and, for a few moments, watched in fascination as vivid flashes of lightning zigzagged across its fast-darkening heights. Every now and again, there came the sound of deep echoing rolls of thunder.

After sniffing the air for a moment, he pulled his head in again and sat down. “Well, you were right,” he said, turning to look at Joshua. “I think we’ll be swimming soon!” he said with a grin.

He took his handkerchief out of his pocket and was about to wipe the perspiration from his forehead when, glancing out of the windscreen, he caught a sudden fleeting movement in the tall elephant[52] grass bordering the side of the road some distance ahead.

He froze. An animal? Bird? Or a terrorist moving into position?

He narrowed his eyes and sat thinking for a few moments then, turning round in his seat, he looked at the DSAs.

“I just saw something move on the side of the road further on,” he said quietly. The men stiffened. “It might have been nothing—or it might be an ambush,” he continued, “but we can’t take a chance.”

Several heads nodded.

For a few moments, he sat lost in thought. All eyes were fixed on him. Then he straightened his shoulders.

“Right,” he said, coming to a decision. ”Here’s what we’re going to do. You’ll all stay here, but I want you to get out of the Leopard and pretend that

we've just stopped for a few minutes for a break. That should fool them."

He waited a moment to let his words sink in.

"Can we smoke, boss?" Chikono asked. "I want one badly—especially now!"

"Yes, smoke as much as you want. If it *is* a bunch of terrorists, do anything that'll make it look as if we don't know they're there. Just sit around and try to talk and act naturally."

Sixpence looked at him anxiously. "Boss, must we take our rifles with us?"

Despite his tension, Chalmers eyes flickered briefly with amusement. "Of course! What's Killer Sixpence without his rifle?" Several of the DSAs laughed. "But," resumed Chalmers, his voice serious again, "make sure all your safety catches are in the *off* position—you may need to use your rifles in a hurry!" He looked from one to the other. "Now, are you all clear as to what you've got to do?"

There were murmurs of assent.

"Right then," said Chalmers, leaning over and grabbing hold of his rifle from the side of the driving seat. "In the meanwhile, I'm going to go and get the others chaps from the lorry and see if we can creep up behind the terrs and give them a little surprise!" He turned to Joshua. "I want you to come with me, ok?"

Joshua smiled broadly.

"*Yes, boss!*" he said, his eyes sparkling in anticipation.

Leaving the Leopard, the two men started walking towards the parked lorry. As they drew near, the DSAs who were still sitting in the back, started clambering down noisily to the ground. Chalmers put a warning finger to his lips.

"Shhh!" The urgency in his voice made them instantly attentive. "I think there may be an ambush down the road there." He inclined his head slightly to his left. "Now, pay close attention—I've got a little plan!"

The men, their faces set, gathered around him, listening intently.

"We'll move into the grass here for about 100 metres, and then, when I give the signal, we'll make a 90 degree turn to the left and make our way down until we're directly behind where I thought I saw the terrs. Once we're there —" he said, pausing significantly, "well, I hope I don't have to tell you what you've got to do!"

There were muffled laughs.

Chalmers, reassured by the men's spirited response, looked at them with a smile. "I know we've practised this sort of thing plenty of times, but *this* time, we can't afford to make any mistakes so, are you all absolutely sure you know what you've got to do?"

"Yes, boss!" said Joshua, shouldering his rifle. "We know *exactly* what to do!"

A loud roll of thunder filled the air and Chalmers turned and looked up at the rapidly approaching storm clouds and then glanced towards Devil's Pass. The trees on the lower slopes were already bending wildly in the wind, and the higher slopes—now a cold, deep-grey colour—were becoming blurred and indistinct in the torrential rain which was sweeping across them in dark, grey sheets.

He turned to the DSAs. "Quick, we haven't got much time! Get off the road, and spread out in an extended line left and right of me. I'll be in the centre," he ordered.

They swiftly took up their positions and moved into the head-high grass that was now swaying violently before the on-coming wind. Chalmers kept his eyes firmly fixed on the wall of grass in front of him. As he trod it down, flurries of small grey grasshoppers jumped frantically aside, leaping from stem to stem. The ground under his feet was rough and uneven and dotted with small anthills causing him to stumble several times.

Suddenly the grass covering came to an end, and Chalmers found himself on the edge of a narrow, dried-up stream. He stepped down into the bed, glancing quickly up and down to his right and left. As he did so, Joshua appeared out of the grass a few metres away, followed by the other DSAs who were spaced out at regular intervals along the length of the stream on both sides of him.

Chalmers extended his left arm and, moving it slowly up and down as a signal to the DSAs, turned and started walking down the narrow gully.

Although the wind had turned icy cold, Chalmers found that he was sweating profusely. It had suddenly become very dark. He glanced upwards. As he did so, a blinding flash of lightning seared across the sky just ahead of him, illuminating everything in a lurid, bluish-silvery flood of incandescent light. It was followed almost immediately by a tremendous clap of thunder which crackled dryly, and then, unnervingly, stopped abruptly as if cut-off in mid-course. The wind suddenly dropped and for a few ominous seconds,

there was complete stillness. This was followed by a second flash of lightning of such intense brilliance that Chalmers instinctively closed his eyes tightly.

As he tentatively re-opened them, he became aware of a sinister, deep-throated roar that grew in volume. Instinctively, he realised that a cyclone was rapidly bearing down on them. He watched in fascination as a high, broad-fronted bank of swirling dust, leaves, twigs and small branches tore savagely across the flat countryside towards them, the frayed edges of the inky-black clouds trailing down in ragged, wispy tatters.

Hurriedly glancing up the riverbed, Chalmers saw the DSAs frantically diving for cover into the grass on either side, their scrambling figures lit up in garish silhouettes by the now-continuous streaks of lightning.

Before he had a chance to react, the violent dust storm struck him with convulsive force. Chalmers reeled backwards and, raising his arm to shield his face from the stinging debris, staggered out of the riverbed and threw himself headlong onto the grassy verge.

At that moment, the clouds burst open, unleashing a torrential downpour.

The rains had finally arrived.

CHAPTER 48

Within seconds, Chalmers' clothes were saturated, and he was shivering with cold. He lifted his head quickly and looked around. Everything had disappeared, obliterated by the impenetrable curtain of rain that, every now and again, was momentarily illuminated by dazzling, electric-blue flashes of lightning.

The savage ferocity of the storm stunned him and he found it difficult to think coherently. One thing was abundantly clear to him, though—any chance they might have had of catching the terrorists had now gone. He might as well try and find the DSAs and get back to the vehicles, he decided. There was no point in staying where he was.

He struggled to his feet and, gripping his rifle, staggered back into the riverbed. It was already knee-deep in swirling, muddy water from the flash flood, its surface churned up by the force of the torrential downpour.

He waded into the middle and, stepping on a large submerged stone, almost fell as it unexpectedly shifted under his weight. He raised his free hand in an effort to steady himself, stumbled again and half fell. He would have sprawled full-length had his arm not been suddenly grabbed in a strong, firm grip. He looked up, blinking hard to clear the rain from his eyes and saw the bedraggled figure of Joshua standing beside him, the water streaming from his wide-brimmed hat.

"Thanks," he shouted above the roar of the storm.

He took a few more steps and then stopped again. He turned to Joshua. "It's pointless going on!" he bellowed. "You get the men—" He broke off as a tremendous flash of lightning rent the sky. "You get the men … from … your side. I'll … fetch the … others."

He saw Joshua nod his head.

Chalmers raised his arm. "We'll … we'll meet here," he shouted, pointing to the ground. "OK?"

Joshua nodded again.

They struggled apart, slowly inching their separate ways up the river in

opposite directions, within seconds becoming shadowy, vague blurs in the torrential rain.

Chalmers found his men further up on the bank. Drenched and shivering with cold, they sat huddled together in numbed misery, forlorn expressions on their shining, wet faces. Beckoning them to follow, he set off back down the swirling water towards the rendezvous with Joshua, his rifle slung over his shoulder.

He caught a glimpse of vague, shadowy figures ahead.

Good! he thought with relief, Joshua had managed to round up the rest of the men. But as he strained his eyes to see through the rain, he suddenly realised that the figures that he had seen in that split-second, instead of coming towards him, had been moving diagonally across the river. As the truth dawned on him, he tensed, his heart racing.

It was the terrorists!

Turning instantly, he waved his arm vigorously to the DSAs who were following him and, splashing and stumbling to the bank on his left, grabbed a tuft of over-hanging grass and heaved himself up the muddy, slippery side.

As he stood up, he swept his eyes over the wide expanse of desolate, waterlogged ground before him. There was no sight of the terrorists.

A wave of intense disappointment swept over him, swiftly followed by a surge of anger. He might as well let the terrs know that they were on to them! Raising his rifle, he slipped the catch onto repeat fire and, nestling the stock into his shoulder, blindly fired nine or ten rounds into the bush a few hundred metres ahead. The sharp recoils of the rifle hurt his shoulder, yet in some strange way, the firing eased the tension.

The DSAs who, like him, had clambered up onto the riverbank were only too happy to follow his example. Gleefully and recklessly, they fired into the distance until their magazines were empty.

Chalmers watched a moment and then, giving them a signal, climbed back down into the swollen river.

A peal of thunder rolled across the sky, but to Chalmers, its volume seemed less intense and it now had a muffled quality to it. The rain, too, although still heavy, was easing, and the wind had become less violent.

Standing knee-deep in the middle of the racing water, Chalmers looked left down the riverbed and saw Joshua and the other men trudging disconsolately towards him. It was obvious that they had seen nothing of the terrorists. After

a few brief words, they all made their way back to the road.

They came out onto it at a point about 20 metres in front of the Leopard. Keeping carefully to the edge of the track to avoid stepping on any new landmines the terrorists may have laid before the storm, Chalmers walked quickly to the silent vehicle, banging on the bodywork and shouting to get the attention of the DSAs inside.

The side canvas flap was lifted cautiously, and two big, startled eyes looked down at him for a moment. Chalmers climbed onto the rear wheel and tiredly pulled himself up and waited for the rear door to be unfastened. It was gingerly pushed open. As he stood there, a large puddle of water formed at his feet.

Hira, who was sitting right next to the door, looked at him and then at the widening puddle.

“Boss—you’re wet!” he exclaimed.

Chalmers stared at him, torn between exasperation and amusement. “Don’t worry, Hira, it’s just sweat!”

CHAPTER 49

A few moments later …

As Chalmers adjusted his seatbelt, he looked down the long length of ‘Landmine Alley’ and eyed the large, lake-like stretches of water covering much of the road and surrounding countryside. After a few moments’ thoughtful silence, he leant back in his seat and, speaking more to himself than anyone, muttered: “If you ask me, a boat would be of more use right now than a bloody Leopard!”

He started the engine. “Anyway,” he said, drawing in a deep breath and releasing the handbrake, “to hell with the mines. Let’s go home!” *If,* that is, we still have one to go to! he thought sardonically.

Unusually for him, a mood of almost fatalistic resignation had taken hold of him. Apart from his worries about what had happened at the base, he realised that, no matter how carefully he picked his way along the road, the slightest turn of the wheel could detonate a mine at any moment. After the emotional turmoil of the past few days, though, he was now almost too tired to care anymore. Either they hit one or they didn’t—that was all there was to it! he mused, mentally shrugging his shoulders.

However, it wasn’t as bad as he had anticipated although, not being able to see the innumerable deep potholes in the road, it proved to be a far bumpier ride than the one *into* Urungwe the day before—and that had been bad enough! But, the sky was beginning to clear and, looking up and out of the windscreen, he could already see several patches of soft, blue sky.

At a point roughly halfway down ‘Landmine Alley’, they came across a wide expanse of dirty water lying across the entire road. Chalmers immediately recognised it as being the spot where Wally had detonated the two mines on their way in. He slowed down and drove carefully onto the muddy verge bordering the large, water-filled crater. As he passed round it, he noticed through the side window, the clear-cut reflections of the clouds on its shiny, metallic-coloured surface. He accelerated, and as the rear wheels

spun frantically in the thick mud, they sent up a fusillade of small lumps that banged loudly against the Leopard's underside.

With engine racing, the Leopard gained speed and, sliding drunkenly, bounced back onto the road.

As they drove on and the minutes slowly slipped by, Chalmers suddenly realised with rising spirits that they were now nearing the end of 'Landmine Alley'.

Only one obstacle delayed them.

As they approached the end of the notorious stretch of road, Chalmers saw the msasa tree under which they had parked after the descent from Devil's Pass the day before. One of its large branches had broken off and was now lying across the road.

Although terrorists frequently blocked roads when preparing to ambush vehicles, given the ferocity of the recent storm, this time there was no doubt in Chalmers' mind that it was purely due to natural causes. As he studied the tree, he could clearly see where the branch had been wrenched off by the tremendous winds, high up beyond reach.

He pulled up close to it and, unstrapping himself, got up.

"Come on, you chaps, you've got some work to do."

As the men clambered out, Chalmers stood for a few moments looking back down the road at the approaching lorry. It was moving fast and sending up sheets of water. The driver changed gears and, with a loud squealing of brakes, the lorry slithered dangerously before finally coming to a standstill a few metres behind the Leopard.

Chalmers walked over to it and looked up at the bedraggled Africans who began emerging from under their waterproof capes. Despite the extreme discomfort of being exposed to the cold wind, they were full of high spirits and immediately started talking and joking as they carelessly jumped down into the puddles, splashing each other with jocular indifference.

"And did you all enjoy your swim back there?" Chalmers called out.

There were loud cries of derision.

"No, boss," he heard Sewera say. "I'm not a bloody crocodile! I don't like water."

Chalmers chuckled. "So I've noticed! I imagine it's the first decent wash any of you have had in months!"

They laughed uproariously.

Following Chalmers' instructions, the men quickly dragged the massive branch onto the side of the road, and then taking a brief cigarette-break, they stood around talking and laughing.

After a few minutes, Chalmers flicked his cigarette away and started walking back to the Leopard.

"Right, let's go!" he shouted.

*****

The drive up Devil's Pass was slow work, and every inch of the way required Chalmers' total concentration and strength to prevent the Leopard from slipping backwards down the steep, mud-covered slopes.

However, after what seemed to Chalmers like an eternity, they reached the top of the Pass. He wearily brought the Leopard to a standstill in a clearing and sat silent for a few moments. Then he undid his safety belt, reached for his rifle and stood up. Picking his way over the legs of the DSAs, he undid the back door and climbed down onto the soggy ground. He looked back at the Africans.

"We'll wait for the lorry, but don't forget your rifles—there's not much chance of an ambush here, but you never know," he said, glancing around.

Craving a moment to himself, he slowly strolled over to the opposite side of the road and, selecting a convenient rock, sat down, his rifle resting across his knees.

He turned his head and looked back down towards 'Landmine Alley'—now a small, thin ribbon—and beyond to the rolling plains which swept away towards Hermes. A heavy darkness still covered the tiny-looking trees and wide stretches of sodden grasslands as the retreating storm slowly moved away into the distance.

Suddenly the sun broke through the scudding clouds overhead, flooding the cold, sombre hills of Devil's Pass in a warm, rich, golden light.

Looking up, Chalmers saw a brilliant rainbow arched across the sky, and above it, an eagle, its wings perfectly motionless, was soaring majestically higher and higher in slow, wheeling circles.

Chalmers turned and looked around him. The nearby trees sparkled and flashed in the sunlight while, from below, he could just hear the faint sound of rushing water as hundreds of newly-formed streams splashed over the

rocks hidden in the low-lying gullies.

Suddenly, a cold shadow fell across the ground in front of him as a large, dark cloud covered the sun. Instantly, the air grew chill and he shivered slightly. The colours immediately drained away from the landscape, and at almost the same moment, he became aware of the harsh, high-pitched whine of the approaching lorry as it slowly laboured up the last stretch of road to the top of the Pass.

It was time to move on.

“Damn!” he muttered.

CHAPTER 50

While Chalmers sat on the heights of Devil's Peak, a few kilometres further down the road, a large group of terrorists was moving stealthily through the sodden bush. Reaching the Chitangwe–Hermes road, they fanned out and took up firing positions in readiness to ambush the two returning vehicles.

Black Satan had chosen his spot well.

To the rear of them, the bush-covered ground stretched away to a series of densely-treed kopjes. To their right, the road, curving gently down a slight hill, straightened out abruptly before crossing a short, narrow, low-level concrete bridge. The surface of the crossing was submerged beneath a thin sheet of sluggish water from the stream which, swollen by the recent storm, had flooded its narrow banks.

Across from the bridge, the road climbed a short, steep incline before levelling out for the last few kilometres of its run-in past Chitangwe base camp.

Black Satan squatted in the wet grass and surveyed the terrain with satisfaction. Noticing a large boulder a couple of metres away from him, he heaved himself up and crouching low, moved along towards the bridge near to where his lieutenant, Aaron Letson, was lying concealed in long grass bordering the road.

Letson looked round as Black Satan flopped down nearby.

"Hey, Letson," the leader said softly.

"What's up, Blacko?" Aaron asked, raising his eyebrows enquiringly.

Black Satan looked round him. The place was perfect and yet, despite this, he was worried. It was true that the number of men under his command had almost doubled with the recent addition of the new recruits from Mozambique, but they were inexperienced, badly trained and of poor quality. Their hearts were not in the struggle and morale was low.

Black Satan shifted himself uneasily. "D'you think we should attack the convey?"

Letson stared at him in astonishment.

“Sure, why not? It’s dead right here. They won’t stand a chance,” he said confidently.

Black Satan scowled impatiently. “Think, man, think! If Moyo attacked the base last night, the security forces will be all over the bloody place—some of ‘em may even be coming in the convoy with the pigs from Urungwe now!” He paused, thinking hard. “*We’re* the ones that wouldn’t stand a chance—especially if the bloody choppers[53] are anywhere around as well!” he added.

Letson picked a piece of grass and started chewing it thoughtfully. It was a frightening picture.

“I hadn’t thought of that.” He half rose on his elbows and looked at Black Satan. “I reckon we should beat it, man,” he said.

Black Satan nodded his head. “Yeah, that’s what I think. It’s too risky.” He pushed his black sunglasses back on his nose. “Let’s go and pay those bloody missionaries a visit instead. It’s safer!”

He got to his knees. “Go tell the others we’re pulling out.”

Letson stood up and, crouching low, disappeared into the surrounding bushes.

Feeling relieved, Black Satan slowly got to his feet.

Suddenly he stiffened as he heard the muffled sound of approaching vehicles. Heart pounding, he shouted to the others and raced for cover.

From scattered positions along the side of the road, men suddenly emerged and, abandoning all caution, scattered pell-mell in panic.

As they ran off, Chalmers’ Leopard, closely followed by the lorry, came over the crest of the hill.

Almost immediately, one of the men sitting on the open back of the lorry spotted the fleeing terrorists. He shouted. The vehicles came to an abrupt stop and, immediately, an intense volley of rifle fire streamed out from the lorry into the backs of the fast-disappearing terrorists.

At the same moment, the rear door of the Leopard clanged open and five DSAs leapt out, followed a few seconds later, by the white driver. Terse orders were rapped out. The men on the back of the lorry stopped firing and, jumping down, ran off into the bushes in pursuit. They disappeared from sight.

The silence that followed was succeeded a few minutes later by the distant

sound of shouts and firing.

A slender brown buck leapt into the air and with wild, staring eyes, bounded in long, graceful leaps across the road in front of the deserted vehicles.

CHAPTER 51

"Well, that's one less, at least!" said Chalmers grimly as he settled himself down in the driving seat of the Leopard and snapped home the clip of the safety belt.

One of the DSAs—it was impossible in the melee to know which—had managed to shoot one of the fleeing terrorists. Admittedly, it had probably been sheer luck but, under the circumstances, the chances of making a kill at all had been almost negligible.

However, what had surprised and delighted Chalmers most of all was that, not only had his men spotted the terrorists almost immediately, but they had reacted with lightning speed and a degree of discipline that he hadn't expected.

As he thought about the incident, he suddenly felt an unexpected sense of pride in them all.

He smiled to himself and shook his head. Now he could *really* think about going after Black Satan in earnest. Although killing was abhorrent to him—no matter what form it took—each time he learnt of yet another bestial act of brutality on the part of Mugabe's thugs, a surge of deep-seated hatred welled-up in him.

But at the moment, only one thing disturbed his mood of quiet satisfaction—the fear of what he might find at the base.

He turned to Joshua. "I've been thinking: before we actually drive into camp, we'd better stop and see if anything looks suspicious first." Noticing the puzzled look on the African's face, he added: "You never know—the place might be swarming with terrorists."

Joshua opened his eyes wide in surprise. "I'd forgotten about that, boss!"

Chalmers chuckled.

He drove the last few kilometres towards the camp in preoccupied silence. Fears aside, he found he was looking forward to getting back. With a certain amount of disbelief, he realised that the place, as comfortless as it was, had almost become 'home' to him now and in his present exhausted state, the

mere thought of his quiet, bare room filled him with pleasurable anticipation.

The last two days had been nerve-wracking in every way, he reflected, and by the look of things, it was going to get a lot worse before his stint of duty at Chitangwe was over.

The sudden, sharp report of a stone striking the undersides of the leopard jerked him out of his short reverie. He glanced around at the countryside and seeing the long, low outline of Assegai Kopje on his right, realised with a sense of surprise that they were now almost there.

He changed gears, braked, and swinging slowly off the road towards the low kopje, eased the Leopard across an open stretch of uneven ground. He looked in the rear mirror and watched as the lorry came to a standstill on the road, the driver uncertain whether or not he was intended to follow.

Chalmers switched off the engine.

“Come on, Joshua, let’s go and have a look,” he said briskly.

As he made his way down to the end of the vehicle, he said: “You lot stay here. Joshua and I are just going to give the camp a recce.”

Signalling to the lorry driver to stay where he was, the two men then set off towards the hill. The ground around the base of the kopje was muddy and waterlogged, and as they picked their way towards the rising ground in front of them, their feet made soft, sucking sounds on the patchy clumps of grass stubble which, under their weight, oozed dirty, muddy water.

Reaching the hill, their pace slackened as they started the gentle climb. After a few minutes, they stopped by a small outcrop of granite boulders that littered the top of the small elevation.

They looked towards the camp.

In the late afternoon sun, the guard tower and surrounding concrete bunkers were softly shadowed in the mellow, golden light. A thin column of grey smoke was drifting lazily in the still, clear air.

They both looked at the tranquil scene in silence.

“Well, it certainly looks peaceful enough,” said Chalmers thoughtfully. “At least it’s still in one piece,” he added, “but I’d give anything to have a pair of binoculars!”

Joshua sniffed and then, closing his eyes and bending forward, sneezed violently.

Chalmers looked at him “If you’re getting a cold, I don’t think you’d better go out on patrol,” he said. “The terrs would hear you a mile away!”

Joshua smiled. “Yes, boss!” he said. “I’ll stay in bed for the rest of the week!”

Chalmers laughed. “Come on, you idiot,” he said. “Let’s get moving.”

They walked back to the Leopard, climbed in and drove back to the road.

Pulling up alongside the lorry, Chalmers stood up and, pushing his head through the canvas top, shouted to the driver: “When you get to the end of the airstrip, stop and wait until I give you a signal that it’s safe for you to drive in —and tell your guys to have their rifles ready!”

The driver nodded and started up the lorry’s engine.

Chalmers sat down and turned to the DSAs. “I want you all to stand up and have just the tips of your rifles resting on the top where the canvas joins the sides there.” He pointed above their heads. “I’m going to drive into the camp very slowly. If I see any sign of terrorists, I’ll tell you and you must open fire immediately, ok?”

The Africans grinned gleefully.

“But,” he warned, “for God’s sake, be careful. Only fire if I tell you. We don’t want you killing any of our own guys,” he added with a wry grin.

As the Leopard rounded the sharp corner that marked the start of the final approach to the airstrip, Chalmers shot a quick glance at the small cluster of mud huts of Sapere kraal that nestled at the side of the road.

Ominously, there was no one in sight.

He changed gear and accelerated rapidly as the Leopard bumped onto the level ground of the runway. After the continuous jarring and rattling on the dirt roads of the past hours, it seemed unnaturally quiet.

As they drove along the boundary fence towards the main gates, Chalmers scanned it anxiously, alert for the slightest sign of irregularity. He stiffened as a man carrying a rifle suddenly emerged from the guard box. Bending down quickly to lift the securing bolt, the figure deftly swung the gates back on their hinges.

It was Masikela and, behind him but hidden from immediate view by the projecting outer wall of the bunkers, were two small ranks of immaculately uniformed DSAs. Belinda was sitting in front of them unconcernedly licking her fur.

As the Leopard passed slowly through the gates, Masikela sprang to attention and saluted, a broad smile on his face.

“Welcome home, boss!” he shouted.

Chalmers smiled and waved briefly.

To his intense relief, the camp looked peaceful, a haven of safety. They had made it.

Had Masikela known it, at that moment, Chalmers could have hugged the man!

