

FURY'S WAR

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AN EPIC TALE OF TWO LIVES ON OPPOSING
SIDES OF A BITTER CONFLICT

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The novel weaves fictional characters into actual events that occurred during the second Anglo Boer War, without in any way modifying the role of real people involved or altering the actual outcome of historical events. Only the first battle scene is entirely fictional; all others are as recorded in history.

To honour those who dedicate their lives to protect
and care for suffering children everywhere.

CHAPTER 1

September to November 1899

“And so it is, Gentlemen, that we have come to the end of the long road, past the battle of the pens and the wrangling of tongues, to the arbitrament of the Lee-Metford and the Mauser.”

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

“In life, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose; but in war, even the winners are losers.”

There was an air of authority in the quietly spoken words, which instantly silenced the testosterone-fuelled cries for war against Britain. When Johan Fourie spoke, men listened. President Martinus Steyn, the elected leader of the Orange Free State, gazed intently at the imposing figure who had so effortlessly taken control of the meeting. It was Thursday, the 21st of September 1899, and the assembled Raad of the Free State was giving feedback to the burghers of its decision to stand by the Transvaal in its ongoing feud with Britain.

Johan, or Jan to everyone except his late mother, was a big man, easily six-foot-four, with broad, powerful shoulders and large hands. Although his manner was gentle, he was clearly not a man to be trifled with. The laugh lines that crinkled around his eyes were evidence of his good nature, but few men had the courage to test it. Fortunately for all around him, Jan was not easily angered, and he possessed good judgement with a sound moral compass. In times of difficulty, and especially in the event of war, he was undeniably a man you wanted to have on your side.

For a large man, Jan was light on his feet and had moved easily through the crowd. Although outwardly calm, he remained ready to spring into

action. Jan towered over the small podium as he continued to address the meeting. “My friends, let us not be fooled into thinking that Britain will arrive unprepared for this war. Victory will not come as easily to us as it did in the last one, and serious losses will be suffered on both sides. The English will be better prepared this time. They will send a greater number of troops, bring bigger guns, and arrive with a fierce resolve to avenge the defeat of 1881. Fathers and mothers will lose sons, and sons and daughters will lose fathers. It will be a time of hardship for us all, even greater than experienced during the Great Trek.” Jan held the audience captivated as he spoke. No one tried to shout him down or interrupt him.

“The last war was over in five short months, but this one will not be over so quickly. War is not grand or glamorous. It is not romantic. War is not noble. No, my friends! War is brutal. War is heartache and great loss. We will not be able to shelter our women and children from this war. They too will experience its horror and suffering. Let us not be rash or foolish. This is not a decision to be founded on emotion. This is a time for careful, calculated decision-making, after considering all possibilities. We cannot commit half-heartedly to this war! If we choose war, there is no turning back until victory is won. No turning back! The path of war is a treacherous one, so let us think carefully before we decide to walk it.”

The meeting remained silent as Jan made his way back to his seat. At age thirty, Jan was by far the youngest Commandant-General in the Orange Free State. He led the commandos from Clarens, and owned a farm that was nestled in one of the many luscious green valleys in the foothills of the mighty Drakensberg mountains.

President Steyn had a Scottish wife, known to her friends as Tibby, whose grandparents had travelled to Africa as missionaries. Despite having been born in the Free State, her roots were Scottish, and so the looming prospect of war with Britain troubled him all the more. “How does a man go to war with his wife’s family?” Steyn thought despondently as he looked around at the throng of Boers expectantly gathered in the Stadsaal of the small town of Fouriesburg, the capital of the Orange Free State. There were the young men, eager for the excitement of battle, and

the older, wiser souls, recognising that war was the only way to stop the insatiable greed of Britain to plunder the gold and diamond reserves of the Free State and Transvaal.

The British had annexed Kimberley to take ownership of the diamond mines, and now they were also going after the gold in the Transvaal to fund the growth of their empire. The Boers were a tough, proud people and not easily angered, but Steyn sensed that this grab for gold by Britain was the straw that would break the proverbial camel's back. For these Boers, enough was enough. In a short, gut-wrenching moment, Steyn realised that war was inevitable, and it sickened him to the core. He pushed his chair back and walked soberly to the makeshift podium.