CHAPTER 52

A little later …

But the camp *had* been attacked—and in a rather bizarre way, he learnt later—but, for the moment, that could wait …

Chalmers had a shower, put on a clean uniform and after tidying his room, went down to the staff lounge, stopping at the kitchen on the way to ask Misheck to bring him some tea.

He felt relaxed and was looking forward to a quiet evening alone. For once, he felt things could look after themselves for a while. He sat down in the armchair near the open window and, yawning loudly, leant his head back and closed his eyes.

The setting sun shone across his face and chest in a broad, golden band, and for a few moments, he was conscious of the faint, reddish-pink glow of its light through his closed eyelids. A slight breeze ruffled the curtain and he could hear the distant, homely rattle of crockery from the kitchen as Misheck prepared tea—or, perhaps, one of his culinary masterpieces for dinner. Chalmers smiled at the thought and slowly drifted off into a luxurious sleep.

He slept and, like Bunyan, as he slept,

> ‘he dreamed a dream. He dreamed, and behold, he saw himself clothed with raggs standing in a certain place, with his face from his own house, a book in his hand, and a great burden upon his back …’

Chalmers woke with a startled jolt as an unlatched window in the lounge suddenly swung-to with a loud bang. Chilled and with eyes blurred with sleep, he shook his befuddled head, and then noticing that a tea tray had been placed on the small table nearby, he got up stiffly and walked over to it. He put his hand on the dented metal teapot. It was cold. He yawned and, standing on his toes, stretched his arms high above his head, tottering drunkenly.

He crossed to the window and shut it, and then, lighting a nearby candle—the electric light was too harsh for his mood—he sat down and tried to

marshal his thoughts. He shivered.

There was a knock at the door. “Come in,” he called out huskily.

It was Masikela.

Seeing the corporal, he smiled. “Oh, good. Come in Masikela, I want to hear all about the attack. Take a pew!”

They both sat down and after a little prompting, the corporal hesitatingly related the surprising events that had taken place in the early hours of the previous night. From the disjointed narrative—for the corporal’s English was never particularly fluent at the best of times—Chalmers pieced together what had happened.

According to Masikela, the attack had begun around 01h00 with heavy machine-gun fire being directed at the base from somewhere in front of Assegai Kopje. A few minutes later, this was reinforced by mortar fire from the same direction although, fortunately, the terrorists’ aim had been too high and most of the bullets and bombs had sailed harmlessly over the camp to explode a few hundred metres beyond the security fence on the opposite side.

Immediately the bombs went off, however, heavy firing broke out in response which led Masikela to conclude—rightly, as it later turned out—that the camp was actually being attacked on two sides simultaneously.

Chalmers raised his eyebrows and chuckled as he listened to the extraordinary story. “Don’t tell me that they were firing at each other in retaliation all the time?” he asked incredulously.

Masikela grinned widely and nodded.

Chalmers shook his head disbelievingly. “Well, I’ve heard of things like that happening before, but I’ve never really believed it!” he said with a laugh. “And did any of them hit the camp at all?” he asked when Masikela had finished.

“Not really, boss. The fence was a bit damaged by a mortar bomb, but it’s been fixed now,” replied Masikela.

Chalmers laughed. “Well, we did much better than that when *we* attacked the camp, didn’t we?” he said.

The corporal smiled broadly. “Much, much better, boss!”

Chalmers stifled a yawn. “And do you think it was Black Satan’s lot?”

Masikela frowned thoughtfully. “I don’t know, boss, but I don’t think so—I don’t think *he* would have made a stupid mistake like that.”

There was a long pause.

“And tell me, Masikela,” said Chalmers, “how did the men behave?”

“Ah, boss, alright. They’re ok!”

“No panic?”

Masikela shook his head. “No, boss.”

A satisfied expression crossed Chalmers’ face. “Well, it looks as if all the training we’ve been giving them has finally paid off. I must say that the guys I had with *me* were spot on, too.” He looked at Masikela with a smile. “And it’s mostly due to your efforts. You’ve done very, very well, Masikela. I’m extremely grateful to you.”

Masikela shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Compliments embarrassed him.

“Thank you, boss,” he mumbled.

Noting his discomfort, Chalmers quickly changed the subject. “By the way, what’s wrong with the radio? Was the aerial hit or something? I was very worried when I didn’t hear from you while we were in Urungwe,” he said.

Masikela shook his head. “No, boss, there’s something wrong with the generator. We tried to fix it, but it was no good. It’s completely buggered!”

Masikela seldom, if ever, swore and, in spite of himself, Chalmers couldn’t resist smiling at the corporal’s colourful verdict.

However, the loss of the generator was an extremely serious matter. Without the radios, the isolated base would be especially vulnerable, and if an emergency suddenly arose—well, best not to think of that! he quickly concluded.

Somehow or other, the generator would have to be fixed—and quickly, too, but who was going to do *that?* he wondered desperately. His own knowledge of such things was rudimentary, to say the least; he could mend a fuse and change plugs and do minor electrical repairs around the house, but fixing a large generator would call for infinitely more knowledge and experience than *he* possessed—not that he intended to let Masikela or any of the others know that!

He leant forward in his chair. “OK, Masikela, I’ll have a look at it in the morning,” he said reassuringly. “However, in the meantime, we must get through to Urungwe and Hermes and report the attack. By the way, have you given Kenneth the new batteries that I brought back with me yet?”

“Yes, boss.”

“Good, but please tell him to go very easy on them until I have had a look

at the generator."

Masikela nodded.

"Now," said Chalmers, changing the subject, "there are a couple of other things I wanted to speak to you about." He touched his index fingers together as if counting. "Firstly—did you manage to take that fellow who was shot here the other day back to his kraal?"

"Yes, boss. His parents claimed the body. I've got all the details for you in my room."

"Good. And secondly, I noticed that the missing rifle has been put back in my room. Where did you find it?" asked Chalmers.

Masikela looked at Chalmers blankly. "No, boss, I didn't find it," he said, frowning in puzzlement. He paused, ill at ease. "I looked everywhere for it but it was nowhere," he added after a few moments silence. "I didn't know it was back in your room!"

Chalmers stared at him, suddenly feeling a renewal of the vague sense of unease that had gradually been building up in him in recent days. It wasn't just the shooting incident that had disturbed him. There had been all manner of disquieting little 'coincidences' of late—the breakdown of the Pookie; the two near-ambushes they had run into on their way back from Urungwe, as well as the attack on the base itself, and now the generator. Admittedly, all these things could be explained away quite easily and naturally, and yet—

Chalmers resolutely put his disquiet aside. Now was not the moment to probe too deeply. Nonetheless, he resolved that, in the meanwhile, a little deception on his part might not be out of place. It would certainly give Masikela—or whoever came to hear about it, for that matter—something to think about.

He looked at the corporal. "Well, not to worry, Masikela," he said with an assumed air of indifference. "Actually, I know who is behind it all. In fact, I informed headquarters about it so everything will be taken care of," he lied.

Masikela's face was expressionless.

Chalmers looked up as Misheck knocked on the door to retrieve the tea tray.

"Sorry, Misheck, I didn't drink any tea after all," said Chalmers apologetically. "Oh, and by the way, seeing as we've now got some food, I think I'll have steak, chips and peas for dinner tonight to celebrate! Do you know how to cook steak?"

Misheck smiled broadly. “Yes, boss, I know how to cook *everything*!”

Chalmers laughed and snorted good-humouredly. “Like hell you do!”

As the cook left the room, Chalmers turned back to the corporal. “OK, Masikela,” he said lightly, “I think that’s all for the moment.”

He watched Masikela as he walked, somewhat subduedly, out of the room and then, with a satisfied smile, settled down to read a newspaper.

When he had finished, he got up and walked outside and stood looking at the dark outline of the guard tower for a few minutes.

The moon was almost full, and as the scudding clouds passed across its face, the silent camp was alternately darkened and then flooded in a ghostly wash of bright silvery light. The chill night air was filled with the noise of thousands of chirping crickets and the harsh croak of innumerable frogs.

To Chalmers, the night seemed oddly menacing without the reassuring, friendly hum of the generator.

CHAPTER 53

Time: 09h30. December 17

Chalmers stood outside the generator shed in the early morning sunshine wiping the grease from his hands with a dirty piece of rag and listening to the welcome din of the generator.

He was feeling exceptionally pleased with himself. Against all odds—and by dint of persistence and not a little sheer bloody-mindedness—he had managed to repair the generator's shattered clutch-plate.

It had been far from easy.

Fraught with repeated failures, the task had taxed his ingenuity to the full. Finally, however, with only the most basic tools available—a sledge hammer, two metal angle irons and a couple of 6-inch nails—he had succeeded in improvising a rim to bind the five or six fragments of thick plate together.

He glanced around as he heard Masikela close the creaky wooden door of the shed behind him.

"Well," said Chalmers, "with luck, that may keep the thing going for a few days at least," he said jauntily.

Masikela walked over to him, a respectful look on his face. "It's wonderful, boss," he said, shaking his head in genuine admiration.

Chalmers smiled. "Thank you, Masikela. As they say: 'Where there's a will, there's a way'." He paused. "Well—*sometimes* there is, sometimes there ain't!" he added with a laugh, walking off towards his room. To him, small as it was, it represented another tiny victory over adverse circumstances; another miniscule step in the never-ending struggle for mastery.

He had just sat down to write in his notebook when, through the open window, he heard a gentle cough outside. He looked up and saw the head and shoulders of an African standing a short distance away. The man was dressed in a shabby suit.

Chalmers was puzzled. No one voluntarily visited the camp these days. To do so was to invite almost certain retribution from the terrorists.

Chalmers stood up and leant out the window. “Yes? What can I do for you?” he asked.

The African, seeing him, smiled broadly. “Excuse me, sir. I am a government district health assistant and I have some vaccines,” he announced.

There was a short silence while they looked expectantly at each other.

“Oh … and?” asked Chalmers with a quizzical smile.

“I would like to put them in the refrigerator to keep them cold.” He paused uncertainly. “Otherwise they go bad,” he added lamely.

“Have you been to the camp before, then?”

“Yes, boss. I always put them in the refrigerator. I come and give the people the malaria tablets and vaccinate them for measles at St. Michael’s school,” he explained, adding as one imparting a grave secret: “It is *very* bad here—the Chitangwe district has more malaria than *any* other part of the country.” There was almost a tinge of pride in his voice.

Chalmers eyed him with amusement. “That’s quite a distinction.” He paused. “Alright, you obviously know where the ‘fridge is—but don’t take out any of the food or it’ll go bad. There should be enough room for the vaccines.”

The African beamed with gratitude. “Thank you, sir, thank you,” he said effusively, bowing slightly.

As he left, a sudden thought struck Chalmers. Travelling around the country so extensively as this man obviously did, he must surely know the district extremely well. He could probably give him a better idea of what the terrorists were doing than anyone else he could think of—*if*, that is, he were prepared to.

Chalmers put his head out the window again and looked down the verandah towards the kitchen.

“When you’ve put the vaccines away, would you come and see me for a minute, please?” he called out after him.

The man stopped and turned round. “Yes, sir,” he replied, nodding quickly and repeatedly, his face wreathed in smiles.

Chalmers sat down again at the table and started writing while he waited for the man to return. A few minutes later, there was a gentle tap at the door.

“Come in,” he said.

The African shyly came into the room.

“Sit down and make yourself comfortable,” Chalmers said in a friendly voice, and getting up, he lifted Belinda off a chair and placed her in a patch of sun at the bottom of his bed.

The African sat down timidly on the edge of the chair.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” said Chalmers, “I’d like to ask you a few questions. Do you know the Chitangwe district well?”

“Yes, sir, I was born here. I go everywhere on my motorcycle all the time.”

Chalmers looked surprised. “But what about the terrorists? It must be very dangerous for you.”

The man laughed softly. “No, boss. It’s alright.”

Chalmers raised his eyebrows. “Do you have you a gun?” he asked.

The African shook his head. “I try to make people well, *nkosi*[54]. I do not make them sick,” he said. His voice was gentle, almost reproving.

“You are a brave man,” commented Chalmers. *Or a collaborator.* “Tell me,” he said, leaning forward confidentially, “what do you think the situation’s like in this area?”

The man shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. “Bad, *nkosi*, very bad,” he replied shaking his head. “Nearly all the schools are closed. All the clinics have had to be shut down and there is much, much sickness. Many people and cattle are dying.” He sighed heavily.

“Why is all this happening, do you think?” asked Chalmers.

“The cattle die because the terrorists fill in all the cattle dips, and the animals get sick. It is very bad, and the people are suffering and have no food. The maize is all finished and the rains come too late now, *nkosi*.” The African looked out of the window and then down at his shoes in thoughtful silence. “It is *very* hard,” he said quietly after a lengthy pause.

Chalmers looked round as Belinda jumped down from the bed and stretched and then slowly walked out of the room. Chalmers watched her absent-mindedly.

“And the terrorists? Are there many around here?” he asked.

The African looked up and shrugged his shoulders. “I do not know, *nkosi*. Perhaps 400 or 500,” he said, spreading out his hands in a gesture of resigned ignorance. “But there are many.”

Chalmers waited.

“And have you seen any of them recently?’ he asked quietly.

The African smiled and standing up unexpectedly, walked jerkily to the window. Chalmers followed him with his eyes.

"They have a big, big place down there, *nkosi*." He turned and looked at Chalmers. "*That* I know!"

Chalmers heart skipped a beat. He stood up and walked over to the window and stood next to the man. "Do you mean in the Mazweru Hills, there?" he asked.

"For sure, boss, for sure. In the caves there." He pointed off into the distance with a stubby, emphatic finger.

Chalmers deliberately feigned disbelief. He had learnt that one generally found out far more by contradicting a man than agreeing with him—*if* one did it carefully.

"Never!" replied Chalmers emphatically, shaking his head and going back to his chair.

"Yes, boss, it is true," said the African earnestly. "In the caves. There is one very big cave there, not far from Magomba kraal. That is where they are."

Chalmers laughed. "Nooooo!" he said, drawing the word out derisively.

The African waved an arm energetically. "Yes, boss. I speak the truth. There are plenty, plenty terrorists there! They have many big boxes of guns." He pointed his forefinger towards his face. "I have seen them with these, my seeing eyes, *nkosi*."

Chalmers shrugged his shoulders with a chuckle. "Well—*if* you say so!" His tone of voice expressed disbelief.

Inwardly, Chalmers could hardly believe his luck at having stumbled across the man so unexpectedly. Now there was only one more piece of information that he needed and then the puzzle would be solved, he thought with mounting excitement.

Casually, he asked: "Have you heard of a man that goes by the name of Black Satan, by any chance?"

The African breathed out deeply and shook his head. "Yes, *nkosi*—a very, very bad man. He is no good."

Silence.

"And is *he* down at those caves, too?"

"Yes. He is the big boss of all the terrorists there. He is at the caves down there—" he pointed to the window, "down by Magomba kraal."

Chalmers smiled. Taking out his cigarettes, he offered one to the African.

“Thank you, boss,” the man said, bending forward and carefully withdrawing one from the packet.

“Tell me,” went on Chalmers after he had lit their cigarettes, “do the local people help the terrorists?”

“They do not want to, *nkosi*, but they are made to—otherwise they are killed. They do not understand what is happening. They just want to live in peace.” He opened his mouth and placed a finger on one of his discoloured front teeth, jabbing it repeatedly. “It is like the toothache, *nkosi*. It goes on hurting and hurting and you cannot sleep. All you want is to have it pulled out so you do not have pain anymore.” He paused. “The people want peace, boss—no more toothache,” he added, shaking his head.

Yes, thought Chalmers, that is really all that most people want —*everywhere*.

”I am sure it is true what you say,” Chalmers replied. “But if the people want peace, the people must fight for it. You do not get peace by doing nothing, you know,” he said.

The African looked at Chalmers, a mystified expression on his face.

“Pardon, boss? I do not understand what you say.”

Chalmers looked at him. “What I mean is, you must fight if you want to have peace. The little animals never have peace—only the big, strong lion has that!”

“Yes, *nkosi*, that is true, but the people are poor and sick and have nothing,” the man said sadly.

Chalmers sighed. “Yes, I know. It is not easy.” He stood up and looked at his watch. “Well, it’s getting late. I think you’d better be off,” he said with a smile.

The African stood up quickly, an anxious look on his face. “*Nkosi* …”

“Yes?” said Chalmers.

“I think the terrorists win the war,” he said flatly.

Chalmers turned and looked at the man with raised eyebrows. “Nonsense,” he retorted briskly.

They walked to the door, and after exchanging courtesies, the man left.

Going back into his room. Chalmers went and stood looking out of the window, deep in thought. Despite his confident denial of the African’s assertion, deep down he knew the man was probably right. He recalled the district commissioner’s astonishing claim two days earlier that, even now,

they were fighting a lost cause and that, if the truth were known, the terrorists had already won.

Chalmers sighed deeply.

All those misguided idealists of the world sitting safely at home in their comfortable armchairs had a lot to answer for, he thought bitterly.

CHAPTER 54

Time: 10h15. The same day.

Chalmers picked up the survey map and spread it out over the table.

It had become more familiar to him over the past few weeks than, perhaps, anything else. Almost every spare moment since his arrival at the camp had been spent poring over it. The names of the many kraals, rivers, hills and other features were now as well known to him as those on the island where he had lived as a child.

He tapped his finger thoughtfully on his front teeth as he studied, yet again, the many small multi-coloured dots that he had methodically marked on the map to represent killings, burnings, sightings, ambushes, mines, abductions—the whole gruesome gamut of atrocities. He ran his eye over some of the more well-known place names: Kwevane, Umsholo, Nyakende, Magunya, and a host of others.

As he scanned the map to the east of Chitangwe, he made a mental note of the few white farms that were scattered around the area. Nestled among them lay St. Mark's Catholic Mission. And there, on the extreme right edge of the map, he saw the name *Good Hope Farm* printed in small red letters. In brackets next to it were the words: *Owner J.R. Pearson*.

Chalmers drew in his breath. He had almost forgotten about Claire's invitation to spend Christmas Day with her and her family! He glanced up at the calendar that hung on the wall near the table. Only eight days left to Christmas, he noted with amazement.

He turned back to the map and, with his fingers, roughly gauged the distance from the base to the farm. It was about 14 kilometres, he calculated, and it should be easy enough to get up there—weather and terrorists permitting, he thought. It would certainly be worth a try, he decided. He picked up his pen and wrote: *Morning patrol to 'Good Hope Farm'* against the 25th on the calendar.

Suddenly becoming aware of a confused babble of voices from the DSAs

quarters, he went to the window again and looked out. He saw several of the men running excitedly along the verandah on the opposite side of the quadrangle. Almost simultaneously, he heard the faint but unmistakable sound of approaching Alouette helicopters.

Going outside, he set off across the quadrangle, glancing up at the sky in the direction of the tower. He caught a momentary glimpse of several helicopters in the distance turning sharply in line ahead, before they disappeared from view behind the asbestos-covered roof of the African sleeping quarters. The noise of their engines died away as the building blocked out the sound.

Chalmers broke into a run. As he approached the main gates, he saw Masikela walking briskly over to an excited group of DSAs who were crowding around the gates.

He slowed his pace as Masikela, yelling to make himself heard over the voices and the growing noise of the fast-approaching machines, took control. The guard swung open the gates, and Chalmers strode out and positioned himself on the edge of the airstrip and watched the helicopters gradually lose height.

The leading machine drew level with him, hovering a couple of metres above the ground. As it slowly swung its bulbous nose towards him, a glint of reflected sunlight flashed in his eyes. He put his fingers in his ears to protect them from the shrill, high-pitched scream of the engines. The wheels touched down, but to his surprise, the engines were left running and none of the troops got out. He watched as the pilot of the lead machine climbed down and crouching low, ran towards him. It was Steve Grant, the same pilot who had come on the previous occasion.

Chalmers moved forward to greet him, but Grant immediately and unceremoniously grabbed hold of his arm above the elbow and, without a word, firmly led him along the outside of the security fence away from the helicopters.

“Sorry about this, Mike, but we can only stop a minute,” he said hurriedly in a loud voice. His face was set and serious.

“Have you come for fuel?” asked Chalmers.

Grant shook his head. “No. I’m afraid it’s bad news.” He gave Chalmers a searching look.

Chalmers felt his stomach knot up in apprehension. “Why? What’s up?”

Grant ignored the question. “Have you had any contacts within the last few hours?” he asked.

“No, not really. The base was attacked by two lots of terrs on Saturday night. I was in Urungwe at the time. On the way back yesterday though, we ran into a couple of ambushes a few kilometres down the road—but that’s all.”

Grant pulled a face. “I don’t suppose you know which lot it was, do you? No clues at all?”

“None at all. We killed one of them but, unfortunately, he didn’t have any papers on him.”

“Damn,” muttered Grant.

“So, what’s happened then?” asked Chalmers.

“The bastards went to St. Mark’s Mission last night. They murdered Father Patrick and two of the mission staff there. Seems to be part of a new, wider terror campaign against ‘soft’ targets—another lot of the bastards hit the Elim Mission in the Eastern Highlands the night before last. Massacred the lot—men, women and children.”

Chalmers felt his scalp crawl.

He was about to ask him for further details, but Grant shook his head. “Sorry, Mike. I honestly can’t stop now. Just came on the off-chance that you might have a bit of info about St. Mark’s.” He turned and then stopped. “But I’ve got a special edition of yesterday’s newspaper you can have. That’s got all the details of the Elim killings—come with me, I’ll give it to you.”

As he turned away, Chalmers held out a restraining hand. “Before you go, Steve, I think I now know where one large group of terrs is hanging out.”

Grant shot him a quick, penetrating glance.

“Do you, by God!” he exclaimed with quickened interest. “That’s excellent.”

“Yep, but if I’m right, I’m going to need some help,” he said, looking at Grant hopefully.

“No problem! Just get through to JOC headquarters when you need it. If you’re right, we’ll get the whole bloody army and air force in—and the navy too!” he added with a laugh. “If you get on to anything, let me know straight away. I’ll be there as quickly as I possibly can.”

Chalmers smiled with relief, nodding his head in thanks as they headed over to the waiting helicopter.

Reaching the aircraft, Grant leant over into the cockpit and grabbed a rolled-up newspaper and handed it to Chalmers.

“By the way, I’ve arranged for some more fuel to be sent over. It should be here in a few days. It looks as if we’ll be needing it,” he yelled as he climbed into the craft and strapped himself in.

Chalmers nodded and gave a thumbs-up sign.

As the sound of the helicopter engines rose in intensity, he backed away and stood watching as the helicopter slowly lifted off the muddy airstrip. As it swung gently away from him, he saw Grant give him a quick wave.

Chalmers waited until the five machines were out of sight and then started walking disconsolately back to the gates. The wind had grown cold and he noticed that heavy, dark storm clouds were gathering over the distant Mazweru hills.

CHAPTER 55

Back in the lounge, Chalmers sat down in the armchair near the window and unfolded the newspaper. He glanced at the large headline: ‘Massacre at Elim Mission’.

He read the report slowly.

> ‘Nine British missionaries and four young children—the youngest being only three weeks old—were savagely beaten and then bayoneted to death by terrorists on Rhodesia’s south-eastern border last night in the worst massacre of whites since the war began.
>
> ‘Three of the missionaries were men and the others women.
>
> ‘The gruesome murders by a group of eight to ten terrorists happened at Emmanuel Mission school, 15km south-east of Umtali and 8km from the Mozambique border. The dead were all missionaries of the Elim Pentecostal Church.’

A list of the victims’ names followed. The article continued:

> ‘Most of the women had been sexually assaulted and brutally mutilated.
>
> ‘Witnessing the barbaric scene, even war-hardened soldiers were stunned into silence. The Director of the Church in Rhodesia and South Africa who visited the Mission said: “We see no trace of humanity here.”
>
> ‘When security forces reached the scene, they found the bodies scattered in groups round the school’s cricket pavilion. The victims had all been viciously beaten and stabbed.
>
> ‘In one group, a woman had died from an axe-wound—the weapon still protruded from her shoulder—and two men, one with his hands tied behind his back, had been slashed to death.
>
> ‘Nearby, a young mother and her baby had been savagely beaten

and lay side by side, their arms outstretched towards one another. The baby was three weeks old and had been bayoneted through the head.

'All but one of the six adult women had been raped and left semi-naked on the grass.'[55]

Chalmers rested the newspaper on his knees and sat staring at the opposite wall for several minutes.

As he thought about the wholesale massacre of the young, the good, the innocent at Elim and St. Mark's, he recalled to mind a certain Biblical text and, putting the newspaper down, he went across to the bookcase and took out a green, and very tattered, copy of the Bible.

He blew the dust off and, opening it, searched for the passage. Finding it, he read[56]:

10. There shall no evil befall thee, neither shall any plague come nigh thy dwelling.

11. For He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.

12. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone. …

14. Because he hath set his love upon me, therefore will I deliver him:

15. He shall call upon me, and I will answer him: I will be with him in trouble; I will deliver him …

Chalmers put the book back on the shelf and, going out of the lounge, walked across to the radio-room where Kenneth, his legs up on the table, was idly paging through an old magazine, looking at photographs of young white women in scanty underwear.

As Chalmers walked in, he swung his legs off the table and stood up quickly, closing the magazine guiltily.

"Any messages?" asked Chalmers.

Kenneth shook his head. "No, boss."

"You'll probably be receiving quite a number of calls soon. We should be

hearing from various Crusader[57] units as well as aircraft in the area. I want you to make absolutely sure that you copy all messages down correctly and let me know *immediately*. If I'm not on camp, radio them through to me if they're really urgent. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir," Kenneth replied. He hesitated. "What's going on, boss?"

Chalmers bent down and in a preoccupied manner, picked up a broken pencil that was lying on the floor.

"Terrorists murdered three people last night at St. Mark's Mission," he said quietly. Straightening up, he glanced at the man's expressionless face then his eyes fell to the cross hanging around Kenneth's neck. He looked at it thoughtfully for a few moments then turned and walked to the door.

Noticing some discarded scraps of paper on the floor, he stopped and turned back to Kenneth. "Get a broom and sweep this place out straight away."

He went across to Masikela's room. "Corporal, get the men out—we're going on a patrol immediately," he ordered.

Masikela's smile of greeting faded as he looked at Chalmers' set face.

"Yes, boss," he said in a subdued voice.

CHAPTER 56

On patrol to Magomba kraal, Mazweru Hills.

The air was heavy and oppressive.

Chalmers, perspiring profusely, glanced up yet again at the dark clouds that were slowly advancing towards them from the hills beyond. There was not a breath of wind, and the only sound breaking the unnatural stillness was the soft swishing noise that the DSAs made as they cautiously pushed their way through the head-high grass.

They had covered about five kilometres since leaving the camp.

The silence was suddenly shattered by a loud crashing noise in the dense bush cover nearby on their right. A moment later, it was followed by a penetrating crack of splintering wood.

The line of DSAs spun round, their rifles at the ready.

Chalmers raised his arm commandingly to signal them to hold their fire. He listened intently, straining every nerve in an effort to identify what had caused the disturbance.

No one moved.

Suddenly, there was a loud rustling noise accompanied by a deep snort, followed almost immediately by the pounding of fast-retreating hooves.

As the noise died away in the distance, Chalmers glanced at Masikela.

The corporal was grinning. “Rhinoceros,” he mouthed quietly.

Chalmers nodded and smiled, and the short, single file of men resumed their slow and arduous patrol through the thick grass.

Despite the brief moment of light relief afforded by the rhino’s appearance, Chalmers was unable to rid himself of a feeling of impending disaster which had been growing in him since first deciding so precipitously and, perhaps ill-advisedly, to take a patrol down to Magomba kraal.

As he tiredly pushed his way through the tall grass, he increasingly found himself wondering whether perhaps the commonsense thing to do would be to abort the patrol. He mentally weighed up the pros and cons. He knew they

were moving through extremely dangerous terrain and, moreover, they were a long way from the base should they need help quickly. And, yet again, it looked as if they would be caught in a severe storm.

At that moment, as if in confirmation, Chalmers heard a low rumble of distant thunder.

He came to a decision. They would have a short rest and then return to the base.

Noticing a small kopje a few hundred metres ahead, he called out softly. The men stopped and saw him gesture with his hand. They walked back and gathered around him expectantly.

“I’ve decided to abort the patrol. I don’t think we’ll achieve anything by going on now,” he said, indicating the clouds massing overhead. He noticed the relief on their grimy, perspiring faces.

“There’s just time for a quick cigarette, but you’d better hurry—it looks as if the storm is going to hit soon.” He turned to Masikela. “You and I will have a quick recce from the top of the kopje. You know the area, don’t you?”

Masikela nodded. “Yes, boss, I know exactly where we are,” he said with a slow smile.

“Good!” rejoined Chalmers without hesitation. “In that case, you can show me how far we are from the caves.”

The two men slowly made their way up the kopje until they reached the top.

Once there, Masikela turned and looked towards the Mazweru Hills, pointing to a spot less than two kilometres away from where they were standing. Chalmers followed the direction of his outstretched arm.

Nestling at the foot of the heavily-shadowed hills, he saw a group of tiny, umber-coloured mud huts, their thatched conical roofs black against the sombre, deep-green background of the surrounding vegetation. Magomba kraal.

Behind the kraal, higher up and cut into the steep sides of the hills, were a number of indistinct gashes.

Chalmers pointed. “Are those the caves?” he asked.

Masikela nodded. “Yes, boss.”

Chalmers studied them carefully. “Well,“ he added after a moment’s thought, “if that’s where Black Satan is hiding out, it certainly won’t be as easy to get at the terrs as I thought.”

Masikela looked at him with a slight smile and shook his head. “No, boss, it won’t be easy at all.”

Chalmers gave a disappointed sigh and then, having seen all he needed, turned away and was about to start making his way to rejoin the others, when he heard the muffled throb of beating drums in the distance.

He stopped and listened to them for a few moments, a renewed chill of unease creeping over him. God, he thought, this is Darkest Africa with a vengeance!

As the two men reached the bottom of the brush-covered slope, they saw the DSAs standing silently in a group some distance away, looking down at a large, flat-topped rock.

Sensing trouble, Chalmers quickened his pace and strode over to them.

As he reached them, Joshua turned around. “This is interesting, boss. Come and see,” he said, making way for him.

Outlined roughly on the side of the rock in black paint was a large circle. Next to it was painted a crude stick-man, its one unnaturally elongated arm running straight across the circle and cutting through its opposite side. The arm terminated in a large arrowhead that pointed in the direction of a cluster of large rocks that stood a few hundred metres away.

Chalmers bent forward and fingered the paint. It was completely dry. Following the direction of the arrow with his eyes, he stood up.

“Alright,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice, “we’d better see where it leads to—it looks like those rocks over there.”

The DSAs, a prey to superstitious tribal fears, shuffled their feet and, with shaking heads, drew back.

Irritated by the men’s trepidation, Chalmers made his way impatiently over to the outcrop accompanied only by Masikela and Joshua where they found, scattered on the ground at the foot of a huge boulder, the naked and badly mutilated remains of six African men and women.

The armless body of an old, yellow-toothed woman grimacing fiendishly, her lips and ears cruelly hacked off, was propped up against a bloodstained rock nearby. Between her twisted, badly broken legs was a large piece of white cardboard on which was written the words: DEATH TO ALL SELL-OUTS!

Chalmers stood motionless for a few moments, staring at the macabre figure. A slight gust of wind passed swiftly through the grass. As it did so, he

turned his head, listening carefully as the menacing sound of the drums briefly swelled in volume and then grew fainter as the wind died away.

He turned and looked at Masikela. “I’ve changed my mind. We’re going on to Magomba.”

CHAPTER 57

The drums of Magomba had fallen silent and a tense air of suppressed expectancy hung over the village. The stillness was broken only by the soft crunch of the DSAs' boots on the stony ground as they walked among the cluster of huts.

The villagers, standing around in small, scattered groups, watched them in sullen, hostile silence.

Making his way to the communal clearing—a small, bare patch of uneven ground in the centre of the village—Chalmers stopped and waited for his men to catch up with him.

He glanced around at Masikela who was behind him. "Have you posted guards?" he asked quietly.

Masikela nodded.

"Good. Tell the people I want to speak to their headman, please."

Masikela stepped forward and addressed the villagers.

Nobody spoke or moved.

Chalmers frowned impatiently.

Suddenly, a high-pitched, strident female voice broke the silence. Chalmers turned his head and saw a woman step forward from a small cluster of villagers. She was shouting and gesticulating with her hands. She looked towards him and then, screaming angrily, turned and pointed accusingly at another, younger woman standing nearby.

Chalmers looked over at the second woman and with a shock of surprise, immediately recognised her.

It was Josephine Matiwa—the woman who had visited the camp three days earlier. Her face was strained and her eyes troubled and anxious.

He was genuinely pleased to see her and was about to smile but, before he could do so, she turned around quickly and, slipping behind the other villagers, disappeared from view into one of the nearby huts.

Chalmers turned to Masikela. "What was all *that* about?"

"The old woman has been saying that the terrs came to the village last night

and took six of their people away with them, including the headman. They don't know where they've gone."

Chalmers frowned. "And?" he said impatiently. "What was she saying about the woman, Josephine?"

"Someone saw her at the base, boss, and some of the villagers think the terrorists came here because of her."

"But that's ridiculous, Masikela," retorted Chalmers. "If the terrs had thought that, they'd have killed her too. For God's sake," he said irritably, "explain that to them!"

Masikela turned backed to them and started speaking, but before he could finish, the woman broke out into another tirade.

Listening to her raucous voice, Chalmers felt a surge of anger sweep over him. "Shut up!" he ordered in a loud voice,

The woman looked at him, her eyes blazing with hate and, mumbling angrily under her breath, fell silent.

Masikela turned to Chalmers. "Well?"

"Others think …" Masikela hesitated, trying to find the right words: "They say she go to the base to spy for the terrs, because when the terrs come here, she was not in the village."

Chalmers suddenly experienced the old nightmarish feeling of being in the grip of sinister forces totally beyond his control and comprehension.

Can *anyone* be trusted? he wondered in a sudden rush of despair.

Baffled, he turned his back on the villagers and stood for a few moments, lost in thought. Obviously the bodies that they had come across further back were those of the missing villagers and, equally obvious, no one here yet knew of their ghastly fate. They would have to be told, of course, but—what about Josephine? What, if anything, should he do about her? he wondered.

He turned to Masikela. "We obviously can't do any good here. Try and get as much information about the terrorists as you can. Then I'm afraid, you'll have to tell them what's happened to their people. But please, do it as kindly as possible, won't you?" he added.

Masikela smiled reprovingly. "Yes, boss. I understand *that*."

Ignoring the implied rebuke, Chalmers watched him as he went across to the villagers. Then, as Chalmers turned and started walking away, he cast a glance at the hut that he had seen Josephine enter earlier.

To his surprise, he saw her standing framed in the doorway, one arm raised

and holding the wooden support post.

She was staring at him steadily, a faint, enigmatic smile on her face.

CHAPTER 58

A few hours later.

Chalmers glanced at his watch. Although it was only four o'clock, the sky was already dark as the storm slowly followed in their tracks. He was tired and very hungry and looking forward to getting back to the base.

He looked around at the undulating, heavily-treed stretch of broken ground they were crossing and, suddenly recognising certain familiar features, realised with intense relief that they had just over a kilometre to go before they reached camp and safety.

As he trudged along wearily behind Masikela, his thoughts turned to the killings at Magomba, to Josephine and, finally, to the brutal massacres at the two missions. Absorbed in his thoughts, he stumbled heavily on a partially buried tree root protruding from the sandy ground. As he staggered drunkenly trying to regain his balance, his foot slipped on a smooth-worn stone. His ankle twisted violently and gave under his weight. A searing pain shot up his leg and, tottering helplessly, he sprawled full-length to the ground.

But the fall saved his life …

At that instant, an ear-splitting burst of automatic gunfire came from the nearby bushes to his left, and a shower of splintered wood and bark flew around and above him as he fell helplessly to the ground.

For a second, as he lay on the ground, numbed and confused by the hail of bullets and winded by his fall, he couldn't comprehend what had happened. But as the truth penetrated his tired and shocked brain, his world immediately took on a surreal, dreamlike air. While everything around him moved in slow and distorted time, his mind was racing: *Ambush! … It can't be—this isn't happening to me … others die—I don't …*

He frantically rolled over and shot a glance at the shattered tree, its trunk riddled and showing yellowy-white where the bark had been stripped off under the impact of the bullets. Even as he looked at the deep gouges on the tree's trunk, a second burst of fire ripped through the lower branches and

leaves of some nearby bushes.

To Chalmers, it sounded much nearer and more menacing. With a racing heart, he became aware that someone was moving towards him.

Almost simultaneously, heavy, spasmodic firing broke out from several points around him.

He suddenly realised that he was in the middle of the ambush. Lifting his head, he listened carefully, trying to pin-point his exact position, but almost immediately, flattened himself again as he heard the sharp, unnerving whine of a bullet ricocheting off a nearby rock. It passed harmlessly over his head.

Although totally disorientated, he knew he had to move—and quickly—but where to? Where were the terrorists? Where were his men? Which way should he go?

As he tried to regain control of his thoughts, a figure, bent in a half-crouching position, suddenly burst through the undergrowth a few metres ahead. As the man ran in front of him and raced out of sight, Chalmers caught a blurred glimpse of green trousers and a rifle with a forward-curving magazine. He recognised it immediately as an AK-47, the standard equipment of all terrorists.

Chalmers staggered painfully to his feet and, gripping his rifle that had landed on top of him when he had fallen, ran stumbling and hobbling awkwardly in pursuit of the vanishing figure. He was struggling for breath and he could feel a vice-like tightness across his chest as his lungs gasped for air.

Swerving around a slender tree, he saw a dark smear of colour and disturbed branches as the terrorist, realising that he was being pursued, began weaving and zigzagging in a frenzied attempt to escape. Chalmers stopped and snapped his rifle to his shoulder. As his finger curled around the trigger, he saw a brief flash of something dark out of the corner of his eye. His heart contracted.

As he spun round, he came face-to-face with another terrorist who, with a grimace of fear at the unexpected sight of Chalmers, froze momentarily in his tracks. For a fraction of a second they stared at each other. As Chalmers levelled his rifle at him, the terrorist leapt sideways and bounded off into the bushes and disappeared.

Chalmers fired but the bullet passed harmlessly into the undergrowth.

As he limpingly gave chase, he heard another vicious burst of automatic

fire close behind him, followed by a long, drawn-out scream. There was a heavy crash as someone fell to the ground. He spun around and, moving painfully through the undergrowth towards where the sounds had come from, he almost collided with Masikela who was staring down at the twisted body of a terrorist.

Chalmers, breathing hard and deeply relieved to find one of his own men, looked at him and smiled briefly. “Well done, Masikela,” he said between breaths. He turned and looked around. “Where are the other DSAs?” he asked hurriedly.

Masikela, wiping the sweat from his face with his arm, shook his head.

Chalmers looked down at the body, and then he half-turned and pointed in the direction he had come from. “There were a couple of others down there,” he said, “but I expect they’ll have gone by now.”

Masikela gave him a quick look. “Maybe not, boss. You can never tell with terrs.”

So saying, he immediately broke into a run leaving Chalmers to stumble on as best he could behind him. Within seconds they were out of sight of each other. As he staggered on, Chalmers noted that the firing had now become scattered and intermittent, and realising the pointlessness of his trying to catch anyone now, he slowed down.

It had now become ominously dark. A clap of thunder rolled through the air and isolated spots of rain began to patter on the leaves around him. He glanced at his watch and stared at it for a moment in sheer disbelief as he realised that only six minutes had passed since the moment he had fallen and sprained his ankle.

Suddenly, he heard a single shot ring out close by, followed a few moments later by a prolonged burst of rapid fire. Clenching his teeth in pain, Chalmers broke into a run, hopping awkwardly in the direction from which the firing had come.

As he emerged into a small clearing, he almost fell headlong over Masikela who was lying motionless, face upwards, his rifle across his shins. Chalmers numbly took in the scene. A few metres away, half-hidden behind a bush, was a terrorist who, babbling incoherently to himself, was desperately trying to change the magazine on his rifle. A little further away, behind the terrorist, Chalmers suddenly saw Sewera who, with his rifle to his shoulder, was on the point of firing.

He watched in fascination as Sewera's finger pulled on the trigger. Nothing happened.

Sewera had forgotten to move the safety catch to the firing position.

In that instant, the terrorist threw down his AK and bolted into the bushes, but even as Chalmers released half a magazine after the fleeing man, he knew it was too late.

He turned round and putting his rifle on the ground near Masikela's prostrate body, knelt down next to him. As Sewera came up to them, he looked up at the DSA.

"Stand guard, Sewera," he said tensely.

Chalmers bent down towards Masikela and then noticed two slowly spreading crimson stains oozing out over the corporal's chest and lower stomach. The African's eyes were closed. Chalmers realised immediately that there was nothing he could do to help. He already knew the massive wounds he would find if he were to turn Masikela's body over.

Chalmers quickly undid his shirt and took it off, rolling it up tightly and placing it under Masikela's head. As he did so, Masikela opened his already glazing eyes, frowning in an effort to focus.

He looked up into Chalmers' face and smiled proudly. "I got one of them for you, *nkosi*," he whispered.

Chalmers fumbled to get his water bottle out of its carrier on his hip. "Do you want a drink?" he asked in a soft voice.

The corporal moved his lips, trying to speak.

Chalmers bent down, putting his face close to Masikela's lips. "What is it, old chap?"

There was a long pause.

Chalmers gently wiped the sweat from Masikela's face with his handkerchief as the corporal struggled to speak.

"Boss …" His voice was barely audible. "Not all …" He stopped, moistening his lips with his tongue.

His hand reached up and Chalmers grasped it.

Breathing quickly, Masikela closed his eyes in an effort to summon his last remaining strength.

"Not all … black men … are … bad, *nkosi*," he murmured.

He opened his eyes and focusing them with difficulty on Chalmers, smiled gently.

Chalmers felt a pricking sensation in his eyes as he looked down at Masikela's suddenly calm face. He swallowed and nodded his head slightly. "I know, Masikela. I know," he said quietly. He paused. "And neither are all white men," he said softly as Masikela's head slipped slowly sideways against his bare arm.

Chalmers looked at him. "Go well, old friend," he whispered, his eyes filling with tears.

CHAPTER 59

That same evening.

Chalmers leant back wearily in his chair and looked out of his bedroom window at the dismal, dark-grey countryside and the heavy, low-scudding clouds. It was pouring with rain, and he could hear the melancholy sound of the water as it flowed off the tin roof in a continual stream and splashed loudly onto the concrete below. Strong gusts of wind drove the rain against the rattling panes of the window.

Sunk in dark depression, he stared out at the rain with tired, unseeing eyes.

Masikela's death had affected him more than he would have believed. He realised that over the past few weeks, he had grown to depend on the corporal's steadfast presence and had become almost fond of him.

True, there had been times when he had had serious doubts as to where Masikela's loyalties had really lain—and he realised too that, now, he would probably never know who had stolen the rifle from his room and shot the man from Umsasa.

However, Chalmers also knew, deep down, that whatever the corporal's political persuasions may have been, he could never have countenanced being associated with barbarians capable of such inhuman acts as those perpetrated by the terrorists. Masikela had been too kind-hearted, too forgiving, too generous to be guilty of that and, to Chalmers, it was those very qualities that were the hallmark of a truly civilised individual.

But what disturbed him most was the agonising thought that, if it had not been for him, Masikela might still be alive. He felt tortured by the knowledge that everything that had happened that afternoon had stemmed from his impetuous decision to take a patrol to Magomba kraal.

And yet, he asked himself for the hundredth time, *could* Masikela's death have been avoided? Can one avoid one's fate? Was there even such a thing?

Getting up slowly, he limped over to the door and pulled the light string. The sudden glare from the naked bulb hurt his eyes. He went back to the

table and looked down at the pile of papers neatly stacked in one corner. At least, he thought with relief, he had done everything that needed doing—for the moment, that was.

His lengthy report on the day's events had been written; coded messages had been sent to Steve Bishop at Hermes, to Urungwe and to Steve Grant at Grand Reef; he had updated his map and other records; and, more importantly, Masikela's body, together with that of the terrorist he had killed, had been placed under a blanket on the floor in the corporal's room. The two lay side by side.

As he thought of the cold corpses lying there, Chalmers shuddered involuntarily.

In an effort to put the chilling picture of death from his mind, he picked up a small, tattered black notebook and three ZANLA[58] pennants that he had found on the body of the terrorist and went and lay down on his bed.

He opened the pocket book at the last two entries. The pencilled writing was illiterate and childlike, and he had difficulty in deciphering it.

> 'On Sunday night we Comrades went to St. Mark's Mission. We reached there at 8.45 and we had a storming raid. We shot the whities, one who was the missionary. White women were two and altogether there was three dead. Had one of the women—it was very good. No Comrades were hurt.
>
> 'On same night, we went to Magomba kraal and took some sell-outs —kraal-head and others too. This was six we killed. We was happy and had much drink from the store we broke into.'

Chalmers turned back to the first page and read the terrorist's name and number. He closed the notebook with a sigh and, getting up, walked awkwardly over to the table and laid it on top of the white cardboard sign warning death to all sell-outs that they had brought back from Magomba.

He lit a cigarette thoughtfully as he picked up and examined the small ZANLA flags. Each bore a legend: *One bullet —one white*; *Kill Smith*[59] *and his running jackals;* and *Free Zimbabwe. Aluta Continua—The struggle continues.*

After a few moments, Chalmers put them down on the table. All of the items were valuable evidence—especially the notebook. It was small wonder,

he mused, that when he had radioed through his report of the recent events, the Security people had said they would collect the bodies and other evidence first thing in the morning.

There was a sharp knock on the door.

“Come in,” he called out above the drumming of the rain.

The door opened, and Joshua, his waterproof cape and hat dripping with water, stepped in to the room. Small puddles formed at his feet on the floor.

“Good evening, boss” he said with a broad smile.

Feeling as depressed and lonely as he was, Chalmers found he was pleased to see him—although he would have been happier still had it been Wally, he thought.

“Hello, Joshua. And what can I do for you this lovely summer’s evening?”

Joshua pulled his hand out from beneath his glistening, wet cape. He was holding a small white envelope, soggy with rain. “We just found this stuck in the fence, boss.” He held the envelope out to Chalmers.

“How odd,” murmured Chalmers, taking it with a frown.

He carefully peeled open the flap and pulled out a small, grubby piece of limp, lined notepaper. He studied the writing. It was in ink which had run in one or two places. Stepping back, he went and stood directly under the light and read: ‘Meet me at Sapere kraal. 11 o’clock tomorrow night.’ It was unsigned.

He raised his eyebrows and put it back in the envelope without saying a word. He looked at Joshua. He would have liked to have told him what was in the note—secrecy was always distasteful to him—but Chalmers had learnt much over the past few weeks.

“Thank you, Joshua,” he said with a smile. He paused. “Incidentally, who found it?”

“Chikarema, boss.”

Chalmers nodded. “Oh, by the way, Joshua, there’s something else. Now that Masikela is no longer with us, I’m putting you in charge of the men. I have advised Urungwe that you will be acting senior NCO from tomorrow onwards.”

To Chalmers surprise, a look almost of dismay spread across Joshua’s face.

“What’s wrong? Don’t you think you can do the job?” asked Chalmers enquiringly.

Joshua shook his head. “No, boss. I can’t!”

There was a long silence.

Chalmers turned back to the table with an air of finality. “Well,” he said decisively, “you’re going to do it anyway, so that’s all there is to it! That’s an order, Joshua,” he added, looking back at him.

To his surprise, the African smiled broadly and, snapping his feet together, gave him a smart and noisy salute. “Yes, boss,” he said in a loud, enthusiastic voice.

Chalmers shook his head. Never, he thought, *never* would he understand these people!

“OK. Push off now, you idiot!” he said in a voice that carried overtones of amusement.

Joshua’s face beamed with satisfaction. “Yes, boss. Right now, boss.”

After he had gone, Chalmers went and sat on the edge of the bed and took out the mysterious little note that Joshua had given him. He studied it carefully but, hearing another knock on the door, he put it down on the bed next to his packet of cigarettes.

“Come in,” he shouted, frowning.

Joshua put his head around the door. “Boss, can I have a cigarette? I haven’t got any—”

Chalmers sighed. “For goodness sake, Joshua. Here, take one,” he said, holding the packet out to him. He watched Joshua’s fingers delve into the box. “I said ‘*one*’, Joshua—not the whole bloody box, you thieving so-and-so!”

A smile creased the African’s face. “Thank you, boss,” he said, retreating quickly with three or four clutched in his hand. Chalmers shook his head. He would almost miss it if Joshua ever stopped robbing him of his precious cigarettes!

He picked up the note again and re-read it. He recalled that the base’s former commander, George Falon, had mentioned once that sympathetic villagers frequently left such anonymous notes in odd places around the base.

But, he wondered, who could this be from? He ran over the possibilities in his mind. Josephine?

As Chalmers thought about it, it seemed more and more likely to him that the note had, in fact, come from her. He suspected that she knew far, far more about the terrorists than she had originally let on when she had visited the camp.

But he realised he had to be very careful. He remembered with discomfort, the strange, cryptic way she had smiled at him as he had left the village.

Who knew *which* side she was really working for.

*****

He went across to the table and, hastily opening the map, put his finger on Magomba kraal. His eyes travelled from there to the base camp and then back again to the deep, brown-coloured high ground of the Mazweru Hills. A slow smile spread across his face, only to vanish almost immediately as another—more frightening—possibility crossed his mind.

Supposing the note had been written, not by Josephine, but by Black Satan or one of his accomplices?

He went and sat on the edge of his bed again, a frown of deep concentration on his face. What was it the DC had said? ‘When out hunting tigers, be careful tigers aren’t hunting you!’

CHAPTER 60

Time: 05h05. December 18

Yet again, Chalmers' sleep was fitful, plagued with disturbing dreams.