"The Free State has signed a treaty to stand with the Transvaal. We are bound by everything that is near and dear to us to unite with them against the British and defend the freedom that our fathers fought for. Britain must be made to realise that we will not tolerate its insatiable greed. Our gold and diamonds do not belong to them! They belong to our people and to our nations. We will not surrender them!"

A loud, spontaneous cry of approval went up around the room as President Steyn slammed his fist down on the podium, emphasising the commitment of the Boers to make a stand against the Empire.

"A war between the Transvaal and Britain is a war with us! We will stand together and defeat the usurpers." Cheers filled the room. "Sir Alfred Milner has asked that the Free State remain neutral in the event of war. He has asked that we allow his troops into our territory to protect the railway line to Pretoria. He assures me that Britain has no quarrel with the Free State, and that they wish to preserve the friendly relations that at present exist. I responded to him in no uncertain terms that a war with our brothers in the Transvaal is a war with us!" Steyn's firm stand was greeted with further rapturous applause.

There was a distinct hatred of the English among the Boers, and some of those present at the meeting had, alongside the then-boy Paul Kruger, now president of the Transvaal, been part of the Great Trek from the Cape to the hinterland of southern Africa, between 1835 and 1843. They and

their fathers had left the Cape Colony to escape British rule and were now in no mood to be subjected to it once more. They had defeated the British in a matter of three months in 1881, and they would fight and defeat them again.

When the meeting had been brought to a close, Jan was invited to President Steyn's house for a cold beer and a briefing on the finer details of the negotiations that had taken place between the Transvaal and Britain. The house was not far from the newly built town hall, and was constructed from the same golden sandstone as most of the other buildings in town. It was a modest home on a corner stand, sporting a traditional wrap-around stoep, which helped to keep it cool in summer and warm in winter. Across the street was the imposing Dutch Reformed Church with its customary steeple dominating the skyline of the booming farm town.

Once seated in the front room, President Steyn leaned forward as he began to speak. "Jan, you and I both know that war is inevitable." The look of resignation on Steyn's face reinforced the gravity of his words. "As far back as 1895, Britain made her intention clear with the Jamieson raid. Rhodes and Milner, its masterminds, had a vision of a British-controlled Africa extending from the Cape to Cairo. They need the gold of the Transvaal. Since then, President Kruger has been secretly buying the most modern weapons and an assortment of guns and has been shipping them through the Cape and Port Natal in boxes marked as agricultural equipment." They smiled together at the subterfuge. "The taxes earned on the gold have made the Transvaal into a very rich country. We in the Free State have also been buying weapons, albeit on a far smaller scale. Britain continues to send fresh troops to Port Natal. As we speak, ten thousand additional soldiers are on their way."

President Steyn looked intently at Jan as he spoke. He could see from the earnest expression on Jan's face that he fully appreciated the gravity of the crisis. Steyn had a great deal of respect for the younger man and valued his opinion. Upon first meeting Jan, he had instantly recognised him as a leader of men and had promoted him rapidly through the ranks to his current position of Commandant-General.

“Britain is using the issue of gaining citizenship for its people working in the Transvaal as an excuse for war. Kruger and his Raad have tried to be flexible around the citizenship issue. His concessions have not satisfied Sir Milner, who will not rest until the Uitlanders, most of whom are British, are given the vote so they can take control of the Transvaal. When it was just veldt the British didn't want it, but now that there is gold it is a different story. Do you know that the gold reserves of the Rand are valued at seven hundred million pounds?” President Steyn exclaimed incredulously.

“That is an enormous wealth, sir,” Jan said as he shook his head in disbelief. “I can see why you say that war is inevitable. I have heard that with the world moving to the Gold Standard, Britain has very little gold to support its currency.” Jan felt grateful to have recently read an article in the local paper on the subject, thus letting him keep pace with the president.