Waking to the chill, comfortless half-light of dawn of a new day, he looked dully out of the window at a sky heavy with a low blanket of dark, rain-filled clouds.

He fumbled around on the bedside table and picked up his watch. As he turned in his bed, a sharp pain shot through his ankle. He groaned softly.

After a few moments, he sat up and, putting his hands behind his head, leant back against the cold, damp wall, thinking. There was no reason to hurry. He knew that in this weather, it would be pointless taking a patrol out anywhere. He turned his head and looked at the calendar.

Time was getting short. His call-up ended in a couple of weeks. Although he was longing with all his heart to get back home again and be free of the never-ending tension, doubt and uncertainty, there was one thing he wanted even more at the moment—*Black Satan*.

He got up and gingerly lowered his foot to the cold, slate floor, wincing as his full weight pressed down on the swollen ankle. He hobbled painfully over to the table to get a box of matches where his eye fell on the white envelope Joshua had given him the previous night.

Despite the obvious danger, he had already made up his mind that—rightly or wrongly, injury or no injury—he would go to Sapere kraal that evening. After all, he reasoned, there was only one way to find out whether the note had been left by Josephine or not and that was to go there himself and find out—and fortunately, he didn't have far to go: the kraal was at the end of the airstrip!

He glanced out of the window and looked towards Masikela's room on the opposite side of the quadrangle. Frowning, he sat down at the table and pulled his notebook towards him.

Tonight's little escapade would need very, *very* careful planning. After all,

if it were a ploy to get him and the men away from the camp or, alternatively, to ambush them at the kraal itself, the whole thing could very easily end in sudden disaster for them all.

He sat for several minutes marshalling his thoughts and then, opening his book, picked up his pen and started writing.

When he had finished, he read through the meticulous list of details. It certainly seemed—on paper at least—to be watertight, but he knew only too well how often in life things didn’t go as planned.

He glanced at his watch. It was time to dress. The security people would be arriving soon.

CHAPTER 61

Time: 21h58. That evening.

It was pitch dark and still drizzling steadily, and as he sat quietly tapping his fingers on the tacky steering wheel of the Leopard, Chalmers listened to the water dripping off the roof of the nearby African quarters a few metres from the main gate.

Everything was sodden and damp.

Chalmers raised his arm close to his face and peered at the luminous dial of his watch. The men should have been in position for some time by now, he calculated.

As he sat thinking about it, he gave a little chuckle of amusement. Assuming the note was genuine and that Josephine—if the letter had indeed been from her—was completely alone, Chalmers visualised all the firepower that was trained on Sapere kraal for one defenceless woman!

Yet he knew he couldn't afford to do otherwise. It could just as easily be Black Satan and his men lying in wait for them down there—with the added possibility that another group of terrorists was poised near the base itself, just waiting for them to leave before launching their own attack on the under-manned camp.

Chalmers sighed softly. He would get little sympathy from the authorities if it turned out that he had fallen for what would appear, in hindsight, to be such an obvious ruse.

Chalmers looked at his watch again. "OK, Joshua, it's time we were off," he said, turning the ignition key.

The small red light glowed on the dashboard and the engine started with a sudden roar. He fumbled around for the windscreen wiper knob and turned it on. The blade stuck momentarily and then swept across the windscreen with a slight screech. He put the Leopard into gear.

"A peerage or Westminster Abbey," he muttered with a slight grin as he released the handbrake and slowly eased the Leopard towards the main gate.

He leant forward, peering into the inky darkness beyond. Just for a moment, he was tempted to switch on the headlights but caution prevailed, and he decided against the idea.

A torch, held by one of the DSAs near the gates to help guide him out, flashed on briefly, its yellow light distorted and blurred in the fine rain.

Chalmers accelerated slightly, allowing the vehicle to move forward slowly until he felt the front wheels sink down as they came to the wide, water-filled dip in the ground that lay immediately outside the gates. The vehicle rocked gently from side to side as it negotiated the slippery hollow. Then, revving the engine slightly, Chalmers eased the Leopard onto the soft, muddy airstrip. Judging the distance until he thought he was roughly near the middle, he turned the wheel hard to his right and allowed the vehicle to roll slowly down the strip towards the nearby kraal.

To Chalmers—who could see almost nothing in the total darkness around him—the ride, short as it was, seemed interminable. He frowned in concentration, feeling and assessing each small bump and movement.

Minutes later, there was a sharp jerk as, coming to the end of the airstrip, the Leopard slid gently down onto the muddy ground at the T-junction. Turning the wheel to his left and easing the vehicle over to where he estimated the side of the track was, he pulled on the handbrake and switched off the engine.

He sat back for a few moments and listened. There was not a sound. He glanced at his watch. It was nine minutes past ten.

Easing himself out of the driving seat, he turned towards Joshua. “Come on, this is where we get off.”

As he inched passed Mashiri, he reminded him: “If you hear any firing, turn the headlights on full and drive straight down into the kraal. You’d better sit in the driver’s seat now so that you’re all ready.”

“Yes, boss.”

Chalmers, his ankle still throbbing painfully, climbed down awkwardly from the Leopard and stood still for a few moments, instinctively looking around him in the pitch dark, straining to see.

“Where the hell are you, Joshua?” he hissed.

“Here, boss,” a quiet, reassuring voice said nearby.

Chalmers moved cautiously towards Joshua, feeling the ground in front of him with his feet. He tripped and groped around with his free hand and

suddenly felt Joshua's arm.

"Grab the end of my rifle," he whispered, "otherwise we'll end up in Timbuktu at this rate!"

He heard Joshua give a soft chuckle.

Chalmers lifted his FN and felt Joshua fumblingly take hold of the end of the barrel.

"OK. Are you ready now?" he asked.

"Yes, boss."

"Right, lead on, Macduff!"

"What, boss?"

"Oh nothing! Let's get on with it."

As they slowly inched their way across the dirt track towards the kraal, Chalmers felt an almost irresistible urge to laugh. Now that he was actually here, the whole thing seemed ludicrous and so utterly improbable that he found it hard to take the situation seriously.

It was like something out of a children's adventure story, he thought.

He stopped, feeling the rifle jerk as Joshua stumbled on the uneven ground. The stock of the weapon twisted in his hand and he almost dropped it.

"Are you alright?" he whispered.

"Yes, boss."

Cautiously, he started groping his way forward again. A few minutes passed. Suddenly, the rifle butt slipped out of his grasp onto the ground.

He turned again, frowning. "What the hell are you doing, Joshua?" he hissed.

Joshua moved up to him. "We're there, boss."

Chalmers hesitated. "How do you know?"

There was a pause. "I can tell, boss."

"Oh!" replied Chalmers, somewhat taken aback.

Now they would just have to wait. The two men squatted down next to each other in silence.

It was raining harder now, and Chalmers could feel the cold water trickling down his neck and back. He turned up the collar of his bush jacket. It was going to be a long, very uncomfortable wait, he thought ruefully.

The minutes ticked by slowly. His legs started aching and he had pins-and-needles in his injured ankle. He felt behind him with his left hand and eased himself down into a sitting position on the cold, muddy ground.

Neither spoke.

Listening to the soft patter of the rain on Joshua’s cape, Chalmers gradually felt his eyes growing heavy. He bent his head forward slightly and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 62

He brought his head up with a jerk, suddenly startled as Joshua laid a warning hand on his arm. He squeezed his eyes tightly together. His right arm, still bearing the weight of his rifle, had gone numb. He realised with a feeling of guilt that he must have dozed off.

He felt Joshua's shoulder push against him urgently as he leant over and whispered in his ear: "Someone's coming," he warned.

Chalmers gripped his rifle and stood up slowly without a word. He strained his ears but could hear nothing. Very carefully, he raised his arm to his face and looked closely at his watch. It was five past eleven—five minutes after the appointed time.

Suddenly, he felt a hurried movement next to him and, instinctively stepping backwards, slipped slightly as his injured foot slid into a small puddle.

He heard whispering.

"Boss?" That was Joshua.

"What?" hissed Chalmers. He felt Joshua close to him.

"It's a girl."

"Are you sure? Where is she?" Chalmers peered into the darkness.

There was a movement in front of him.

"Right here, boss," said Joshua, nudging him on the arm.

Chalmers cautiously put out an arm in front of him. He felt soft, wet material and, under it, a large, soft bulge of flesh. He withdrew his hand hastily.

He heard a little, nervous giggle.

Somewhat disconcerted, Chalmers asked: "Did you leave the note—whoever *you* are?"

There was a moment's silence. "No, boss. I come with my mother."

The disembodied voice was thin and high-pitched.

"What is your name?"

"Anna Matiwa."

Must be Josephine's daughter, thought Chalmers quickly. "Where is your mother?"

"She is there."

Chalmers frowned. "For goodness' sake, girl! How am I to know where 'there' is?"

She tittered softly. "You must come with me. I show you."

Chalmers turned to Joshua. "Grab the end of my rifle and follow her."

They started walking.

After a few minutes, they stumbled onto a patch of level ground. Chalmers felt the rifle in his hand pull away to his left. He turned with it.

Suddenly, through the darkness, he spotted a tiny gleam of light—a small, almost gutted candle flickering bleakly in the blackness of a nearby hut which disappeared briefly as the young girl stepped through the doorway and momentarily blocked out its light.

Chalmers turned to Joshua. "OK, Joshua, you stay out here on guard," he said, following the girl inside.

*****

Some twenty minutes later, Chalmers slowly felt his way out of the derelict hut.

"Right, Mr Joshua," he said briskly. "We can all go home now and get some sleep!"

He froze as Joshua's hand warningly gripped him tightly on the arm. "Someone's there," Joshua said, whispering in his ear.

Motionless, they stood listening for several minutes in tense silence.

At length, Chalmers felt the grip on his arm relax.

"They've gone, boss."

Chalmers frowned. "That's very suspicious," he said, thoughtfully. "I wonder who the hell it was? Not that it really matters. I've got all the information I need now." He gripped Joshua's arm and turned his face towards him. "We've got 'em, Joshua—we've got 'em!"

He spoke very quietly but there was no disguising the note of jubilation in his voice.

In the pitch darkness, Chalmers did not see the smile that slowly spread across Joshua's face.

CHAPTER 63

Christmas Eve.

With hands thrust deep in his pockets, Chalmers stared moodily out of the window at the pouring rain.

For almost a week now, torrential rainstorms driven by high, gale-force winds had swept over the waterlogged countryside. The overcast sky—a dull, leaden grey—was filled with low-flying clouds.

Everywhere there was water. It dripped and oozed and ran in little rivulets and streams, filling the smallest ruts and depressions and flooding the low-level bridges and surrounding ground. On the drenched slopes of the misty hills and kopjes, cascading waters splashed and rushed headlong down over the rocks and sodden grass, cutting channels in the soft earth as they forced their way down to the boggy lowlands below.

And with the unceasing rain came the mud—deep, thick, soft and slimy. On the rain-drenched camp, a clinging pall of steamy dampness filled the quiet, deadened quarters with a musty, all-pervading smell of mildew.

The base was now almost completely cut off from the outside world and, with the enforced loneliness and inactivity, Chalmers felt a frustrating and depressing sense of being totally isolated and trapped.

Chitangwe had become a ‘scept’d isle … set in a silver sea’, he thought with a fleeting glimmer of amusement.

He turned from the window and sat down at the table and started reading through the last few pages that he had written of his book.

Writing had brought a certain measure of consolation to him during these long, dismal days.

At least, he thought, it had given him something engrossing and worthwhile to do. And, he thought with satisfaction, he was making good progress.

He broke into a smile as he re-read his account of Wally’s welcome addition to the camp a few weeks earlier and the young man’s irreverent quip as they had set out on their fateful trip to Umsholo: ’Oh Christ, this is nothing

but a suicide mission!' Wally was right, he mused with a chuckle. Sometimes his own call-up at Chitangwe seemed to him to be nothing else but one long walk to the gallows!

He shook his head reminiscently. He missed Wally and his bright, happy-go-lucky nature. Hopefully, the Pookie would be back on the road again soon, he thought, although he was sorry that the young man couldn't have been at Chitangwe for Christmas.

Glancing up at the calendar, he noticed the date.

Hell, he thought bitterly, what a way to spend Christmas, cut off from everyone and everything! If only the sun would shine—*that* at least, would have made some difference.

He leant back in his chair and started thinking of home and of his wife and son. What would they be doing now? he wondered. A wave of unhappiness washed over him. He frowned. He hadn't even been able to get a letter off to them, let alone any presents to go in the Christmas stocking he knew Christopher would be excitedly hanging at the foot of his bed tonight.

Not that anyone could buy things like toys any more, he reflected bitterly. Thanks to the economic sanctions that, as intended, had slowly squeezed the lifeblood out of the country's once-vibrant economy, even the most basic daily necessities had become luxuries.

The British government had a lot to answer for, Chalmers thought angrily. He remembered his mother's letter reminding him how, at one time, there'd even been calls for the Royal Air Force to bomb the country's main centres. He cursed softly to himself. It seemed almost inconceivable that his own kith and kin in England had actually contemplated sending in RAF bombers to attack them all—him, his wife, his little son, his friends and *their* families—the whole thing was utterly monstrous.

He got up and ambled over to the bed, sitting down disconsolately on its edge.

His glance fell on the calendar again and his handwritten note for Christmas Day. How could he go to the farm with half the country under water, for God's sake! he asked himself.

However, as he thought about it, a mood of sudden rebelliousness welled up in him. Why should he just tamely accept what life chose to hand out to him?

"To hell with it," he muttered angrily. "I'll go and see Claire and her family

tomorrow—even if I have to swim!”

*****

Suddenly, at four-thirty that afternoon, a large, green-and-brown camouflaged Bell helicopter noisily—and very unexpectedly—materialised out of the lowering rain clouds and touched down on the airstrip. It brought reserve supplies of Avtur fuel for the strike force helicopters.

To his great delight and surprise, it also brought newspapers, a note from Pamela and a letter from Mary enclosing a hand-drawn Christmas card from his son. Chalmers was delighted. Father Christmas hadn’t forgotten him after all! he thought happily.

Sitting alone in the empty and cheerless staff lounge, Chalmers began reading Pamela’s letter:

> ‘My dear Michael—I’m afraid this brings some rather unhappy news. You may remember Lord Richard Cecil was in the country making a film about the terrorist war? We learnt yesterday that he had been out on patrol with an army ‘Fire Force’ unit, recording material for his documentary[60] when, apparently, they were caught in an ambush. Lord Richard was hit twice at close range, once in the thigh and then in the chest. He died within minutes. …’

Chalmers put the letter back in the envelope and, getting up, went back to his room. He lay down on the bed and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 64

Time: 19h00. The same day.

Christmas Eve, and an air of excited anticipation enveloped the Pearson homestead at Good Hope Farm.

In the fast-gathering darkness, the lights of the farmhouse shone out warm and yellow on the cold, damp night outside. Despite the spitting rain, the wind had dropped at last, and already there were patchy breaks in the dark clouds through which a few early, pale stars were twinkling faintly.

An owl hooted, and in the distance—above the insistent noise of the croaking frogs and shrill, rasping crickets—could be heard the occasional disturbed lowing of the restless cattle in the mud-churned cattle kraal.

Inside, the cosy farmhouse was a hive of activity with last minute festive preparations. The spacious rooms were filled with the sounds of laughter as the Pearson's two younger children, Jennifer and Ruth, their little faces flushed and shining with excitement, rushed shrieking from room to room, clambering over the chairs and skidding on the rugs in boisterous play.

From the warm, cheerful lounge where a large log fire was burning brightly in a massive stone fireplace, could be heard an English cathedral choir on the radio jubilantly singing a Festival of Carols.

Near the glowing fireplace in front of which the Pearson's two large Dobermans, Impi and Sheba, were lying on their sides half-asleep in contented abandon, stood a huge Christmas tree, so tall that its slender tip curled over as it touched the high white ceiling of the room. Freshly cut and smelling fragrantly of pine gum, the young fir glistened with lengths of blue, white and red tinsel, which Claire—now and again standing on tiptoe—was arranging on its dark, green branches.

Her eyes shone with quiet contentment, and as her hands deftly draped the sparkling lengths of decoration over the tree, she softly hummed in tune to the carols on the radio.

After a few minutes, she stepped back and, putting her head to one side,

looked at the tree with critical approval. Turning, she walked over to the large oak table on which stood an old cardboard box of ornaments. Looking inside, she selected a small red- and gold-painted angel. She held it up to the light and looked at it musingly. How beautiful it was, she thought, running her forefinger delicately over its little stubby wings and cherubic face.

A deep voice suddenly broke the silence. “I think we should put *you* on the tree instead—you’d make a perfect angel!”

Startled, Claire looked around and saw her father’s farm manager, Tom Prescott—a pleasant, heavily-built, bearded man of about 50—standing in the doorway of the lounge looking at her. He was carrying a rifle in one hand.

She laughed musically, a soft blush spreading over her cheeks.

The dogs raised their heads enquiringly but, recognising the familiar visitor, lay down again with deep sighs.

“Hello, Uncle Tom,” she said brightly. “How lovely to see you again. How are you?”

He walked into the lounge, threw his bush-hat down carelessly on a nearby armchair, and leant his rifle up against the wall next to three others.

“All the better for seeing you, my pretty one,” he boomed with a broad smile on his strong, jovial face. He strolled heavily over to her and, catching her around the waist with his large, powerful hands, lifted her off the floor and swung her around playfully. She squealed breathlessly, still clutching the little angel.

“Put me *down*, Uncle Tom. Put me down this instant, you dreadful man,” she cried, laughingly.

He put her down, puffing slightly, and then holding her by the shoulders at arms length, looked at her warmly. ”Now, let me have a good look at you, me blue-eyed beauty. Haven’t seen you for months!”

She straightened her hair, slightly out of breath. “Uncle Tom, I’m not a little girl anymore,” she admonished him, playfully.

“I can see *that*, sweetheart,” he said, smiling at her admiringly.

A log fell noisily in the grate sending a shower of crackling sparks up the chimney and, at that moment, Jennifer and Ruth, with screams of delight, raced into the room, their ponytails swinging wildly from side to side.

“Uncle Tom! Uncle Tom!” they cried in excitement, jumping up and down in front of his burly figure, their chubby little arms stretched up towards him beseechingly.

“Well, well, well,” he said, beaming down happily at their upturned faces with a fond smile. “And how are my little ragamuffins tonight? All ready for Father Christmas?”

He bent down and, putting an arm around each of them, lifted them up in the air, groaning playfully at their weight. “Bless me if you’re not getting as fat as little piglets!”

He kissed them each loudly in turn, and then, holding them closely to him, started tickling them with his free fingers. They screeched and wriggled in his arms with delight, beating his chest with little clenched hands and pulling at his ears and beard.

Claire turned and watched them, a smile of amusement on her face. “I think you’d better stop it, Uncle Tom; you’ll make them sick. They’ve been tearing around like mad things all evening,” she said in a reproving voice. She walked over to the struggling group and looked up into their happy faces as they sat on his crooked arms, pouting down at her.

She shook her head indulgently as Tom lowered the protesting girls to the floor. “Go on, you two, why don’t you start putting all the presents under the Christmas tree?”

The girls clapped their hands eagerly and raced out of the room.

Tom exhaled heavily and looked at Claire. “So, where are your poor mother and father? Have they run away?” he boomed in his deep, rich voice. “I wouldn’t blame them if they had!”

Claire chuckled. “I expect they slipped out the back as soon as they heard you coming,“ she said with a grin.

He chuckled. “The devil they have, you cheeky thing!”

“Mum’s in the kitchen doing battle with the turkey for tomorrow’s lunch,” she went on, laughingly, “and the last time I saw Dad—” she stopped and looked around as her father appeared in the doorway, a glass of sherry in his hand.

“Hello, Tom,” her father said in a welcoming voice. “I thought I heard you come in just now.”

Claire looked at Tom and grinned impishly.

Her father walked in and sat down heavily in a large armchair by the fire, gently pushing one of the dogs aside with the toe of his shoe.

“You could hear him ten kilometres away, if you ask me,” said Claire, her eyes sparkling with amusement. She went across to her father and sat on the

arm of his chair next to him. “Is Mum still in the kitchen,” she asked.

James removed his glasses and taking a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped the lenses. “Yup—” He paused at the sound of breaking crockery, followed by an ominous silence. “Sounds like she could do with a little help though, if you ask me—although I’m steering well clear!” He grinned and, looking at Tom short-sightedly, said: “It’s like a steam-foundry in there—crash, bang, wallop—mince-pies here, Christmas pud there, gravy in the sink, turkey in the dustbin!”

Tom exploded with laughter. “I don’t think I’ll bother with lunch tomorrow then, by God!” he said, his eyes beaming with delight.

Putting on his glasses again, James Pearson looked at Tom enquiringly: “What will you have to drink, Tom?” He gave him a broad wink. “I’m sure Claire will be only too happy to get it for you!”

Claire jumped up quickly. “Uncle Tom can get his own—he needs some exercise!” She bent down and gave her father a light kiss on the top of his balding head, and then, poking her tongue out at Tom, said: “I think I’ll just go and see if I can do anything in the kitchen.”

She walked out of the lounge, laughing.

The two men watched her affectionately. There was a short silence.

“Tell me, James, how come an ugly brute like you has such a lovely family?” asked Tom, shaking his head, a broad smile on his face. “You’re a damned lucky fellow, you know!”

James gave a soft laugh. “Must be all the beer and *biltong*[61],” he said humorously. He stared into the fire, watching the flames lick around the end of a wet log of wood which sizzled loudly as the sap oozed out in tiny, frothy bubbles.

Hearing his two sons, David and John, enter the room talking loudly, he looked up. The boys greeted Tom and their father with easy familiarity.

David, the eldest—who had recently received his military call-up papers and was due to go into the army for a two years stint the following week—threw himself noisily onto the sofa.

He looked across at his father. “Hey, Dad,” he said, after a moment’s pause, “don’t you think it’s about time we got some sandbags up around the house? You won’t have me around to look after you much longer, you know!” he said in a teasing voice and grinning widely.

Tom looked over to him, nodding. “Quite right, my boy. Been telling your father that for ages. Should have been done a long time ago.” He stood up, groaning under his weight and, walking over to a large, elegant server table, poured himself a whisky and soda.

James Pearson sighed. He had been meaning to put up sandbags for a while but, somehow, had never got around to it. The farm already had excellent security fencing and a radio-alarm system, so the question of sandbagging had been carelessly put off from week to week.

“Yes, I daresay you’re right. We’d better make a start on it after Christmas.” He looked across at Tom soberly. “Have you heard if they’ve caught any of the terrs involved in either of the mission killings yet?”

“No,” said Tom, drawing the word out with a note of disgust in his voice. “The trouble with the army is that a lot of the people at the top have gone soft.” He shook his head and lifted his glass, pointing it at James. “All this talk of a ‘political solution’ is nothing but a damned convenient excuse to just hand the place over to Mugabe. When the politicians start talking of ‘political solutions’, you can bet your life on it that they’re about to give in.”

There was silence for a moment.

Tom sighed. “It’s not the fault of the army boys,” he resumed, “but the reality is that a lot of the ‘Top Brass’ just don’t *want* us to win the war any more.” He shook his head ponderously. “I could tell you a thing or two about certain people—” He looked over at James knowingly. “For instance, did you realise that …”

He was interrupted by a woman’s voice calling agitatedly from the kitchen. “James, could you spare a moment, please?”

James looked up wearily. “Sorry, Tom, another domestic crisis rears its ugly head,” he apologised with a smile of resignation, lifting himself out of the chair. “Coming, dear,” he called out placatingly, giving his farm manager a broad wink at the same time.

As he left the room, he affectionately ruffled his daughters’ hair as the young girls bustled self-importantly into the room, their arms full of brightly wrapped gifts.

Seeing all the presents, John sprang up from the sofa where he had been sitting next to his elder brother, leafing through a magazine.

“Hey, which are mine? I bags the big red one!” He tried to snatch if from Jennifer’s arms, but with a shrill scream of protest, she twisted herself away

and ran to the tree, impetuously spilling the parcels onto the floor in a jumbled heap.

John turned to David. “Come on, Dave, let’s open them all now!”

By way of an answer, David picked up a large cushion and threw it at him. With a loud hoot of laughter, John ducked nimbly. It sailed over his back and hit Tom on the side of the head.

“Hey, you skellems[62]!” the big man yelled playfully, leaning around and throwing it back awkwardly. As he did so, Claire and her mother walked into the room.

“So, Tom, it’s *you* who are ruining all my cushions—and here was me blaming it on the dogs,” Helen said, tucking a wisp of grey hair over her ear in a preoccupied manner.

As she walked over to the fire, Tom stood up with a guilty smile. “Hello, Helen,” he said, greeting her warmly. “How’s tricks?”

She sat down tiredly and smiled good-naturedly at the big man, then hearing suppressed giggling from behind Tom’s chair, she leant forward, craning her head as she tried to see what the girls were up to.

“Now, you leave those presents alone, you two,” she said sternly. “Those are not to be opened until tomorrow morning!”

She sat back and looked at Tom with a knowing smile. “Children!” she said, shaking her head affectionately.

*****

A few moments later, James came back into the lounge. Hearing him, Helen looked around, enquiringly. “Did you manage to fix the stove, dear?”

Her husband sat down on a small table near her, nodding. “Good as new,” he reassured her with a smile. “Now, why don’t you just sit back and relax a moment? I’ll get you a drink.”

As he poured her a sherry, they heard the telephone ring from the hallway. Helen looked around at the clock on the mantelpiece. “I wonder who that can be at this hour?” It was just after a quarter to nine.

James got up with a sigh and went out of the room to answer the phone. They could hear his voice faintly.

Helen turned her attention to the children: “Now, you little monkeys, it’s

time for bed. Pack everything away nicely and say ‘goodnight’ to everyone. Don’t forget your Uncle Tom,” Helen reminded them.

Tom sat up and stretched out his arms. “Sleep well, my little ones,” he said, giving each of them a loud kiss on the cheeks. “I’ll see you tomorrow—and maybe,” he added in a mysterious voice, “*maybe* there’ll be another present for each of you. You never know!”

They clapped their hands excitedly. “And we’ve got a present for you,” said Ruth as if revealing a secret. “You’ll *love* it,” she exclaimed.

Jennifer looked at him seriously as if considering a matter of immense importance and then, leaning forward, whispered: “Shall I tell you what it is?”

He drew back in feigned shock and looked at her, an exaggeratedly astonished look on his face: “Oh no, no, no! You mustn’t tell me,” he said, tweaking her on the nose. “Whatever next! You must keep it as a surprise.”

Helen laughed. “Come on now,” she said, shepherding the exuberant girls out of the room. “We’ve still got to hang up those stockings!”

The children raced off to their bedroom and started scrambling into their pink pyjamas, frantic with anticipation.

Father Christmas was coming!

CHAPTER 65

The same time.

"Comrade Shoniwa has done well," Black Satan murmured softly, pushing the unlocked security gate of Good Hope Farm open slightly. "The old man knows what's good for him!"

Aaron Letson slipped through and stood next to him breathing hard. He was drenched through and cold. He shivered in the drizzle. "Is it far to the farmhouse?"

Black Satan bent down, resting his AK-47 on the ground while they waited for the rest of their comrades to join them.

"It's about a kilometre up this track. Shoniwa said the house is hidden behind many trees. They will give us good cover. But don't make a sound—they've got dogs!" he added tersely.

Once assembled inside the perimeter fence, the group of ten guerrillas stood around nervously, waiting for their leader's command. Black Satan picked up his machine gun, and moving slowly and stealthily, the dark, heavily-armed figures crept towards the farmhouse. They reached the surrounding trees and spread out, studying the heavily-shadowed outline of the house apprehensively.

Light from the lounge windows spilled out onto the newly-mown lawn.

Black Satan, crouching in the soaking grass, peered cautiously around the trunk of a large jacaranda tree and scrutinised the farmhouse. Through the open windows, he heard voices and a woman laugh, followed a few moments later, by the sound of crockery breaking. He turned his head sideways.

"Hey, Letson," he whispered, "I think they're all in that room there," he said, pointing to the lounge. "You know what to do—it'll be easy!" He grinned to himself. He was feeling more confident.

"Yeah, man," answered Letson from the shadows. "Let's go and get the bastards!"

*****

Helen Pearson pushed open the bedroom door and was met with a barrage of giggles and shrieks.

"Come on, girls, it's getting very late!" she exclaimed. "It's way past your bedtime. Have you got your stockings ready to hang up?"

"Yes, look!" said Ruth, waving a long, grey woollen sock around her head and dancing gaily around the room, chanting: "I've got a so-ock! I've got a so-ock!"

"Where on earth did you find that monster?" exclaimed her mother.

"In John's drawer—they're so-o-o-o long, look!" said Jennifer, grabbing one of the socks and stretching it across her chest.

Helen laughed. "Alright then!" She walked over to the bedside table and switched on the little lamp. It filled the room with a warm, cheerful glow. The two girls busily arranged their stockings next to their favourite dolls lying at the foot of their beds.

"Now, darlings, say your prayers—then *sleep!*"

The two girls scrambled down from their beds and, kneeling on the floor, closed their eyes and clasped their hands together.

"Our Father, which art in Heaven, Harold be thy name—"

Ruth started giggling softly and turned to look at Jennifer, her eyes twinkling mischievously.

"Now, now," said their mother reprovingly, "say them properly."

They rushed through the Lord's Prayer in unison, ending with a breathless "Foreveranever-amen."

As they reached the end, Ruth retreated between the clean, white sheets as if being pursued by a dragon. She snuggled down, pulling the soft pink covers under her chin. She looked around at her sister who was still kneeling on the carpet by the side of her bed.

She listened impatiently as Jennifer recited: "God bless Mummy, God bless Daddy, God bless David and John and Ruth and Claire and me—and Uncle Tom, too." She stopped, thoughtfully. "And God bless the terrorists!" she added as an after-thought.

"What did you say just then, Jenny?" her mother asked her, a curious look on her face.

"I said: "God bless the terrorists," she said, pertly.

“Why did you say that?” Helen asked casually, helping her daughter into bed.

“My teacher says we must pray for everyone—even the bad people. She said that Jesus said we must love *everyone*—especially the ones we don’t like.” She paused and then went on: ”Jesus *did* say that, didn’t he, Mummy?” asked Jennifer earnestly.

Her mother bit her lip thoughtfully. She was a religious woman and, in her youth, had seriously contemplated becoming a nun. It hadn’t turned out that way, but she had never forgotten the things she had learnt as a young girl. She ran over in her mind the words she knew so well:

> ‘But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you; and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.’

Helen suddenly smiled. “Yes, darling, your teacher is perfectly right.” She paused. “Now,” she added, brightly, “it really *is* time for you to go to sleep.” She kissed them both. “Night-night, darlings, sleep tight! God bless. See you in the morning.”

She left the room, gently closing the door behind her, a smile of gentle contentment on her face.

She walked back to the lounge, pondering Jennifer’s words. She wouldn’t tell James, she decided; he wouldn’t really understand, and as for Tom—well, he *certainly* wouldn’t.

As she entered the room, she saw her husband standing with his back to the fire. Although he appeared to be looking at the brightly-coloured decorations that festooned the room, his face was clouded. He turned and looked at her.

“That was Ed on the phone just now.”

She smiled uncertainly. “Oh? What did he want?”

“I’m afraid they won’t be coming over tomorrow after all, dear.”

She groaned in disappointment. “Oh, all that food!” but almost immediately, something in the unusual tone in his voice stopped her short. She looked at him with sudden concern. “Is everything alright?” she asked quickly.

“No, I’m afraid not. Stephen was involved in a landmine incident this morning.” He looked at his wife and saw the colour drain away from her face. “He’s alive,” he added quickly, “but he’s lost both legs.” He went

across to her and put his arm around her waist, consolingly. “Come and sit down.”

She sank down, her hands resting limply in her lap.

There was silence.

“Oh, poor Ed and Shirley. Their only son—and at Christmas too!” she exclaimed, eyes brimming with tears. “Is there anything we can do?”

Her husband shook his head sadly. “No. They’re in Fort Victoria now. Ed was ringing from the hotel. Stephen’s in the hospital there.”

“The bastards,” muttered Tom, shaking his head. “I just wish I could get my hands on a few of them.”

He got up and walking heavily across to the table, began to pour himself another whisky. He looked over his shoulder. “Will you have one, Helen?” he asked, his voice suddenly gentle and solicitous.

She looked across at him and shook her head. “No thanks, Tom, not at the moment.” She turned to David. “But I would love a cup of tea. Please can you ask Timothy to make some, dear?”

Her son stood up immediately. “Sure, Mum.”

He went out of the room. In the silence that followed, they could hear him calling: “Timothy, Timothy!”

Helen leant back in the chair. “How did it happen?” she asked, looking at her husband.

James sat down heavily with a sigh. “Usual story. They were out on patrol, and Stephen stepped on an anti-personnel mine. They casevaced[63] him straight into Fort Vic. Ed says the helicopter guys came within minutes.”

“Thank God for that,” interjected Tom. “He wouldn’t have stood much chance otherwise.” He shook his head. “I must say, those chaps are really on the ball.”

David came back into the room. “Tea’s just coming, Mum. Timothy had made some already.”

Helen looked around and stared at him. Her heart contracted. In a week he’d be in the army too. As she thought of it, the tears welled up in her eyes. Why all this senseless killing? she asked herself. What was it all for? Her David …

As she looked at him, she saw him as he once had been—a laughing, merry little boy of six sitting astride old Bucket, the family’s oh-so-patient donkey.

Aside from Stephen, Bucket had been David's best friend. Helen remembered a photograph of them all—there was Stephen, two years older, laughing and shrieking as he pushed the reluctant donkey from behind, with their houseboy, Timothy, pulling gamely from the front.

She still had the photograph somewhere …

There was a rattle of teacups as Timothy came into the room, carrying a large tray.

"Good evening, madam. Good evening, boss," he said with a subdued smile as he bent down and put the tray on a nearby coffee table.

Helen looked up at his familiar, wrinkled face. Dear old Timothy Shoniwa. Thank goodness there are still some good ones, she mused.

"Good evening, Timothy. Thank you," she said warmly. But she turned her face away so that he wouldn't see that she had been crying.

As the elderly African left the room, Claire smiled reminiscently. "It's nice to see him again. But he looks—oh, I don't know—*sad*, somehow," she remarked.

Her father nodded his head. "Yes—he's not his usual self at all these days." He paused. "Must be age, I suppose. After all, he's knocking on a bit now—" He glanced round at Tom: "a bit like the old granddad here!"

They all burst out laughing.

Going over to the tea tray, Claire began pouring the tea. "Oh, he's forgotten the sugar," she said suddenly. "Never mind, I'll just go and get some from the kitchen—"

As she turned, she knocked the small milk jug off the tray. It fell with a crash onto the slate floor, breaking into fragments and splashing milk over her dress.

"God, you women," said Tom, shaking his head, as he got up to help her. "Been at the bottle again, I suppose!"

Claire shook her head with a laugh. "I'd better go and get a cloth!"

She walked towards the door.

CHAPTER 66

Crouching silently by the front door, their weapons at the ready, Black Satan and four of his comrades listened intently. The guerrilla leader bared his teeth in anxiety, his heart beating violently in his chest. Suddenly, he stiffened as he heard an outburst of furious barking from somewhere in the house.

Almost simultaneously, Letson and four of the other guerrillas who had split off into a separate group, began firing through the open windows of the lounge, pouring a devastating stream of bullets into the room and its unsuspecting occupants.

From his position by the front entrance, Black Satan tried to make sense of the ensuing uproar of shouts and piercing screams—abruptly cut short—and the sounds of breaking furniture and animal snarls. He heard a heavy thud, more shouting and the sound of running footsteps. There was another burst of automatic fire, then silence.

“Come on,” the guerrilla leader shouted.

He burst into the house, his machine gun at his hip and almost collided with Letson who was running out from the lounge, wild-eyed.

“We got the bastards!” he yelled, exultantly.

Black Satan cocked his ear as a door slammed loudly somewhere in the house. He heard, faintly, a key being turned in a lock. Breaking into a run, he and the men made their way up the passage, stopping halfway, straining to detect where the sound had come from.

In the sudden stillness, he heard soft sobbing, quickly stifled. But he had heard enough.

With a malicious grin, he strode further down the passage and stopping outside a closed door, tried the handle. It was locked. Stepping back and lifting his leg, he kicked the wooden panel several times with his heavy boot. There was a loud splintering noise as the wood gave way and the door swung open violently.

He glanced round the room quickly. It was empty, and yet …

The rest of the group, pushing behind him, crowded into the small room.

A slow grin spread across Black Satan's face as he noticed a small movement of the crumpled pink bed covers where they touched the highly-polished parquet wood floor. He raised a forefinger to his lips and pointed his machine gun at the bed. He slowly and silently walked over to it. He heard a little sniff from below.

A grin of triumph spread over his face.

"Come out or I'll blow your brains out." His voice was devoid of feeling.

He waited.

There was a shuffling sound as Ruth and Jennifer crawled out slowly, their little faces contorted with fear. Ruth was crying and Jennifer put her arm around her little sister's shoulder protectively.

"Little white bastards," Black Satan snarled, looking at them with contempt and loathing.

Suddenly hearing another furtive noise, he looked down again as Claire, still prostrate on the floor, struggled frantically to disentangle herself from the bed covers in a frenzied effort to come to her young sisters' aid.

"Ah! What's this we have here?" he said, slowly and gloatingly.

He bent down and grabbing the young woman viciously around the ankle, pulled her roughly from under the bed.

Black Satan ran his eyes up and down her body lewdly. He licked his lips. "A nice, young white bitch at last," he said softly under his breath. His voice was thick with lust.

Leaning down, he rested his machine gun on the floor next to him, and knelt down beside her.

"Don't hurt my sister! Oh, please don't hurt her!" Jennifer screamed, suddenly darting across to Black Satan, her face contorted in terror.

Glancing briefly at the frantic child, Black Satan lifted his arm and pushed her violently away.

As she fell against the wall, she looked up and screamed as Letson, lifting his AK, fired several rounds into her stomach at point blank range. She crumpled in a small, misshapen heap on the floor.

Ruth, in a paroxysm of terror, gave a piercing scream and threw herself across her sister's bloodied, lifeless body, her diminutive frame wracked by hysterical sobs.

With tears streaming down her face, Claire struggled frantically to get to her feet. Black Satan pushed her down onto the floor savagely and threw

himself across her writhing body.

“Oh no you don’t, you bloody little bitch,” he spat, breathing heavily into her face.

Laughing crudely, the others gathered around in anticipation, shouting bawdy encouragements.

Black Satan turned his head slightly in their direction. ”Get rid of the other kid—and leave us alone,” he snarled impatiently.

The men cheered and howled lasciviously.

“Come on,” Letson said, “let’s see if we can find some Christmas stuff for ourselves. We’ll come back for this bitch later—when Blacko’s finished with her!”

CHAPTER 67

Time: 07h00. Christmas Day.

Chalmers woke suddenly.

There was no gentle transition—one moment he was asleep, the next wide-awake. He turned his head towards the window. The sun was streaming across his bed through the half-drawn curtains.

Wonderful!

He sat up and watched with quiet pleasure as a cloud of minute dust particles floated in the still air, glinting in the shafts of sunlight.

After a few moments' pleasurable contemplation, he threw back the blanket and jumping out of bed, walked barefoot to the window. Pulling back the curtains fully, he flung the window open and took a deep breath, drawing in the fresh, wine-like air into his lungs. He looked across at the clear, distant hills basking in the soft, morning sunshine and at the deep blue sky. There was not a cloud in sight.

Crossing the room, he went to the other window and opened it wide. As he leant out over the sill, a flight of egrets flew low over the guard tower in a perfect 'V' formation. Watching the slow flying, snow-white birds disappear into the distance, he felt a tingle of anticipation. He looked down at the delicate shoots of grass which had sprung up in the quadrangle and then across at the black, paint-splashed tarpaulin which rose in an ungainly hump over the newly-acquired mortar—another present, this time from the Russians, thanks to Claire's kind efforts! The tarpaulin was wet and glistening with raindrops that flashed in the sunshine. Here and there, he could see gossamer cobwebs sparkling in the light, their silvery, delicate strands traced in outline by strings of tiny beads of moisture.

The sheer magic of the morning roused in him a feeling of elation. It was good to be alive!

Grabbing his towel and razor, he went to the washroom to shave, humming contentedly to himself. The chore was soon finished and, once back in his

room, he quickly dressed and went outside. As he started walking across the quadrangle, he saw Kenneth coming towards him.

"Good morning, Kenneth—merry Christmas!" he said, cheerfully.

The radio operator broke into a wide grin. "Good morning, boss. Merry Christmas." He paused. "Boss, you're wanted on the radio."

"Oh? Who is it?"

"Hermes, boss."

"OK, Kenneth, thanks," he replied.

He strode over to the radio room and went over to the set. "Hello, 224. This is Charlie Tango. Over."

The set crackled. There was a loud click. "Hello, Charlie Tango—this is Sunray speaking. Are you going out on patrol today?" It was Steve Bishop's voice.

Chalmers raised his eyebrows. What an odd question! "Affirmative."

There was a long pause. "We're coming over to your loc. Wait for us, please," the voice ordered.

Chalmers frowned. Why so peremptory—and who, and why, were they coming? He was tempted to ask but immediately thought better of it. Radio transmissions were frequently intercepted.

"Roger. Will do."

Leaving the radio room, he strolled over to the kitchen and put his head around the door.

"'Morning, Misheck. One egg, large. One piece of bacon, large. One sausage, large. And tea—a *big* pot!"

Not waiting for an answer, he started walking away but almost immediately turned back. "Oh, and a very merry Christmas, Misheck!" he called out.

Wiping his hands on a tea towel, the cook turned to him, his face beaming. "Merry Christmas, boss!"

Chalmers smiled. "I'm afraid I haven't bought you a present, Misheck, but seeing as it's Christmas, you may—just this *once*—" he stressed the word "have one of my sausages for your breakfast!"

Misheck grinned. "Thank you, boss."

Going into the sunlit lounge, Chalmers picked up one of the newspapers that had been left by the Bell helicopter crew the day before and, moving to a chair by one of the windows, he sat down to read.

It was a South African paper. Skimming through it, his eye caught sight of

a small item.

> ‘David Dimbleby describes how in the Boer War, British troops destroyed farms, slaughtered livestock and set up the world’s first concentration camps, in which as many as 26,000 Afrikaner women and children died.’

He raised his eyebrows. Turning the page, another item caught his attention.

> ‘LONDON. A young woman screamed for help for 25 minutes as she was raped, battered and strangled in London late on Friday night, but neighbours said they did nothing because fighting and screams are frequent there.
>
> ‘Police in the Islington district said they were called on Saturday morning when children going out to play found the body in a pool of blood outside an apartment block on the De Beauvoir Estate.
>
> ‘The woman, as yet unidentified, was so badly beaten that police could only estimate her age at between 15 and 30.’

Chalmers put the newspaper down. That—in England? *English* people? He frowned, shaking his head in bewilderment. England was getting almost as bad as here! he thought in disbelief.

He got up and crossing to the bookcase, took out a cheap copy of *A Christmas Carol* by Dickens and, sitting down again to wait for his breakfast, started reading:

> ‘Once upon a time—of all the good days in the year, on Christmas Eve—old Scrooge sat busy in his counting house. It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal: …’

CHAPTER 68

Time: 10h30. The same day.

At the unexpected sound of loud laughter from the verandah outside, Chalmers looked up, puzzled.

A sudden outburst of raucous voices singing ‘God rest ye merry gentlemen, let nothing you despair’ was followed by a noisy exclamation: “*Ouch!* Careful, you idiot!”

Another voice—surely Wally’s, thought Chalmers in surprise—complained: “Bloody hell, it’s heavier than concrete!”

There was a laugh accompanied by more scuffling, and then the discordant singing started again.

Still slightly bemused, Chalmers put down his book and got up from the chair. At that moment, Wally and Steve Bishop burst noisily into the room.

“Happy Christmas, Dad,” shouted Wally, exuberantly. “It’s party time! Put your lipstick and best silk stockings on!”

Steve noisily heaved a crate of rattling beer bottles onto the old dining table and then walked over to Chalmers.

“’Morning, Mike, merry Christmas,” he said heartily, holding out his hand.

Chalmers, with a broad smile on his face, shook hands with him. “And a merry Christmas, Steve—and to you too, Wally, you old reprobate!” he added, going over to him and shaking hands warmly. “Well, I must say, this is a *very* pleasant surprise!” he exclaimed, putting his hands on his hips and looking at the two of them.

“Good! We hoped it would be,” said Steve. “We thought the war could do without us for just one day!”

“Too bloody true!” added Wally. “But hey, Mon Capitaine,” he said, looking around the room, “where’s my Christmas present? I don’t see one!”

Chalmers chuckled. “You’ll be lucky!”

“Well, never mind the present,” said Wally, “we’re going to get you drunk. Do you good—in fact, we’re all going to get plastered!”

Chalmers regarded the men, smiling indulgently. Although he seldom drank and was particularly averse to rowdy parties, he was very pleased to see the pair of them—especially Wally. However, he had no intention of cancelling his plans to visit the farm. He did some quick thinking.

"Well, certainly one drink in honour of the occasion will be very nice," he prevaricated, "but I'm afraid I've got to disappoint you guys—I accepted an invitation to have Christmas lunch with some friends on a farm nearby. I don't think they would appreciate it very much if I turned up completely 'motherless'!" he added with a laugh.

"No-ooh," cried Wally and Steve in a long, drawn-out cry of disappointment.

"Cancel it, Mike!" exclaimed Steve.

"Yeah, man," added Wally. "Go tomorrow—send a message—say you're being attacked by terrorists and are too busy to come today!"

Chalmers chuckled. "No, no, I can't do that; I more or less promised."

"Damn!" Wally burst out, throwing himself down disconsolately in a chair.

There was a deflated silence.

Steve turned and looked at Chalmers. "What farm are you going to, Mike?"

"'Good Hope'"

Steve opened his eyes wide. "Oh, I know the people there very well—the Pearsons. Old friends of mine. Their place is up near St. Mark's Mission, isn't it?"

Chalmers nodded. "Yes, that's them."

"How come *you* know the family, then?" asked Steve, curious.

"Well, I don't actually. I only know their daughter, Claire. I met her at Urungwe," Chalmers explained.

Steve nodded. "Oh, that's right, she works in the district commissioner's office there. I forgot that." He fell silent a moment. "Isn't she a gorgeous thing?" Then he added: "But the whole family's really super."

Wally clicked his fingers. "How old is she?' he asked, eyes sparkling.

Steve turned to him. "Never you mind—she's far too nice for a bit of old rough like you. Don't you agree, Mike?"

Chalmers laughed. "Good God, yes!" he said, emphatically.

There was a pause, then Steve's face suddenly brightened. "I know! Why don't we *all* go up there together?" he said, enthusiastically. "That would be fantastic!" He turned to Chalmers. "What d'you think, Mike?"

Chalmers didn't like the idea at all although he tried gamely to hide the fact. "I really don't think it's such a good idea, Steve," he temporised. "It would be a bit much, the three of us just turning up out of the blue without any warning, don't you think?" he said, looking at Steve.

"Rubbish, man!" interjected Wally. "I bet they'd welcome us with open arms. I mean, it *is* Christmas after all, damn it!" He paused. "Oh, *I* know why you don't want us there—you just want to have the delectable daughter all to yourself!" he said, laughing.

Recognising there was some truth in what he'd said, Chalmers grinned sheepishly. "Ok, ok, I give in!" he said with a resigned laugh realising there was no way to get out of it gracefully.

The others cheered.

"That's the spirit, Dad!" exclaimed Wally, jumping up. "And we'll be really polite and take our own beer," he said, rubbing his hands together happily and walking across to the table to retrieve the heavy crate.

Chalmers smiled limply. "Alright. I'll just go and tell Joshua to get the men ready." He moved to the door. "Got room for a couple of the chaps in your Leopard, Steve?"

He nodded. "Sure thing, Mike.

*****

The two Leopards roared up the dirt track that led to the Pearson's farmhouse.

Chalmers followed the road with his eyes until it disappeared behind a cluster of jacaranda trees at a sharp bend. As they approached the trees, Chalmers caught a glimpse of the house.

He saw the brake lights on Steve's Leopard flash on in front of him as, slowing down, he eased the vehicle around a circular drive and came to a squeaking halt at the side of the house. Chalmers pulled up behind him and, undoing his safety belt, climbed out over the legs of the three DSAs.

He turned to Joshua. "Wait here a moment. I'll just go and find out what the arrangements are for you chaps."

He jumped down, and Wally and Steve, talking and laughing loudly, walked over to join him. Wally, who had been drinking steadily during the entire trip, suddenly burst out carol singing:

‘Fear not then, said the angel,

Let nothing you affright.

To free all those who trust in Him,

From Satan’s power and might.

O tidings of comfort and joy …’

Chalmers frowned slightly. “Shush, man! We don’t know these people yet. Behave yourself!” he chided his young friend amiably.

Wally put on a duly-reproved face.

Chalmers turned and looked around appreciatively at his surroundings.

It was idyllically peaceful, the almost perfect stillness broken only by the soft twitter of birds in the nearby trees and shrubs, and the gentle cooing of doves.

The farmhouse stood on elevated ground, and as he gazed beyond the recently mown lawn, he could see the mauve-coloured hills in the distance with small puffs of fleecy white clouds drifting slowly above them.

He breathed in contentedly. “This is beautiful. I’d give anything to have a place like this,” he said.

“Lovely, isn’t it,” agreed Steve.

They stood together admiring the view.

Steve suddenly turned. “I wonder where everyone is?” he said, looking towards the house. “It’s helluva quiet, isn’t it? Not even the dogs have bothered to come out and greet us!”