“That is exactly the point, Jan. Britain needs the gold from the Transvaal to fund the growth of its economy and support its currency. No matter what concessions Kruger gives, they will not be enough,” Steyn said sombrely. “Kruger has built up a stockpile of weapons and drawn out negotiations to get through the winter so there will be green grass to feed the horses when out on the battlefield during spring. I called a conference between Kruger and Milner in Bloemfontein in May, but negotiations quickly broke down. Milner wants the Transvaal and that is that.” Steyn paused for a moment in contemplation. “Call up your commandos in Clarens and make sure that they are prepared and ready. Only a miracle can save us from another war.” The president spoke the words gravely, almost prophetically, and Jan felt a shiver run down his spine.

* * *

Late that afternoon, Jan left the president's home immersed in thought. He had decided to spend the night in town and leave early in the morning on his twenty-mile journey back to his beloved farm in Clarens. The town

was abuzz with war talk and the hiding that the English were once again going to receive at the hands of the Boers.

Jan was fortunate to find a bed for the night at the Fouriesburg Inn, the only hotel in town, just one short block away from Steyn's home. The fourteen-room inn, also made of golden sandstone, had stables at the rear where he tethered his horse for the night.

His room, which opened on to the front stoep and faced the street, was spacious, with Oregon pine floors and a pressed lead ceiling. Struggling as he did to sleep comfortably in the single bed most inns provided, Jan was relieved this time to see a double bed. He could never understand why two tiny singles would be pushed together to give patrons the impression of a double bed. "A man can only sleep in one bed at a time, so make it big and comfortable," was his thinking. The communal ablution facilities were accessed through a back door from the room.

The events of the day, and his new burdens of responsibility, left his mood sombre as he made his way to the dining room for dinner. As he was passing through the bar towards the restaurant, his path was blocked.

"Are you frightened to fight the English, Mommy's boy?"

Jan was startled by the aggression shown by the brute who had clearly misunderstood the message in his speech.

"Leave that coward alone, Piet. We don't want him pissing in his pants here in the bar."

Jan turned to his left from where the second voice had come and saw that the thug had a twin who was closing in on him. His muscles flexed involuntarily as he prepared for the inevitable onslaught.

"Gentlemen, I am a visitor to your town at the request of President Steyn and do not want any trouble." Jan spoke the words loudly but as calmly as he could, so that the other patrons would hear and possibly discourage the pair from pursuing the conflict further. But his words had the opposite effect, as a human fighting ring materialised around the three men.

While not often tested, Jan had experienced this situation before. The big men of the town somehow felt threatened by his imposing presence,

for some reason believing that by beating him into submission, they would enhance their own reputations as the meanest men to be feared. And in Fouriesburg, the Klopper twins, who always fought as one, were those mean men.

The ring of spectators had also witnessed this scene before. The Klopper boys were spoiling for a fight. Yet they sensed that this stranger was different; he was not standing down as so many had before. The crowd could smell the blood. They were not to be disappointed.

“The president is not here to protect you, nor are your Tommie friends who are still licking their wounds from Majuba, so who is going to protect you now?” the brute called Piet sneered.

Jan was as proud an Afrikaner as anyone he knew. Clearly his impassioned plea for peace had been misunderstood as a sign of weakness, or allegiance to the English. He smiled briefly in resignation knowing that he could not talk his way out of this situation. He was left with only two options: fight or surrender. Then again, surrender was never an option for Jan. He stood his ground. As his adrenalin-fuelled body readied for action, he wondered which brother would attack first, or would they fight as one?

What Jan needed was room to manoeuvre, but the human fighting ring tightened around the three men as spectators jostled for a better view of the pending carnage. The bar was packed with locals, as well as farmers who had made their way into town to attend the afternoon's political meeting. The sound of chairs scraping as they were pushed back towards the bar filled the room.

The air was thick with tobacco smoke and the atmosphere practically crackled with anticipation. The spectators, hungry for blood and gore, jockeyed for position. Jan was convinced that the one named Piet would attack first, as he had started the argument. As Piet began to circle, Jan sighed, realising that his clean clothes were likely to be bloodied before dinner.