He started walking across the lawn towards the front entrance. “Probably gave it a thrashing last night and they’re still sleeping it off!” he called back over his shoulder. “I’ll just go and wake them up,” he said, laughing.

He went up the front steps two at a time, calling: “Wakey, wakey!”

Wally and Chalmers slowly followed in his tracks.

Suddenly, they heard a shout.

Wally and Chalmers stared at each other for a split second and then, in unison, broke into a run and headed towards the house.

Racing through the open front door and down the hallway, they burst into the lounge, stopping short in the doorway, frozen in horror at the appalling sight that confronted them.

Chalmers’ head reeled as he looked uncomprehendingly at the torn and

twisted, blood-spattered bodies that lay strewn on the chairs and floor.

Steve walked in a trance-like state around the room, staring numbly at the scene of carnage with incredulous, disbelieving eyes.

Even Impi and Sheba …

He stumbled over to Chalmers and Wally and, gripping them by the arm, pushed them backwards through the doorway, hardly knowing what he was doing. The men stood in the hall for a few moments staring at each other and then, without a word, they made their way down the passage. Coming to an open doorway, they stopped and looked hesitantly, past the shattered door, into the room beyond.

There was a moment's appalled silence.

"Oh, my God!" shouted Steve unbelievingly. "Look what they've done to Claire—*oh God, no-ooo … Jenny!"*

He suddenly turned around and, pushing past the others, stumbled back into the passage, tears streaming down his contorted face. "Where's Ruth? *Ruth* …" His voice rose in a cry of anguish.

Chalmers felt transfixed by the horrific scene before him. His heart and throat contracted. Time seemed to stand still. White-faced, he turned to look at Wally in despair.

Too overcome with emotion to utter a sound, the men followed Steve, not daring to hope that maybe, just maybe, one little life had been spared.

*****

They found Ruth in the kitchen, her broken, lifeless little body slumped against the wall. In front of her, half covering the girl's small frame, lay the contorted figure of Timothy Shoniwa. The old man was holding her hand.

"He tried … he was trying to protect her," groaned Steve without looking up as Chalmers and Wally came and stood beside him.

On the wall above the mutilated bodies, the words 'SELL-OUT!' had been written in blood.

*****

As dusk fell, Chalmers sat at his table in the silence of his room and stared with unseeing eyes out of the window.

It was a perfect evening, still and calm, and the billowing cumulus clouds were tinted a rich gold in the clear mellow rays of the fast-setting sun. Venus, the evening star, floating serenely low on the horizon, was shining brilliantly against the soft, turquoise-blue of the deepening sky.

Chalmers sighed deeply and looked down at the open page of his notebook.

He picked up his pen and started writing.

CHAPTER 69

Time: 08h00. December 26

Chalmers looked approvingly at the two rows of smartly dressed DSAs standing rigidly to attention in front of him.

The 28 men, their eyes fixed straight ahead, hardly breathed. In the stillness, the only sound was the occasional soft flapping of the camp's two flags as they gently rose and fell in the fitful breeze.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he turned and positioned himself directly in the centre of the front row of men.

"You are all aware of the recent attacks on St. Mark's Mission and Magomba kraal." He spoke slowly to give his words emphasis, his voice stern. "As you also know by now, the night before last a group of terrorists murdered a further nine people at a farm near here. Two of them were little children. One of the women had been savagely raped before being bayoneted to death."

Chalmers paused. "This latest atrocity has been reported, and units of the Security Forces are moving into the area to carry out follow-up operations. However," he went on, looking up and down the ranks, "that does not mean that we are just going to sit back and leave all the dirty work to them. So far, you men have managed to kill two terrorists which, considering that we are not meant to be a fighting unit, is not a bad effort—*but,*" he stressed, "that is not enough—not by a long way."

There was silence.

Chalmers turned and started walking slowly up and down in front of the rows of stiff, motionless figures.

"You have all done well—very well indeed, and I am proud of you." He waited a few moments. "You are now more than a match for any of these murdering—cowardly—*scum!*" He uttered the words loudly with withering contempt. "We now have the weapons, we have the ammunition—and we now also have something else: something we have been waiting for, for a

long time." He stood still and eyed them in silence. "We now know, at long last, *exactly* where they are hiding out." He raised his voice. "And that means we can go in and get them."

He resumed his pacing.

One of the DSAs started coughing. Chalmers looked at him in irritation, waiting for silence.

After a few moments, he went on: "Nothing—and I repeat, *nothing*—is going to stop us. Is that clear?" He looked from man to man. "It won't be easy. In fact, we now believe that there are about fifty or sixty of them—and they're heavily armed. We also have reason to believe that there is a big arms cache at their base."

He raised a hand and wiped his eye briefly as an errant gust of wind blew dust into his eyes.

"However," he resumed after a moment, "we will not be entirely on our own. We'll be operating in conjunction with the army and, if need be, the Air Force as well."

He turned with a stern look as one of the DSAs breathed an audible sigh of relief.

"But *we* know this area better than anyone else—except, perhaps, the terrorists!—so the Security Forces will be relying heavily on our knowledge of the district."

There was a long silence. Out the corner of his eye, Chalmers saw Belinda walking slowly between the two ranks of men with complete indifference.

That wretched cat, he thought inconsequentially—just like Wally: no sense of the dignity of the occasion!

"Excuse me, boss."

Chalmers looked at the man standing at the end of the back row.

"Not now," he said in a sharp voice before continuing addressing the men: "Once our plans have been finalised, you will be fully briefed so that all of you know *exactly* what you will have to do and what is expected of you."

He was nearly finished. "I want you all to remain alert and ready to move out at a moment's notice. Keep your water bottles filled at all times and your rifles clean and oiled—and that goes for your magazines as well. And remember: make sure you have plenty of spare ammunition in your pouches and keep them by you at all times. Those of you who will be carrying the mobile radios—make sure they are in working order and that there are spare

batteries. The two medics must check their boxes and replace any used items."

He waited a moment. "From now on, you must consider yourselves as being on 24-hour standby." He coughed. "Now, before Joshua dismisses you, I want to say one more thing. Remember: the terrorists are more frightened of you than you are of them. They are more used to attacking women, children and old men—not well-armed, well-trained *fighting* men like you, so you needn't go around trembling in your boots—" Chalmers glanced over at Sixpence and smiled, "like Killer Sixpence here, who I'm sure I heard sighing with relief just now!"

The men grinned and laughed softly. It broke the tension.

"Now, if any of you have any questions, you can come and see either Joshua or myself, ok?"

He turned to Joshua. "You can dismiss them now, corporal, but I want to see you and Mashiri in my room as soon as you have finished here."

"Yes, sir," said Joshua. Chalmers nodded and walked briskly back to his room. Throwing his red beret onto his bed, he strode over to the table and studied the unfolded map.

A few minutes later there was a loud knock on the open door.

"Come in, you two," he called, without looking up.

As Joshua and Mashiri entered, Chalmers said: "Come and have a look at this."

The DSAs walked over and stared down at the map.

"Here's our base, here—" he said, putting his forefinger on the spot. "And there's Magomba kraal," he continued. "Here are the Mazweru caves—" He tapped the dark-brown coloured contours. "And *that* is where the terrorists are hiding—unless they're running scared and have already moved to another bolt-hole. We can just hope like hell they haven't," he added, more to himself than the others.

He stood up and looked at the two Africans. Their eyes were gleaming.

"Mashiri, go and get your rifle. You get the Bren, Joshua—and don't forget a radio, either. We'll go down there now to do a quick recce. We shouldn't be long, but once we've confirmed that they're still there, I can alert the Security Forces and we can, hopefully, wrap the whole thing up."

Joshua grinned broadly. "How many of the men will be coming with us, boss?" Mashiri asked, apprehensively.

“None. It’ll be just the three of us.” He paused. “We’ll take the Leopard—and just hope to God we don’t run into an ambush!”

Mashiri looked at Joshua and pulled a face.

Chalmers looked at his watch. “We’ll leave in 15 minutes,” he said, briskly.

CHAPTER 70

Magomba kraal
Time: 09h10

Josephine's hut was empty and the rough, uneven earth floor was littered with dirty scraps of paper and other bits of rubbish.

Chalmers scowled as he looked around the dark interior and then, turning on his heel, went back out into the glaring sunshine to where Joshua and Mashiri, talking softly to one another, were standing waiting for him.

Chalmers looked around him. There was no one in sight and the deserted kraal had a desolate air to it.

"Joshua, see if you can find anyone to ask where we can find Josephine Matiwa, please."

Levelling his rifle in his right hand, Joshua walked across to a neighbouring hut and, putting his head inside, started speaking loudly and sharply to someone inside.

Chalmers watched closely as an old, toothless man in a filthy army greatcoat and wearing a battered, wide-brimmed hat on his grizzled head, hobbled nervously out of the hut. He heard Joshua say a few words and saw the old man shake his head. Joshua turned away impatiently and, going to the next hut, went inside.

Chalmers flicked a mosquito off his arm and absent-mindedly watched some chickens fussily scratching and pecking around in the dirt.

After a few moments, he looked up and glanced around him. "It looks as though she's gone," Chalmers said to Mashiri without looking at him. He sighed. "I only hope she got away safely."

Mashiri remained silent.

"Let's go and see how Joshua's getting on," said Chalmers. The two walked over to the huts. As they approached, Joshua reappeared.

"Any luck?" Chalmers asked him. His voice sounded unnaturally clear in the stillness.

Joshua shook his head. ”She hasn’t been here for several days, boss. She’s gone—” He looked at Chalmers, slowly shaking his head from side to side. “I think she was working for the terrs, ” he added. There was a knowing smile on his face.

Chalmers pursed his lips, considering his words. “No, Joshua,” he replied, but without conviction. “I don’t think so.” He shrugged his shoulders. “But, who knows?—you may be right.”

He turned and looked up at the high range of hills that seemed to tower over the village and ran his eye along their heat-hazed slopes towards the dark patches that marked the entrances to the caves. He stared at them in silence for a few minutes.

“How long do you think it will take us to reach the caves, Joshua?” he asked.

”Not long, boss, maybe an hour.”

Chalmers glanced at his watch. “Come on then. It’s getting late.”

He started walking off and then stopped suddenly, his hand patting his shirt and trouser pockets. “Damn! I’ve left my cigarettes in the Leopard.” He thought for a moment. “Ach! It’s not worth going back for them. I hope you’ve got plenty with you, Joshua!” he added, looking at the corporal.

Joshua smiled. “No, boss, I haven’t got any. I was going to ask you for some!”

Chalmers pulled a face. “As usual! I might have known—well, you’re out of luck this time, old chap. We’ll both just have to bite our nails instead!”

“Yes, boss,” replied Joshua in a subdued voice.

They made their way out of the village in single file and headed for the rugged, undulating slopes of the hills. The broken ground was covered in a dense mass of small stunted trees and thick thorn bushes. It was hot and humid, and within minutes, the three men, scratched and sore from scrambling up the hillside, were drenched in sweat.

After a quarter of an hour or so, Chalmers stopped to regain his breath and, mopping his streaming face with his handkerchief, waited for the two DSAs to catch up to him. He could hear the rustling undergrowth as the pair pushed and pulled themselves towards him.

While he waited, Chalmers unclipped his water bottle, unscrewed the cap and, lifting the flask gratefully to his parched lips, took a long drink. As he put the flask back on his hip, Joshua and Mashiri broke through the long

grass and trudged wearily up to him, breathing heavily.

"Can we rest here a minute, boss?" asked Mashiri and without waiting for permission, lowered himself with a loud groan to the ground.

Chalmers smiled weakly. "It looks as if you're doing so anyway!" He looked down at the reclining figure. "What's the matter with you, anyway? You're a fine, healthy young fellow—or you *should* be. I'm the one who ought be resting, not you!"

Mashiri laughed. "Boss, you'll have to carry me the rest of the way!"

Joshua, who was standing with one foot resting on the Bren, grinned broadly. "It's women, boss. That's *his* trouble!"

Chalmers chuckled. "I'm sure it is—it's *everyone's* trouble! But you certainly can't talk, Joshua!"

The two DSAs burst out laughing.

Chalmers put his finger to his lips. "Shhh!" he warned.

Joshua clapped his hand over mouth quickly. "Sorry, boss. I forgot!"

There was silence for a few moments, and Chalmers turned and studied the surrounding wooded hills, dappled green and yellow in the brilliant sunshine.

Joshua followed his gaze and, pointing to a spot about a kilometre away to their right, said: "That's where the caves begin, boss."

Chalmers turned. "Do they?" he asked in a surprised voice. "Have you been here before?"

Joshua grinned. "Yes, boss. When I was a small boy, I used to play up there sometimes."

Chalmers looked at him. "I didn't know you came from this area. I thought only Masikela knew the place!" He thought for a moment. "Well, that'll certainly save us a lot of trouble. You'd better lead the way from now on, then."

Joshua smiled. "Yes, boss. I think so too—we could have come a much better way!"

Chalmers stared at him aghast. "Well, why the hell didn't you say so in the first place, you idiot!"

Mashiri groaned and raising his head slightly, looked at Joshua venomously. "You bloody bastard!" he said after a few moments.

Chalmers shook his head. At that moment, he agreed wholeheartedly with Mashiri.

"All right then, seeing as we've wasted so much time—thanks to Joshua—I

think we should be getting a move on, “ he said, eyes twinkling. “And, bearing in mind that we’re practically walking into a terrorist base, I think it might be a good idea if you two stopped talking so much and kept your eyes open more!”

Mashiri looked at Joshua. “I think so, too,” he said pointedly, getting up slowly.

They set off in single file—this time, with Joshua in the lead.

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Standing with head bowed, and leaning heavily on his rifle, Chalmers stared at the ground and then closed his eyes as a wave of nausea rose up from his stomach into his throat. Then, turning quickly away from Joshua and Mashiri, he bent over behind a bush and vomited several times. He took a sip of water from his water bottle and, turning back, cast a quick, apologetic glance at the two Africans.

He was exhausted and beginning to feel his years.

He glanced at his watch wearily. It was twenty past ten. He frowned and wiped his perspiring hands on his trousers.

Although he couldn’t see the mouth of the caves from where he was, Chalmers felt sure that they couldn’t be far from them now. He turned, a questioning look on his face as Joshua walked back a few paces towards him.

“We should be about level with the caves now, boss. If we climb up there,” he said, pointing directly up towards his right, “and then go along there, we will get a good view of them.”

Chalmers pulled a wry face as he looked up at the short but steep slope. “You must be joking,” he said. “I may be a Capricorn, but I’m not a mountain goat!”

Joshua grinned. “It’s easy, boss!”

Chalmers shook his head and sighed. “Alright, Joshua, if you say so! But tell me: once we’re up there, how far will we be from the first cave?”

“Not far—only about half a kilometre. The end of the ridge is over the entrance.”

Chalmers nodded. “Good. But will the terrs be able to see us?”

Joshua shook his head. “No, boss, I don’t think so. We’ll be looking down onto the cave and there’s plenty good cover.”

The three started moving slowly and painfully up the hillside. Although the ledge was only about 20 metres above them, their progress was slow and the climb took much longer than Chalmers had anticipated. When they reached the narrow, path-like ridge, Chalmers sat down to recover.

He looked around for a few moments.

Behind him, the long range of hills rose steeply for over a hundred metres. He ran his eye along the rocky slopes and then followed the line of the rounded tops that swept in gentle, undulating curves away to his right and left. He leant back against the stony slope and scanned the landscape in front of him. Much to his discomfort, they were far higher up than he had expected, and in the clear air, he could see for kilometres across the gently rolling plain which stretched away into the misty distance.

He tried without success to locate the base.

“Where’s the camp, Joshua? Can you see it?” he asked after a few moments’ searching.

Joshua pointed vaguely in front of him. “It’s over there somewhere, I think. But I can’t see it.” He turned to his right. “There’s Magomba kraal down there—and I can see the Leopard by those trees, there,” he added, pointing.

Chalmers turned and, screwing up his eyes, picked out the tiny-looking vehicle where he had parked it near a large clump of trees. It was barely visible.

At length, he got up. “Come on! We’ll all fall asleep if we sit around here any longer.”

He turned and looked at Mashiri who, with his hat over his face, appeared to have done so already. Chalmers went over to him and rested his foot gently on the DSA’s stomach.

“Yes, boss, alright!” the African answered lazily and slowly sat up with a broad smile.

They picked up their weapons and started walking along the thin, twisting ridge path.

CHAPTER 71

Time: 10h50. The same day.

“Boss! Boss!”

Chalmers looked up quickly as he heard Joshua’s urgent, whispered call. He hurried up the path towards where the DSA was standing and, to his surprise, suddenly emerged onto a small open area of uneven ground dotted with several large granite boulders. They had obviously reached their destination.

Joshua pointed over to a large rock standing dangerously close to the edge where the hillside dropped off precipitously.

”They’re there, boss!” he said, a triumphant smile on his face.

Chalmers opened his eyes wide. “Who? The terrs?”

Joshua nodded. “Have a look, boss!” he said with suppressed excitement. “It’s good!”

Chalmers moved across to the boulder and with one hand leaning against its warm, lichened surface, carefully craned forward and looked down. His heart was racing.

Some 30 metres below and away to his left, he could make out an almost-perfect miniature amphitheatre formed by a gently curving depression in the encircling hills. At one end of the small, stage-like platform of level ground, he could clearly see a gaping, darkly-shadowed fissure in the hillside that marked the entrance to a cave. It was flanked on both sides by sentinel-like trees which partially obscured its opening. About thirty metres away, in front of the cave itself, the ground fell away sharply down the rocky, cliff-like face of the hill to the flat plain over 100 metres below.

From the other side of the rock, Joshua pointed to some small bushes growing to one side of the cave, a short distance from its entrance.

Chalmers narrowed his eyes. At first he could see little in the deep shadows, but as he continued to stare, he began to distinguish what looked like several large, coffin-like wooden boxes.

He glanced at Joshua and nodded. “They look like crates of weapons to me,” he said in a whisper.

“I think so, boss,” agreed Joshua quietly.

Chalmers turned back and studied them carefully.

At that moment, two figures bearing another heavy crate by its end handles emerged from the darkness of the cave and carried it with considerable difficulty, across to where the other boxes were stacked.

Chalmers looked round quickly as he heard Mashiri coming across the clearing behind him.

“What do you see, boss?” he asked in a quiet voice, kneeling down on one knee next to him.

Chalmers shifted his position slightly to give the DSA more room. “Have a look for yourself, Mashiri. It’s just what you’ve been waiting for, my heroic, fire-eating warrior!” he replied with an amused look on his face.

The African peered over the edge in silence for some moments. As he continued to stare, his eyes opened wide apprehensively. Then, pulling his head back, he turned and looking at Chalmers, said in a plaintive voice: “Can we go home now, boss?”

Chalmers grinned broadly and then, without a word, looked back down the hill again. A few moments later, five more terrorists came out of the cave. Chalmers could hear their faint voices, talking and laughing as they chided two of their comrades who had followed them out of the entrance and were also struggling awkwardly with a heavy crate.

But as the implications of what was going on dawned on him, Chalmers’ smile gradually gave way to a frown of frustrated anger. The terrorists were obviously abandoning their base.

He realised with a sinking heart that, after all his efforts to track them down, there was now every chance they would slip effortlessly through his fingers. And there was almost *nothing*, he thought bitterly, that he could do to prevent it.

Questions raced through his mind. How many crates did they have? Had they just started moving them—or were they nearly finished? How long would it be before they started moving off? How many terrorists were there and, above all, were they all there? If so, had they posted any guards?

As the last question flashed through his mind, he quickly scanned the surrounding area.

He turned to Joshua. “Can you see any signs of look-outs anywhere, Joshua?” he asked urgently.

Joshua shook his head. “No, boss, I’ve been looking.” He paused. “No one ever comes here. It’s a good place to hide out.”

“Maybe,” said Chalmers thoughtfully, “but I can’t believe they’d not have someone keeping guard. Even they are not *that* stupid!”

He turned and looked behind him and then turned to Mashiri. “I think you’d better cover our rear, Mashiri. We don’t want to be surprised from behind.”

The DSA nodded and crawled across the clearing and settled himself down in a lying position next to a large rock from where he had a good view of the surroundings.

Chalmers watched him for a few moments and, then satisfied Mashiri was in position, turned to Joshua. “Listen! They’re obviously getting ready to leave the cave. How long it’s going to take them is anyone’s guess. It may be a short time or a long time but, whatever happens, we *mustn’t* let them get away from us now. We’ll have to stop them somehow—even if there is only the three of us!” He paused. “My bet is that they’ve only just started shifting the stuff. If so, we may still have time to get the rest of the men from the base over here.”

Joshua nodded. “Do you want me to go back to the base and fetch them, boss?” he asked urgently.

Chalmers shook his head. “No, there’s no time. We’ve got a radio, thank God! We’ll let Kenneth know—he can pass the message on and also alert the army guys at the same time. Go and get the set from Mashiri; the sooner we get cracking the better.”

Joshua smiled with relief. “I’d forgotten about the radio,” he said. He got up and, crouching low, ran across to Mashiri. Grabbing hold of the small A.76 set in one hand, he ran back to Chalmers. He stood it on the ground next to the Bren and started screwing in the short aerial.

Chalmers, suddenly realising that the rocks would interfere with transmission and reception, shook his head. “No, no, take it over there somewhere,” he said, pointing behind him. “But, Joshua, listen very, very, carefully—” Chalmers voice was urgent. “I want *you* to send the messages, not me. Kenneth’s English is not very good and he doesn’t always understand very well. You can speak in Shona—I can’t. Now, here’s what you must do. First: tell him that he must tell the men to get down here immediately—and I

mean *immediately!* They must bring the other two Brens and the small mortar with them. Let them know where we've left the Leopard and they can park there. They'll have to walk the rest of the way on foot like we did. One of us will have to go down and meet them and show them the way here. Now, have you got that?"

Joshua nodded his head eagerly. "Yes, boss."

"Ok, secondly: if there are as many terrs as I think there are, there won't be enough of us to cope with them. Plus, they are far more heavily armed—they've probably got bazookas and rockets and all sorts of hardware down there."

Chalmers was thinking rapidly. "So, tell Kenneth he will also need to radio through to Joint Operation Headquarters *urgently* and let them know what's going on. He must ask them to send Fire Force helicopters as soon as they can—*if* they can, that is! You must tell Kenneth exactly where we are. You know the area well so you'll be able to give him precise directions. He'll need to look on the map and get the grid reference to give to Joint Operations. Is that clear?"

"Yes, boss, all clear!" Joshua started to move.

Chalmers grabbed him by the arm. "Wait, I haven't finished yet! Tell him he's not to bother coding the message. It'll take too much time and he might get it wrong anyway. There isn't time—every minute counts." Chalmers looked at him and smiled encouragingly. He was entrusting a lot to him. "You can do it, Joshua," he said, looking at Joshua intently. "Now—*go!*—chop-chop."

Without waiting further, Joshua scrambled to his feet and ran off with the radio.

Chalmers turned back and started studying the cave mouth and surrounding area. The questions continued to whirl through his mind: Would they have enough time? Would they be able to get the men down here before the terrorists moved out?

"Boss!"

Startled, Chalmers looked up as Joshua reappeared at his side. He had an anxious look on his face.

"What is it?"

"I couldn't get through, boss—there's something wrong with the radio," he said nervously.

Chalmers jumped up. “For God’s sake!” he exclaimed in suppressed anger, half-crouching, half-running across to where the set was lying. Chalmers picked it up and switched it on. It was completely dead. Hastily taking it out of its canvas case, he unclipped the bottom to check the batteries. The battery compartment was empty.

He looked at Joshua’s anxious face.

“Go and get Mashiri,” he said between clenched teeth.

A few moments later, Mashiri, shame-faced, apprehensively sidled up to him. Chalmers held out the open case of the radio wordlessly. The DSA stared down at it with a guilty expression on his face.

Chalmers spoke slowly and softly with suppressed rage. “Do you have *any* idea what you have done? Do you even vaguely realise what your thoughtlessness and stupidity may cost us? The terrs will almost certainly get away now—unless the three of us can somehow manage to stop them by ourselves. And *that*, my friend could, very possibly, cost us our lives!”

There was a long silence.

Mashiri hung his head. “Sorry, boss,” he mumbled, contritely.

Chalmers shook his head as he despairingly contemplated the possible consequences of the man’s careless oversight. But as quickly as his anger had erupted, Chalmers felt a pang of remorse.

“Ok, Mashiri,” he said with a bleak smile. “Just remember in future: always, *always*—if you live that long!—make sure you’ve got batteries—and spare ones too.” He started clipping the canvas cover back on the set. “Now, you’d better get back to your position.”

Dejectedly, Mashiri started walking away.

“Mashiri,” Chalmers called out softly after him.

The African stopped and turned round enquiringly. “Yes, boss?” he asked in a dismal voice.

“Have you got a magazine on your rifle?”

The DSA grinned sheepishly and, holding up his rifle, patted the magazine with his hand. “Yes, boss—and it’s got bullets in it too!”

Joshua smiled as he saw Chalmers open his eyes wide in mock astonishment. “That’s wonderful, Mashiri. Absolutely wonderful! We’ll make a soldier of you yet!”

Chalmers turned to Joshua. “Well, there’s only one thing for it now, Joshua. You’ll just have to take the Leopard and go back to the camp yourself.

Mashiri and I will stay here and keep watch. If the terrs move off, we'll try and keep them pinned down until you manage to get back here with the men, ok?"

Joshua nodded and started to move off.

Chalmers looked at him. "Now, you're absolutely sure you know what you've got to do?"

"Yes, boss."

"Well I hope so, because *everything* depends on you now, Joshua."

Joshua smiled. "Don't worry, boss. I won't let you down."

Chalmers watched him for a few moments as he walked away across the clearing.

"Joshua!" he called out softly.

The African stopped and turned round. "Yes, boss?"

"I have no particular wish to leave here in a wooden box. If it's no trouble, would you mind leaving us the Bren, please?" he said with gentle sarcasm.

Joshua trotted back and handed the machine gun to Chalmers with a broad smile.

"Thank you, Joshua—and don't forget to bring cigarettes back with you, too, if you get a chance. I'm going to need some!"

Joshua grinned. "I won't forget *that*, boss! But I don't have any at the base, either!"

Chalmers grinned. "In that case, maybe I can persuade you to have one of mine for a change, then!"

"Thank you, boss!"

Chuckling, Chalmers walked back to the rock and, placing the Bren next to him, sat down.

He looked at his watch, swiftly calculating: Joshua should get back to the base about twelve-thirty if everything went well—double that time for the return journey—add about ten minutes for the DSAs to get themselves organised—assuming they weren't all asleep! That, Chalmers reasoned, would mean that the DSAs should be here at about two-thirty.

He frowned. He and Mashiri were in for a long wait.

CHAPTER 72

Time: 11h07

Chalmers eased himself into a more comfortable position on his stomach.

It was stifling hot. The sun was almost directly overhead and he could feel its fierce rays burning through his sweat-soaked shirt. He turned the wet collar up to protect his neck. Idly, he brushed an ant off the back of his hand then, cradling his head in his crossed arms, he turned his attention back again to the mouth of the cave and the weapons crates lying nearby. It was difficult to see exactly how many there were but, judging by the number of times the terrorists had been to and fro, he estimated that there must be at least eight or nine of them by now.

He lay there, lazily speculating as to the types of weapons the crates might contain: probably the usual stuff from China and Russia and her satellites, he mused—AK-47s, RPDs, SKSs, rocket launchers, bazookas, SAM heat-seeking missiles, maybe even small anti-aircraft guns. He eyed the crates curiously. He'd heard claims—from sources in their own Security Forces—that the terrorists were more plentifully equipped than the Rhodesian Army itself!

His train of thought was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of two terrorists who sauntered out of the cave and stood in the deep shade of the tree on the right of the cave's entrance. They were carrying AK-47s.

Lighting cigarettes, they stood talking together. One gave a soft laugh and casually looked up almost directly towards the spot where Chalmers was lying. The other followed suit.

Chalmers froze, hardly daring to breathe, his heart beating violently in his chest. He waited tensely for any telltale sign that the men might have seen him.

One of the terrorists raised his arm and pointed to a spot towards, but some metres below, him. The other, following the direction of his companion's outstretched arm, stamped his cigarette out and started walking leisurely

across the clearing in front of the cave and began climbing the side of the hill on which Chalmers was positioned. The man was obviously going to take up a lookout position somewhere nearby.

To Chalmers relief, though, it was clear by both men's air of unconcern that neither suspected that he and Mashiri were lying there in concealment. And the fact that the terrorists were even bothering to post guards probably meant that they were not about to move off any time soon which, if true, would buy them more time.

Nevertheless, the mere presence of a terrorist so near to their own position complicated things immensely. He must warn Mashiri straight away. It was vital that neither of them made the slightest sound from now on.

He inched himself backwards until his head was well away from the edge, and then, rolling over carefully and grabbing hold of his rifle, he slowly made his way across to the DSA. As he knelt down on one knee next to him, he raised a warning finger to his own lips.

"Shhh! Don't say anything," he hissed. "They've just posted two lookouts," he whispered. "One is near the cave, and the other is just below us on the side of the hill somewhere. You mustn't make the slightest sound from now on, ok?"

Mashiri nodded and, sitting up, raised his cramped arms above his head and stretched himself with an inaudible yawn.

"Boss, I'm bored!" he whispered plaintively.

Chalmers, who couldn't bear waiting himself at the best of times, grinned. "So am I, but there's nothing we can do about it!" He looked at his watch. "It's twenty-five past eleven now. We can't expect the others to get here much before two-thirty, so we've still got a long wait in front of us. But, whatever you do, *don't go to sleep*, Mashiri! Alright?"

The DSA nodded again.

Chalmers looked around. "Perhaps a change of scenery would be a good idea. I want you to go over there on the other side of the rocks." He pointed across the clearing. "I'm going to move further across to the right there, so that I can cover the cave and the slopes of the hill opposite better. But," he warned, still whispering, "don't make a sound—otherwise I myself will riddle you full of bullet holes until you look like a black pepper-pot!"

Mashiri shook with silent laughter and, picking up his rifle, moved silently across to where Chalmers had pointed. He ferreted around for a suitable place

and, after a few moments, sank down noiselessly out of sight.

Chalmers, still on one knee, glanced around him and then looked upwards toward the hills above him. He scowled as the sun shone directly into his eyes. Getting up, he made his way back across the clearing to where he had left the Bren. Taking hold of the gun's wooden handle, he heaved it up and, keeping well out of sight, moved some metres away to his new position. Finding a suitable spot which gave him a clear view of both the entrance to the cave and the hillside opposite, Chalmers bedded himself down carefully and worked the Bren's bipod mounting into a firm position.

The spot he had chosen was in the shade, directly beneath a small but well-leafed bush, and by carefully arranging several low-hanging branches over the gun, he was able to effectively camouflage not only the weapon but himself as well.

The minutes ticked by slowly. He glanced at his watch—it was five to twelve. He sniffed and then, screwing up his eyes, moved his head from side to side, easing his cramped neck muscles.

Slowly, very slowly, the sun moved across the brazen sky, and in the burning stillness, Chalmers could feel his eyes getting heavier and heavier. He shook his head and, frowning in forced concentration, turned his gaze towards the silent hillside in front of him.

A grin of cynical amusement passed across his face as he considered the absurdity of the situation. Here they all were, four men on a hillside lying out in the African sun, just watching and waiting for something to happen, he mused.

But at least they had one major advantage over the two terrorists—he and Mashiri knew the lookouts were there. The terrorists, however, didn't have the slightest idea of *their* presence on the hillside above them, he consoled himself with grim satisfaction.

But Chalmers was wrong. They *were* under the closest observation—and had been for some time now.

How was he to know of the presence of a certain little herd-boy by the name of John Tapere who, like Joshua, not only knew the hills and caves like the back of his hand but had also overheard all that had transpired between Josephine Matiwa and himself at Sapere kraal that rainy evening.

Had Chalmers but known it, the tiger was not only on the hunt at that moment—it was about to strike.

CHAPTER 73

Time: 13h40

Chalmers glanced uneasily at his watch for the hundredth time. The long vigil should be nearly over, he realised thankfully.

Soon he would be able to put his carefully calculated plan into action. He knew exactly what he and his men were going to do—or rather, as he mentally cautioned himself, what he *hoped* to do. He was only too well aware that things seldom worked out as anticipated. An unexpected accident, an unforeseen incident, could change the whole situation in a split second.

But at least, he reflected, he and his men would have the two single most important factors in their favour—position and the element of surprise. These, together with speed of reaction, were always what counted most.

Yet he couldn't rid himself of a growing sense of unease. On the surface, everything seemed to be going according to plan. There had been no movement from the terrorists for some time now. No more crates had been shifted, no more figures seen outside the cave below.

Yet, to Chalmers—always hypersensitive to mood and atmosphere—even the silence of the hills had a different 'feel'.

Before, the stillness had been somnolent and untroubled; now, it seemed increasingly threatening—even sinister. He frowned as he tried to pinpoint the cause of his unease.

He tensed as he saw a slight movement on his left, then relaxed as Mashiri's head and shoulders came into view as he shifted his body into a more comfortable position.

At that instant, a thunderous burst of machine gun fire shattered the silence and a stream of bullets ripped into the bushes where Mashiri was lying, sending up a cloud of dirt, leaves and twigs around the startled DSA.

Taken completely by surprise, Chalmers heart leapt into his mouth. He gripped the Bren and, pulling the butt into his shoulder, quickly scanned the slopes in front of him. As he did so, he heard Mashiri give an answering burst

of automatic fire.

It was probably totally ineffective, Chalmers thought, but at least he now knew that Mashiri had survived the deadly hail of bullets.

The firing stopped and there was a suspenseful silence.

Chalmers took a quick look at his watch. It was eight minutes to two.

Suddenly, a movement on the hillside opposite him caught his attention.

He stared hard, trying to make sense of the abstract montage of shadows and sun-splashed colour that camouflaged the wooded slope. As his eyes gradually became accustomed to the dappled patchwork of light and dark, he thought he detected several figures crouching low, creeping and running in short bursts from rock to tree, tree to rock, back towards the cave below.

He frowned, completely nonplussed. Who were *they*?

He tightened his grip on the Bren and, checking to see that it was cocked and on automatic, looked down the sights. Taking slow and very deliberate aim, he pulled the trigger and raked the slope where he had seen the creeping figures.

His burst of fire was followed by one from Mashiri who, unbeknown to Chalmers, had moved into a more favourable position near to where he was lying.

Almost immediately, an intense and concentrated barrage of retaliatory fire blanketed the ridge area where they were both lying concealed. Then it stopped.

Chalmers turned his head. “You alright, Mashiri?” he called. There was no longer any need for silence.

It was unnaturally still for a few moments.

“I’m not sure, boss. I think so—” the African replied in a slightly bewildered voice.

Chalmers grinned. He lifted his head slightly and scanned the hillside over the top of the Bren. Suddenly, he saw a figure dart out from behind a tree and, bending low, race towards a large outcrop of rocks. Taking quick aim, Chalmers fired a short burst of about ten rounds. That, he thought with a flicker of amusement, would give the fellow something to think about!

Immediately, some of the other terrorists retaliated, raking the area around him with concentrated fire. Instinctively, Chalmers ducked his head behind the Bren, flattening himself into the ground for protection as a lethal hail of bullets erupted around him with soft, sucking sounds. He squeezed his eyes

shut and with a peculiar tingling sensation at the base of his spine, waited in helpless expectation for a bullet to smash into his skull.

But the fatal round didn't come.

As the terrorists' assault slackened and then finally stopped, Chalmers opened his eyes and carefully lifted his head.

An ominous silence had fallen over the hills.

It was time to move position, thought Chalmers. Another fusillade like that last one and he might not be so lucky to escape being hit. Pulling himself backwards and dragging the Bren slowly after him, he eased himself into a small hollow in the ground and looked around for a suitable spot. Spying one away on his left, he slowly got to his knees and, slinging his rifle across his back, manhandled the Bren across to the new position.

Settled, perspiring and breathing hard, he glanced at his watch again. It was five past two. With luck, he thought, the others would be here shortly. *If not —*

But, in their preoccupation with the attack coming from their front, neither Chalmers nor Mashiri saw the small group of terrorists crawling stealthily towards them through the bush above the cave. Swiftly and silently, the five heavily-armed men fanned out, concealing themselves a few hundred metres above the clearing where he and Mashiri were positioned.

*****

The same time.

Returning to the cave by a different route to the one used earlier by Chalmers and the DSAs, Black Satan and some 40 terrorists picked their way in two single columns through the dense, tangled undergrowth.

Black Satan was feeling relaxed and pleased with himself. He was glad that he had now reached a decision to move from the cave; glad, too, that the new base he had chosen was so conveniently situated. Once settled there, he thought confidently, they would be able to get really organised and deal with the white bastard from Chitangwe base and his crowd of monkeys once and for all. And thanks to Josephine Matiwa, he knew exactly how he was going to do it.

For now, though, all they needed to do was transfer the remaining crates of

weapons and ammunition to their new base, re-group and then—

He looked up and, scanning the hills ahead as he walked along, searched for the opening to the narrow pass that wound its way up towards the cave. He looked at his watch. Good! Only another 30 minutes or so and they'd be there. There'd be time for a short rest before starting the arduous task of moving all the new weapons.

"Hey, Aaron," he called softly, looking round but without stopping. "Got any cigarettes?"

Letson grinned. "Yeah—plenty. I found some at the farm."

His words were cut off abruptly by the sound of heavy automatic gunfire reverberating in the hills ahead. The men stopped in their tracks.

"Where the hell was that coming from?" said Letson, frowning.

Black Satan scowled. "It was somewhere near the cave." He spat on the ground and then stood listening, his head cocked to one side. There was a short silence, followed by another burst of machine gun fire that echoed through the hills.

"The swines," he cursed, as the truth dawned on him. "Quick!" he shouted, breaking into a run. "The bastards have found the base!"

CHAPTER 74

Time: 12h20

Joshua, the sweat pouring down his face and neck, crouched over the wheel like a man possessed and careered at top speed down the silent airstrip. As he raced towards the gates of the camp, a long, blearing wail broke out from the rattling Leopard as he rammed his fist down on the horn and kept it there.

The startled guard, woken rudely from his peaceful reverie, leapt out of the shelter in fright and, taking a hurried look at the fast-approaching Leopard, ran over to open the gates. Fumbling in his haste, he agitatedly flung them apart.

As they swung open unevenly, Joshua roared in, hitting the nearside gate violently with the side of the Leopard and half-wrenching it from its rusted hinges.

Accelerating towards the flagpole, the rear lights flashed on as, with screeching brakes, he came to an abrupt and jerky standstill. Within seconds, the rear door crashed open and the dishevelled and agitated figure of the corporal appeared. Clutching his rifle, he leapt down and started running towards the barracks, silent in the slumbering midday heat.

Suddenly the silence was shattered.

“Wake up, you bloody black bastards!” Joshua screamed at the top of his voice as he ran past the open door of the radio room.

Reaching the deserted quadrangle, he stood stock-still and, frowning fiercely, looked around him, panting hard. There was no one in sight and an all-pervading quietness hung over the entire camp.

But Joshua was a man on a mission.

Putting his rifle on automatic and ramming it firmly into his shoulder, he sprayed the barracks with a magazine-full of bullets, shattering every window in sight. He smiled in satisfaction as pandemonium erupted. It reminded him of the night the mortar had been fired. He must remember to tell the boss, he thought with a broad smile. He would be pleased with him!

Running across to the barracks, he flung open the door. The room was in an uproar as the terrified DSAs, shocked out of their peaceful sleep and thinking the camp had been suddenly over-run by terrorists, scrambled around in panic-stricken confusion.

"Everyone outside with rifles and magazines," Joshua shouted above the hubbub. "There's going to be a bloody fight, you bastards."

He turned and strode out but, almost as quickly, reappeared in the doorway. "And get the lorry started—we've got to go now, now, now! The boss is in trouble—*big* trouble," he yelled. "The terrs are going to turn him into fucking mince-meat!"

The next moment he had gone.

He ran across to the radio room where Kenneth was standing idly in the doorway, hands in his trouser pockets, watching impassively. He didn't like Joshua.

As Joshua came up to him, he grabbed the radio operator by the arm and pushing past him, pulled him unceremoniously into the radio room.

"We've got the bloody terrs down there—*all* of them!" he said urgently. "The boss says you must send immediate messages to Urungwe and JOC headquarters and tell them to send a Fire Force now, now—*now!* D'you understand?"

Kenneth looked at him disdainfully. He didn't move.

"*Aaagh*, you bloody fool—you're stupid!" exclaimed Joshua, almost beside himself with impatience. "I'll do it myself, man! What's the call sign?" he exploded, going over to the transmitter and picking up the mouthpiece savagely. He turned round and glared at Kenneth.

But to see anyone—and Joshua of all people—interfering with his precious equipment and trying to upstage him was more than the radio operator could bear.

Suddenly galvanised into action, he leapt across the room. "Leave the radio alone, you bloody monkey! I'm Pronto[64] here!" he stormed, snatching the mouthpiece out of the corporal's hand and pushing him violently aside.

Joshua scowled. "So do it, you bastard. Get Urungwe and tell them to send Fire Force helicopters *now*!"

Kenneth sneered and, with unconcealed hostility, slowly turned around and looked at him scathingly. "How do I tell the helicopters where they must go if

you don’t tell me?”

Joshua frowned angrily, then, quickly going over to the map pinned on the wall, pointed at a spot near the bottom right hand corner.

“Come here, monkey, and I’ll show you.”

Kenneth reluctantly followed him and stared malevolently at where Joshua was jabbing his finger.

“There! In the caves. Tell them to go there—and the boss says you must give the grid reference.”

Kenneth looked at him contemptuously. “Of course you give the grid reference, stupid. You don’t know these things. I do. I have been radio operator for a long time.”

Joshua shook his finger at him angrily. “I haven’t time to bother with you. Just wait till the boss hears about all this—! He turned and stormed out of the room.

As he did so, Kenneth ran to the door and shouted out after his retreating back: “I know all about you—and what you’re doing. Why should I do what you say? You’re nothing. I don’t take orders from idiots like you—you *bastard!*” he screamed.

Joshua turned around and shook his fist, swearing savagely at him. “I’ll fix you when I come back, you bloody traitorous snake!”

Breathing heavily, Joshua stormed across to the waiting lorry that was now loaded with excited, babbling Africans. The engine was idling noisily and irregularly, and clouds of black diesel smoke were pouring out from the throbbing exhaust.

Joshua, hands on hips, stood briefly looking up at them. “Is everyone here?”

There was an immediate chorus of whistles, gibes and good-natured taunts.

Joshua strode to the front of the vehicle and looked up at the driver. “I’ll go first—you follow me,” he said. He was enjoying being in charge and giving orders!

The driver nodded briefly. “Ok, man—go-go-go, you fucking bastard!”

Turning abruptly, Joshua broke into a run and, passing the radio room, raced for the Leopard.

Kenneth watched him from the window with cold eyes. Bloody moron, he fumed. *Why should I do what he says!*

With an angry shrug of his shoulders, he went back to his chair and sat

staring at the map on the wall, thinking hard.

CHAPTER 75

Time: 14h06

It was time to re-position himself again.

Chalmers got up on his knees and rammed a fresh magazine into place on the top of the Bren and then, pushing the other two spare magazines into his capacious trouser pockets, he grabbed the handle of the machine gun in one hand and picked up his rifle with the other. Raising himself to a crouching position, he awkwardly lifted the two weapons and started edging further to his right, down the slope away from Mashiri.

As he did so, a vicious burst of machine gun fire suddenly swept the patch of ground that he had only just left.

With a surge of abnormal strength, Chalmers leapt over a low, flat rock in his path and, swerving towards a large tree, instinctively leapt for cover, flinging himself and the weapons on the ground behind its dark, gnarled trunk. Quickly checking to make sure that he couldn't be observed from the opposite hillside, he leant over and, pulling the Bren forward, carefully lined it up so that only the very tip of the barrel was projecting beyond the trunk of the tree. He looked around cautiously.

There was no movement anywhere.

He frowned, his thoughts in turmoil as he came to the realisation that the shots had come from higher up the hill overlooking the clearing where he and Mashiri were lying in wait.

He suddenly realised that some of the terrorists must have somehow encircled them and that, unless by some miracle Joshua and the others came to their relief very soon, he and Mashiri stood very little chance of getting out alive.

It was also painfully clear to him that if Joshua and the men didn't see the terrorists on the hillside first, they themselves would walk straight into a deadly ambush. The unsuspecting DSAs wouldn't stand a chance. Somehow he had either to clear the hill of terrorists or give Joshua some sort of

warning. But the question was: *how?*

He turned his head and surveyed the entrance to the clearing and then raised his eyes, scanning the densely wooded slope above. As he did so, a furtive movement next to a bush further up the slope caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes and watched intently. A black hand slowly came into view. A fleeting smile flickered over Chalmers' face as he watched in fascination.

Silently, he pulled his rifle into his shoulder and, taking careful aim at a point slightly above the hand, waited for the terrorist's head and shoulders to materialise.

As the hand tentatively gripped a low-hanging branch, Chalmers gently pulled the trigger back halfway and, holding the pressure, waited.

He felt unusually calm.

*****

Time: 14h07

Joshua stopped by the side of the path and panting hard, urged on the scrambling DSAs who were following close behind.

"We're nearly there—keep going!"

Although it had been an arduous climb, Joshua felt pleased at how quickly they had managed to get to the narrow ledge that led to the clearing where he had left Chalmers and Mashiri. Only one question filled his mind—was the boss still alive?

To his alarm, they had heard sporadic outbursts of firing a few minutes earlier but, now, all was quiet. Was he too late?

The thought spurred him on and he forged ahead. Suddenly, he stopped and, raising his hand, ordered the long, straggling line of DSAs to halt. From where he was standing, he could just make out a rocky outcrop—the same one where Chalmers had discovered that the radio had no batteries. Joshua frowned, thinking hard. Where would the boss be now? Where were the terrorists positioned?

He *must* find out—and quickly. He turned round and pointed at two of the silent, panting men.

Suddenly they all froze as a barrage of heavy automatic firing broke out a few metres ahead on their left.

“Come on, you bastards, come on!” Joshua shouted to the startled DSAs at the top of his voice.

Raising his rifle to his hip, he raced up the remaining few metres of path and burst into the clearing, followed by the yelling, disorderly line of DSAs who, spurred on by Joshua’s reckless bravura and their own devotion to Chalmers, stumbled pell-mell to, what they believed, was his rescue.

CHAPTER 76

Time: 14h14

Chalmers waited as the hand was slowly withdrawn. Any moment now, he thought, and he would get his man. But there was no further movement.

Several seconds passed and still there was nothing.

He frowned, puzzled. Relaxing his grip on his rifle and raising his eyes slightly, he caught a fleeting glimpse of a line of some twelve or thirteen sinister, crouching figures moving swiftly, but stealthily, down the slope of the hill.

His heart pounded in his chest. Chalmers realised that they were coming to reinforce their comrades already deployed near the clearing.

Carefully putting down his rifle, he shifted his body and took up position behind the Bren. This was no time for finesse. What he needed now was firepower—and plenty of it.

But the moment he moved, the terrorists concealed in the bush to the front and left of him immediately opened up and directed a heavy, concentrated arc of fire at him. Almost oblivious to the hail of bullets that swept viciously over and around him, Chalmers hastily pointed the Bren at the new arrivals who were now running down the lower slopes of the hill to join their comrades. As he fired, he suddenly became aware that Mashiri had also spotted them and, in his agitation, was emptying magazine after magazine at everything in sight.

Suddenly, there was a movement directly ahead. Quickly realigning the Bren, he took aim and pulled the trigger. There was a sickening, hollow click. The magazine was empty! He swore, savagely cursing himself for the oversight. Fumbling around awkwardly in his trouser pocket, he tried to remove one of his spare magazines, but it caught in the inner lining. Raising his upper body, he frantically tried to wrench it free. As he did so, a shower of splintered wood and dirt fell across his head and body as a stream of well-aimed bullets ripped through the trees and bushes around him. After a few

agonised moments, he wrenched the magazine free and, hastily releasing the empty one on the Bren, slammed the replacement into position and fired.

The effect was immediate. He heard an agonised cry, followed by an unnatural silence. There was no further movement.

He snatched a glance at his watch. With a gut-wrenching twist, he realised that, unless Joshua and the men came within the next few minutes, he and Mashiri were finished.

He didn't want to die on a lonely hill in Africa. For that matter, he reflected with a sudden flash of humour, he didn't want to die on a lonely hill anywhere!

He braced himself.

While they still had some ammunition, there was a chance—however slender it might be. He felt in his other pocket and pulled out the remaining magazine. Apart from the few rounds left in his rifle, that was the last of his ammunition. He tensed as a sudden movement nearby caught his attention.

"Boss?"

It was Mashiri. Chalmers turned his head to answer but, at that moment, a deafening fusillade of shots rang out from the combined terror groups and blanketed the whole area where he and Mashiri were lying. Chalmers flattened himself into the ground, daunted at the intensity of the onslaught. He realised the terrs would make their charge any moment now.

Suddenly, above the uproar, he became aware of confused shouting which gradually increased in volume. He cautiously raised his head.

Racing recklessly into the clearing, their rifles blazing from their hips, Chalmers saw his men charging forward and fanning out, raking the terrorists at almost point blank range. Amid the cries and shouts, he watched in fascination as the nearest group of terrorists turned tail and fled in panic up the hillside, past their comrades who were still in hiding some way above them.

The DSAs cheering wildly and, believing that they had saved the day, immediately relaxed and started jumping around in jubilation and shouting for Chalmers and Mashiri, completely oblivious of the fact that the main force of terrorists was silently creeping down the hill towards them.