Piet stood six feet tall and weighed around two hundred and seventy pounds compared to Jan's two thirty. He had a cruel-looking face and the

evil glint of a bully in his eyes. His nature was accentuated by a feature commonly associated with brawlers: a disfigured nose.

Fortunately for Jan, the other brute, also mean-looking but without the broken nose, seemed content to watch his brother teach this arrogant stranger a lesson. “At least they don’t fight two on one,” Jan thought begrudgingly, with a hint of respect.

Head down and arms flaying, Piet came charging in, looking to end the fight quickly with one big blow. Jan stepped neatly back, leaning out of the way as Piet came lumbering past to crash into the spectators, knocking out cold an unsuspecting onlooker with a single blow to the head. In an act of self-preservation, the human ring expanded, giving Jan more room to move.

“Stand and fight, you coward!” sneered Piet, as he prepared for another charge. Jan shot out a left jab that caught him flush on the nose, snapping his head back. Before the surprise had registered in his eyes, Jan had struck him with two more lightning-fast left jabs and a solid right hook to the jaw. Blood spurting from his broken nose, Piet was unconscious before he hit the floor.

With a cry of rage, brute number two charged at Jan from behind, locking his bear-like arms around Jan’s neck and tightening his grip, determined to choke the life out of him. Jan was caught off guard. The sheer strength of the man surprised him, and he realised that this had gone from a simple bar fight to a battle for his life. “Kill him, Willie, kill him,” screeched a woman from the crowd.

“So brute number two’s name is Willie,” was the meaningless thought that ran through Jan’s mind. He could feel the drops of sweat begin to run down his face as he desperately fought to breathe. Jan’s survival instinct kicked in as he slammed his right elbow back into Willie’s rib cage while smashing his right heel onto the instep of his foot. But if anything, the vice-like grip tightened. Willie was snorting like an enraged bull intent on killing its tormentor.

In a desperate bid to break free, Jan relaxed his body completely, making himself a dead weight for Willie to carry. The move caught

Willie unprepared. As he lost his balance his grip loosened for an instant, and with that Jan spun around and wrenched himself free. Jan realised that Willie was too powerful a man to toy with, so this fight had to end quickly. Willie threw a wild left hook which brushed past Jan's cheek, and as the momentum of the punch carried him forward, Jan lifted his head and smashed his forehead onto the bridge of Willie's nose. The bone-crushing headbutt brought an instant end to the fight, as Willie crumpled unconscious to the floor alongside his brother.

The ring of spectators applauded, but Jan knew the brothers would have been equally lauded had they won. He did take some comfort from the fact that he would have no more trouble in town that night.

Using a handkerchief, Jan wiped the sweat from his face and neck, dusted off his clothes, and checked his shirt for splatters of blood. Despite appearing outwardly calm as he moved through the throng, he could feel his hands shaking from the overload of adrenaline that had flooded his body. Loud cheers reserved for a conqueror erupted as he finally made his way to the dining room. He was not proud to have been in a fight. It had simply been unavoidable. He was not a bar-brawling thug and did not enjoy the slaps of congratulations on his back. He had done what was needed. As he walked away, he smiled wryly to himself at realising he had added a further common likeness to the Klopper boys. Now they each had a broken nose.

* * *

After dinner Jan was eager to get to bed, being mentally and physically exhausted after the events of the day. He pushed the door shut behind him, and while undoing his shirt noticed that a button had been ripped off at his midsection during the fight. Irritated with the damage, he walked over to a small basin standing on a table against the wall to rinse his face. He needed to remove the feel of the fight that lingered on his skin. Jan ran a hand over the tenderness on his neck and knew he would be stiff and aching in the morning. Tossing his shirt over the only chair

in the room, he filled the basin with water from the porcelain jug and, bending forward, splashed the icy liquid over his face and neck. He felt instant relief as it touched his bruised skin. He could clearly feel the lump that had begun to form on his forehead and knew it would be noticeable come tomorrow.