Chalmers leapt to his feet. "Get down! *Get down!*" he screamed. "There's more behind you!"

He fell to the ground and, frantically aiming the Bren, sprayed the slope

with a long burst of gunfire. The DSAs, shocked and momentarily disorientated by Chalmers' warning shouts and the unexpected gunfire, ran for cover, throwing themselves blindly into the bushes.

Chalmers' offensive was immediately answered by the terrorists, but their fire was spasmodic and their aim scattered and ineffective.

As he listened to the erratic firing that was now coming from various points in and around the clearing, Chalmers felt a wave of disappointment sweep over him. His men had done well and it was only thanks to their reckless and idiotic action that he and Mashiri were still alive at this moment. But now they were *all* pinned down and, once the main body of the terrorists joined battle, it would only be a question of minutes before they were all picked off.

He reached across for his rifle and, in that instant, saw figures appear above the ridge on his right. With a spasm of fear, he realised that a second group of terrorists was approaching from behind. They were about to be attacked on two sides!

His heart sank. *Now* they didn't stand a chance—

As he turned to face the new threat, he suddenly became aware of a high-pitched whine that grew rapidly in volume until it deafened him. As he looked up and around in startled bewilderment, an Alouette helicopter slowly passed a few metres above his head, casting a dark shadow across the ground and sending up a dense, blinding cloud of swirling debris. The surrounding trees and bushes twisted violently in the turbulence.

Chalmers threw his arm up to protect his eyes and, rolling over onto his back, peeped quickly through narrowed slits at the dark underside of the aircraft.

The sight was one that he knew he would never forget. It was one of the defining moments of his life.

Gradually, the helicopter—machine guns blazing—moved away over the top of the nearby trees and hovered over the edge of the clearing as the terrorists emerged.

Chalmers, surging with excitement and relief, leapt up and ran out into the clearing to watch. As he looked across the valley towards the opposite hillside, he saw three more helicopters hovering low over the trees. He watched, fascinated, as the leading machine slowly slipped between some trees and Chalmers saw several armed figures leap out of hiding and run, weaving frantically, along the bush-covered slope. So engrossed in the

unfolding drama, Chalmers hardly noticed the DSAs crowding around him jubilantly, cheering and shouting.

He was just in time to see a group of terrorists disappear into the dark cave mouth. The command helicopter slowly turned and, skimming gracefully over the treetops in pursuit, hovered above the clearing in front of the cave. Chalmers saw one of its machine guns swing round and, above the noise of its whining turbo engine, he could just detect the dull rattle of its MAG as it sent a stream of tracers curving into the cave opening.

The exultant DSAs were almost incoherent with excitement but, although Chalmers shared their feelings, there was still work to be done.

He turned to the exhilarated men and held up his hands. “Quiet, you lot!” he shouted above the din. “We haven’t finished yet. There’s still plenty of terrs around here somewhere, and we don’t want *any* of them to get away!”

He hesitated as a sudden thought dawned on him. “Where’s Joshua?” he asked anxiously, scanning the faces. But at that moment, looking beyond the crowd of DSAs, he saw the lance corporal running towards him, his face wreathed in smiles.

Chalmers pushed his way through the men and, holding out his arm, shook Joshua warmly by the hand. “Well done, Joshua, well done!” he said enthusiastically, clapping him on the shoulder. “You and Mashiri both deserve medals.”

The two men grinned proudly. “Thank you, boss, thank you!”

The other DSAs crowded around, cheering wildly.

Chalmers turned to them. “And as for you, you horrible things—you all deserve to be shot, you crazy lunatics!” He grinned broadly.

The delighted men roared with laughter, and Joshua, swept up by heartfelt emotion mixed with deep relief, stepped forward and clapped Chalmers hard on the back. Taken by surprise, Chalmers turned and raised his eyebrows but seeing the look of sheer happiness in the corporal’s eyes, merely laughed.

Suddenly remembering, Joshua fished around in his pocket and held out a crumpled packet to Chalmers. “Instead of a medal, boss—can I have a cigarette?”

Mashiri pushed forward. “And me, too, boss!” he interjected, his face wreathed in smiles.

Chalmers roared with laughter. “Time for that later, guys. First, we must __”

But hearing the sound of a helicopter swinging in low towards them, he left the sentence unfinished and, turning around, watched as it landed near the edge of the clearing. As the Alouette settled gently on the ground, a uniformed figure jumped out and bending low, ran towards him.

It was Steve Grant. Chalmers smiled happily. “Hello, Steve! Boy, am I glad to see you!”

Grant held out his hand, a smile on his face, “Nice to see you too, Mike!”

Chalmers shook his head, chuckling. “Thank God you got our call—you were just in the nick of time!”

Steve looked at him, a puzzled expression on his face. “What call?”

Chalmers stared at him. “The one our radio operator sent through to you earlier—”

Steve shook his head. “I don’t know anything about that,” he replied.

“What!” Chalmers exclaimed in bewilderment.

“We came by on the off-chance, really. Got an urgent message from your district commissioner. Apparently, some black woman turned up there and told him that Black Satan and his gang were down here, hiding out in some caves. Can’t say I really believed it, though!” He looked around and then smiled broadly. “But it was a good job I decided to come, by the look of it, eh?” he said, punching Chalmers lightly on the chest.

Chalmers nodded, exhaling loudly. A sudden thought crossed his mind. “Do you know what the woman’s name was, by any chance?”

Steve frowned. “Let me think … um—oh, yes, I remember now. I think the DC said it was Josephine something.” He turned and at looked at Chalmers. “Does the name mean anything to you?”

Chalmers nodded his head. “Yes, it does indeed!” he replied with feeling. Josephine’s act of courage had saved all of their lives, he thought with heartfelt gratitude.

Steve turned and looked over towards the cave. “I think there’s still a lot of the bloody terrs around, but I’m not quite sure how we’re going to get at ‘em.”

Chalmers turned to him. “It looked to me like most of them have retreated into the cave.”

“*Ja*, could be,” agreed Steve, “but, if so, it’s going to be helluva difficult to flush them out.” He thought for a moment. “I think this is a job for the

Hawker Hunters[65]!”

Chalmers looked at him in surprise. “Hawker Hunters? God, that would be something!”

“How many of the bastards d’you think you guys managed to get?”

“I don’t really know. We haven’t had time to do a count yet—but it must be around eight or nine, I would think.” He shrugged his shoulders. “But, quite honestly, I’m just guessing.”

Steve clapped his arm on Chalmers’ shoulder. “Pretty good going, Mike. It must have been quite exciting!” he said with a smile.

Chalmers chuckled. “Well, I don’t know about that, but it certainly got quite interesting there for a while!”

Steve laughed. “Anyway, the sooner we get the Air Force boys down here, the better. I’ll go and radio them now—keep fingers crossed that they’re not busy elsewhere!”

Chalmers looked at him, a broad smile of gratitude on his face. “Thanks again for everything, Steve.”

Steve laughed. “It was a pleasure!”

As he turned and walked back to the helicopter, Chalmers called after the retreating figure: “Hey, Steve, how long before the aircraft get here do you think?”

“Not long,” he called back. “All being well, they could be here in about 20 minutes or so. Better make sure everyone’s well clear of the area—it gets a bit hairy at close range. I know from personal experience!” He grinned and then, waving briefly, climbed back into the helicopter.

CHAPTER 77

Time: 14h45

Chalmers and Joshua, their rifles lying on the ground beside them, sat under the deep shade of a tall msasa tree high up on the slope of a neighbouring hill. Their elevated position gave them a panoramic view of the cave and the two arms of high ground that stretched out from its mouth like a lion's paws.

With the exception of Steve Grant's aircraft, the remaining helicopters had all landed in the vicinity but, although Chalmers scanned the terrain carefully, he was unable to spot any of them. The command helicopter was hovering over the lip of the cave, ready to drop a smoke marker so the incoming Hawker Hunter pilots would be able to accurately pinpoint the entrance.

Chalmers stiffened suddenly. "Look, Joshua, there goes the smoke marker. The Hunters must be coming."

He stood up quickly, putting his hand above his eyes to shield them from the sun.

The pitch of the command chopper's engine changed, and as Chalmers watched, the Alouette climbed away slowly over the top of the hillside, the noise of its engine fading abruptly as the machine slipped out of sight over the far side of the hill.

A heavy silence fell.

As he watched, a cloud of pinkish-grey smoke from the marker drifted lazily across the mouth of the cave.

Chalmers felt a momentary pang of compassion for the men hiding inside and, for a fleeting moment, his desire for revenge weakened as the reality of the horrific fate that awaited the cave's occupants dawned on him. He just hoped, for their sake, that the end would be swift.

But as quickly as it had come, his compassion faded as other scenes flashed across his mind's eye in quick succession—the mutilated bodies at Nyakende; the beheaded remains of Marita Makwara scattered in the dirt; the gruesome corpses of the villagers from Magomba kraal. He saw again the

look in Masikela's dying eyes. But, above all, he remembered the appalling sight of the two blood-soaked, bullet-riddled bodies of the little girls at 'Good Hope Farm' and the naked, abused and cruelly mutilated body of Claire.

Chalmers scowled.

No, he couldn't forget these atrocities—*ever*. Nor would he ever forgive. All he really hoped now was that Black Satan himself was in the cave.

Absorbed in these harrowing reflections, Chalmers was almost completely oblivious to his surroundings. Joshua nudged him on the arm, pointing at the horizon. Startled, he turned to look.

In the distance, at barely more than treetop height, he could just make out five small dots. Even as he watched intently, they grew larger. Travelling at almost 1,000 kph, the sleek fighter jets tore towards them. Suddenly, three of them broke formation and soared effortlessly upwards, climbing steeply in breathtaking curves.

Chalmers turned his gaze back to the two leading aircraft that, silent and menacing, almost appeared to hover gently in the air.

He could see them clearly now. They were almost at the same elevation as the aircraft and, with a thrill of excitement, Chalmers realised that they would get a close, broadside view of the fighters as they made their low-level run-in.

Chalmers was transfixed. He could now detect the first, faint whistle of their powerful jet engines and then, suddenly, the sound rose to a thunderous crescendo as the two jets hurtled past, straight for the cave. He covered his ears.

Awed and exhilarated by their speed and awesome power, Chalmers felt the prick of tears behind his eyes.

As rockets streaked out from beneath the aircrafts' wings towards the entrance of the cave, the Hawker Hunters pulled upwards in a steep climb, separating in graceful, high-speed flight, the hills echoing and reverberating with the roar of their engines.

The sound of a violent explosion deep in the hillside rent the air. Chalmers glanced at the smoke-laden air around the cave and then, turning quickly, saw the other three aircraft, in stepped formation, streaming in towards the target.

He covered his ears again and as the fighters raced past in a confusing blur, he swung his head, trying to follow them with his eyes. Again, he saw the rockets curving towards the mouth of the cave. As the sleek jets swept over the hill with a deafening roar, there was another deep-throated explosion from

the inside the cave, followed by a deep, sustained rumbling noise.

Chalmers turned to Joshua and, grabbing him by the arm, pointed to the thick smoke that was billowing from the cave.

“They’ve hit their ammo cache! 1,000-pound bombs!” he shouted excitedly above the noise.

He grinned and, peering up at the sky, tried to locate the aircraft. Although they were high up and already several kilometres away, he saw the fighters begin a shallow dive as they prepared to make a second strike.

Momentarily distracted, Chalmers glanced at the hillside below them. As he did so, he spotted a lone figure running erratically through the bush.

Chalmers frowned. “Who the hell’s *that*?” He pointed. “Can you see, Joshua—there—down by those rocks? He’s got a rifle!”

They stared in silence for a few moments.

“I hope it’s not one of our guys—surely they wouldn’t be so stupid as to go down there!” exclaimed Chalmers, eyeing the approaching jet fighters with sudden disquiet.

“Boss, it’s a *terr*,” said Joshua, his eyes widening. “He must have been hiding elsewhere when the choppers came.”

They watched the tiny figure in silence.

“He’s coming this way,” warned Joshua in a tense voice. He bent down and picked up his rifle.

Now oblivious to the Hunters that were bearing down on them at near-supersonic speed, Chalmers grabbed his rifle and cocked it. He glanced over at Joshua. To his surprise, the man had a strange, almost knowing, smile on the face.

“It’s *him*, boss—it’s Black Satan!” he said in a suppressed voice.

Chalmers frowned. “Good God, how on earth do you know that?” he demanded.

“I recognise him, boss!”

“But you’ve never seen him before—*have you?* How can you know it’s him?” Chalmers challenged Joshua, scowling suspiciously.

Without replying, Joshua started running towards a nearby clump of trees further down the slope towards the fleeing terrorist.

As Chalmers followed at a run, the air was suddenly filled with an earth-shattering roar as the five Hunters screamed over their heads in lightning succession.

The fugitive was now about 500 metres away but, suddenly catching sight of Chalmers and Joshua running to intercept him, he turned abruptly and started scrambling frantically along the slope away from his pursuers.

Chalmers raised his rifle to his shoulder and, taking aim, fired off a rapid succession of shots.

He saw the man stumble, only to recover his balance and then fall heavily to the ground. Moments later, the wounded man again scrambled to his feet and headed off down the hill slope with Chalmers and Joshua following in headlong pursuit.

With a frantic glance over his shoulder, the terrorist headed straight for a rocky outcrop nearby and disappeared from view behind a large boulder.

Chalmers and Joshua were almost upon him now but, realising that they would be perfect targets, both instantly threw themselves to the ground and wriggled for cover.

Chalmers, panting hard and covered in sweat, fixed his eyes determinedly on the rocks ahead then, slowly, inch by inch, eased himself over the ground towards them. He could feel the pulse throbbing violently in his constricted throat.

He froze instantly as his rifle clinked on a stone. He narrowed his eyes, listening intently. Was that the tip of an AK-47 halfway up the side of that rock? He quickly wiped the sweat from his eyes to clear his vision. Raising his head slightly, he looked around for Joshua. He was nowhere to be seen.

There was an eerie stillness.

Pushing his rifle slightly ahead of him, he again started to ease himself forward on his elbows.

Suddenly he froze as the sound of a single gunshot rang out, barely metres away from him.

Chalmers frowned, unanswered questions crowding into his head. Pushing his misgivings aside, he realised that here was his opportunity. He jumped up and, clutching his rifle, ran doggedly towards the rocks. Skirting around the side, he emerged barely two metres from where his nemesis, Black Satan, had taken up position.

The terrorist’s back was towards Chalmers and he was completely unaware of his presence behind him. He was kneeling down on one knee, rifle at his shoulder.

As Chalmers, his cocked rifle at his hip, slowly and silently advanced

towards the terrorist, Black Satan suddenly became aware that he was not alone. He spun around in panic, a startled, frightened look on his face.

Instantly recognising the hopelessness of his situation, the terrorist slowly lowered his rifle to the ground and shrank back against the face of the rock.

The two men looked at each other for a few seconds without moving.

Chalmers had often pictured this moment in his mind's eye—and, just as often, had wondered if, when it came down to it, he would be able to shoot the man in cold blood.

He had never been able to decide.

He stood there completely immobile.

Suddenly, Joshua, panting hard, came around the other side of the rocks and, seeing Chalmers standing over Black Satan, stood stock-still.

No one moved.

And then Chalmers suddenly relaxed and, lowering his rifle, turned his head and looked at Joshua.

"Right, corporal," he said in a firm voice. "Keep him covered. I'll get the army chaps to take him into custody."

Joshua, a puzzled frown on his face, moved over and took Chalmers' place, covering Black Satan with his rifle.

Chalmers gave the terrorist a final searching glance and then turned and began walking up the hill, an expression of intense release—almost of liberation—in his eyes.

A short way up the hillside, he stopped short, stiffening as a terror-stricken scream rent the air. Almost at the same moment, he heard three shots fired in rapid succession.

Turning around sharply, Chalmers saw Joshua emerge from behind the rocks and walk briskly towards him. As he drew near, he saw a slight smile on the corporal's lips.

Startled, Chalmers looked at him, mystified.

"What the hell …!" he demanded.

As Joshua drew level, he looked at Chalmers impassively. "He tried to run away, boss," he said, his face a mask.

CHAPTER 78

Salisbury
A few weeks later.

It was lunchtime.

Leaving the office, Chalmers walked through the Gardens and, finding an empty bench, sat down and watched the cascading water in the fountain sparkling in the summer sun.

He looked around him.

The once-trim lawns were littered with the sprawling bodies of Africans sleeping indolently in the midday heat. Empty bottles and discarded rubbish lay strewn untidily over the unkempt paths and once-vibrant flowerbeds.

After a few minutes, he pulled out his wallet and opening it, took out a small slip of paper—his 'To Do' reminders. He ran his eyes down the list: *Post letter to mother. Pick up car battery. Fetch dry cleaning. Ring Mary re: removal quote. Collect air tickets to Vancouver …*

As he crammed the list back into his bulging wallet, he noticed a small blue sheet of notepaper. Puzzled, he unfolded it, scanning the contents quickly. Coming to the last sentence, he read:

> 'Perhaps, when you get back to Salisbury, we could have dinner together again sometime (with proper wine!). I do hope so, but I will leave the decision entirely in your hands, my darling—Your Pamela.'

As he re-read the note, a flood of memories came rushing back: the base at Chitangwe; the hotel at Umsholo; the storms and the heat, the mosquitoes and the hushed stillness of the bush; of Wally and his "Are you on drugs or something?"; of Rob and Masikela—loyal to the end; and of Josephine Matiwa, and Claire …

He shook his head sadly.

And it had all been for nothing—absolutely nothing.

Or had it?

He gave a sigh and, putting his wallet back in his pocket, stood up slowly. Walking over to a nearby dustbin, he took Pamela’s note and, carefully tearing it into small pieces, watched as the fragments spiralled gently into the empty container below.

Turning abruptly, he walked out of the park into the busy street and was lost in the lunchtime crowd.

EPILOGUE

February 1980

The ZANU-PF soldier stood in the doorway of the thatched hut, his AK-47[66] pointing menacingly at the group of frightened Africans cowering inside.

"You will vote for us tomorrow—*otherwise* …" His voice was sinister. "Understand?"

He patted his rifle significantly.

They understood perfectly.

On 14 February 1980, the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front, headed by Robert Mugabe, scored a landside victory in what Britain and the West declared were 'surprisingly free and fair elections.'

The dream of Cecil John Rhodes had come to an end, and on that day, Rhodesia died and passed into the history books.

‘As Members of this House, we are all proud at what has been achieved in our name and in the name of this country.’

Lord Byers, House of Lords, London.

‘Lord Soames Tributes on Rhodesia Governorship’

Hansard, 7 May 1980

NOTES

[1] Servicemen in the operational area qualified for 10 days Rest and Recreation every 30 days.

[2] A 7.62mm automatic rifle developed in the 1950s by the German armaments manufacturer HK (Heckler & Koch).

[3] Surface-to-Air Missile – anti-aircraft system first developed in Nazi Germany.

[4] Capital city of Rhodesia, renamed Harare in April 1982 on the second anniversary of Zimbabwean independence.

[5] Popular African adventure magazine series written by Edgar Wallace from 1909 and later published as a novel in 1911 under the title ‘Sanders of the River’, about a condescendingly paternalistic British commissioner, Lord “Sandy” Sanders, who maintained British rule—and the very Victorian imperialist ideology of the day—over the indigenous peoples in the N'Gombi district of Nigeria.

[6] Standard issue 7.62 calibre light automatic service rifle first produced during the Cold War by the Belgian armaments manufacturer *Fabrique Nationale de Herstal*.

[7] Term commonly used to refer to an African village, although its correct meaning is an enclosure for cattle and other livestock located *within* a village.

[8] Highly effective 85mm Rocket-Propelled Grenade launcher of Soviet origin. Most widely used anti-tank weapon in the world.

[9] Landmine-protected light armoured security vehicle invented in Rhodesia by automotive engineer, Ernest Konschel and in production from 1975 to 1979.

[10] Bren LMG – 1930s Czechoslovak-designed, British-built magazine-fed Light Machine Gun.

[11] A member of an informal network of adolescent spies and messengers—the ‘eyes and ears’—of the terrorist forces.

[12] Porridge-like meal made from ground white maize. Mealie-meal, as it’s commonly known, is the staple food of the people of Zimbabwe and other African countries.

[13] Acronym for Aviation Turbine fuel, known internationally as Jet A-1.

[14] Attacked.

[15] So called because it actively hunts its prey instead of making a web.

[16] Hill (Shona).

[17] Slang for terrorists.

[18] Traditional round, mud-and-pole thatched huts.

[19] Soviet-designed and manufactured 7.62 mm automatic assault rifle, developed in the Soviet Union by Mikhail Kalashnikov. It formally entered military service with the Red Army in 1947, hence: ‘Automatic Kalashnikov, model/year 1947’.

[20] A small African child. Thought to be a corruption of the Portuguese word ‘pequeño’ (small or little).

[21] Terrorists.

[22] Designed by Ernest Konschel, the inventor of the Leopard, the Pookie—a light armoured landmine detection vehicle—was built between 1976 and 1980. Regarded as Rhodesia’s secret weapon against landmines, the hugely successful Pookie had wide, low-pressure Formula One racing tyres and, exerting only three pounds pressure per square inch—less than that of the human foot—the Pookie would not even detonate standard anti-personnel landmines. Not one of the 68 vehicle built ever detonated a single landmine.

[23] Terrorists.

[24] Landmine.

[25] Rocky outcrops (Afrikaans).

[26] Traditional sewn-leather shoe (Afrikaans).

[27] Handheld landmine detector.

[28] Sadly, one of these aircraft later broke up in a storm while on a test flight, killing the pilot, Captain Jack Malloch.

[29] Base Commander.

[30] Ground Forces; army.

[31] Communist Terrorist, often abbreviated to CT or, in the international radiotelephony spelling alphabet, Charlie Tango. Not to be confused with Chitangwe’s call sign, also Charlie Tango.

[32] OP or Observation Patrol.

[33] Single-Sideband modulation, first used commercially in 1927. Long considered the de facto standard for long-distance voice radio transmissions.

[34] Hugely successful, multi-purpose all-French designed and manufactured helicopter. Named after the French word for ‘lark’.

[35] A Belgian 7.62mm general-purpose machine gun—*Mitrailleuse d`Appui Général*—designed at Fabrique Nationale (FN) during the early 1950s.

[36] Situation Report.

[37] Small, cotton flannel cleaning patch typically measuring 4” x 2”.

[38] Call sign for one of the Department of Internal Affairs’ own aircraft.

[39] Internal Affairs’ Head Office in Urungwe.

[40] Pass Laws introduced pre-UDI by the British-administered colony of Southern Rhodesia decreed that all Africans had to carry a 'registration card' or certificate as proof of identity. Also known as a ‘situpa’.

[41] Hill.

[42] Medicine (Shona).

[43] Large, spiral-horned antelope found throughout eastern and southern Africa.

[44] Broken (Afrikaans).

[45] Chief (Shona, Informal).

[46] Moniker referring to a group of 20-plus foreign front-line correspondents covering the Bush War who, in defiance of international press ethics, carried weapons. Many considered this controversial practice exposed all journalists in Rhodesia to charges of being armed combatants and ‘fair targets’.

[47] Rhodesia’s capital city, Salisbury (now Harare), was originally named after the 3rd Marquess of Salisbury, Lord Robert Cecil, British statesman and three-time Prime Minister (1885–86, 1886–92, 1895–1902).

[48] An unlicensed bar or club, usually located in a black township, selling alcohol—often home-brewed.

[49] Verandah (Afrikaans).

[50] Joint Operational Command Headquarters.

[51] Tribal Trust Land.

[52] A species of grass native to the grasslands of Africa. Growing up to 4.5 metres (15 ft) tall, it is a favourite food of elephants.

[53] 'Fire Force' airborne helicopter unit.

[54] A form of address to a superior (Xhosa).

[55] Based on an original report by Terry Blocksidge/Sunday Mail (Salisbury, Rhodesia).

[56] Psalm 91.

[57] Army.

[58] Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army. The militant wing of the political organisation of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).

[59] Ian Douglas Smith, Prime Minister of Rhodesia from 1964 to 1979.

[60] Freelance filmmaker, Nick Downie, who accompanied Lord Richard on the assignment, went on to complete filming of the documentary they had been engaged in at the time of Lord Richard's untimely death. It was later broadcast by Thames Television as a 30 minute TV Eye programme under the title 'Frontline Rhodesia' (1979).

[61] South African. Strips of dried cured meat, typically made from beef, ostrich or game. Similar to beef jerky.

[62] Now mainly of South African usage, to mean a scoundrel, rogue or scamp.

[63] 'Casualty Evacuation' – the emergency evacuation of the injured from a combat zone.

[64] Radio operator.

[65] Hawker Hunter FGA.9 jet fighter, produced by Hawker Siddley in the 1950s and 1960s, and flown extensively by the Rhodesian Air Force throughout the Bush War.

[66] The Registrar-General of Elections objected to the use of ZANU-PF's intended logo on ballot papers as it portrayed an image of an AK-47 rifle which he considered to be 'detrimental to public order'.