Jan had a large frame, warm grey eyes, and dark brown hair. He got more than his fair share of attention from women. Some would glance furtively at him as he entered a room, while others would stare more brazenly, hoping to get a lot more in return than just his glance. By rights, at the age of thirty, he should have been married and ready to start a family. It wasn't that he couldn't find a woman prepared to marry him; on the contrary, he was spoiled for options. He just hadn't met the right one. His father was growing old and eager to hold Jan's children on his lap before he died. He could not understand why Jan hadn't taken a wife, particularly given his choices.

Shortly after falling into an exhausted sleep, Jan was woken by a persistent knocking at the door on the street side of the hotel. He sprung out of bed, instantly alert.

"The Klopper boys are back with reinforcements or a shotgun," Jan groggily muttered to himself. Not a threat to be taken lightly. Not only had their egos been savaged, but their aura of invincibility among the townsfolk was also under threat. "These guys are tough," Jan thought, almost admiringly. "Most other men would have limped home nursing their colossal headaches."

Gathering himself, Jan figured that this time around the Kloppers would be prepared and infinitely more dangerous. He reached for his Colt .45 hanging in its holster on the chair. He calmly cocked the pistol and held it ready, nestled in his big right hand tucked behind his back. Jan did not believe in bringing a gun to a fistfight, but if the odds were too heavily stacked against him, he would have no choice but to threaten his attackers. With his heart pounding, he stepped quietly to the door. His only chance of survival lay in the element of surprise. He reached for the

handle, gripped it firmly and, with lightning speed, wrenched the door wide open, his muscles coiled tight.

Anika, the pretty blonde barmaid, almost dropped the bottle of champagne and two glasses she was holding in sheer shock at the sight of him, imposing and half naked in the doorway. "I thought we could have a nightcap now that I'm off duty," she stammered, all wide-eyed, trying to regain her composure. For a moment, Jan was at a loss for words. This was not at all what he had expected, and clearly, nor had she.

He had spent some time talking to the slim, full-breasted barmaid after dinner, and the look that she'd had in her eyes was still there, fuelled by the sight of Jan's muscular torso. She looked vulnerable and seductive at the same time. After just a moment's hesitation, Jan leaned forward and scooped her up into his arms, turned, and kicked the door shut behind him. As he carried her to his bed, he felt the cold trickle of spilled champagne on his chest and the thrill of arousal swelling in his groin.

* * *

Shortly before sunrise, Jan mounted his horse and began his ride east towards Clarens. Anika had seemed pleased and a little surprised when he had woken her to say goodbye and thanked her for the night they had spent together.

Jan had grown accustomed to unsolicited attention from the ladies, and although he normally showed restraint, the tension of the previous evening had left him feeling vulnerable to the charms of the pretty, and very willing, barmaid. He had a deep-seated respect for women and looked forward to the day when he would meet a special one, fall in love, get married and start a family. One thing he knew for sure, Anika was not that woman.

Jan's horse, like the man, was big. A jet-black stallion named Samson who stood eighteen hands high. Jan and Samson shared a compatible relationship. The horse, always a silent companion, listened intently to all Jan had to say. "No wonder the British want our country," Jan muttered as

the sun began to rise, revealing the magnificence of the landscape. It was a warm, cloudless October morning, and the emerging glow of the sun blended into the deep blue sky, bringing the rugged green countryside to life. The warm rays could be felt immediately, and Samson even picked up his pace with the breaking of the day.

Lentsoane was a beautiful, six-thousand-hectare cattle farm nestled in the fertile valley of the Brandtwater Basin. The farm had an ample supply of water all year round from the sparkling Little Caledon River, which meandered through it. As they picked their way through the stony river, Jan allowed Samson's reins to fall loose to let him drink from the fresh, clear water. The red, rocky outcrops that lay between Fouriesburg and Clarens stood proud and striking against the morning sun. Jan felt his spirit lighten. It was good to be going home!

Jan lived on the farm with his father, also named Johan Fourie (a tradition in Afrikaans families), and his younger sister Sylvia, who had a five-year-old son named Markus. Jan's father had fought in the 1881 war against Britain and was part of the victorious Boer commando that had massacred the British at the Battle of Majuba Hill. When young, he had also taken part in the Great Trek and fought several wars against local tribes, but the memory of the slaughter at Majuba Hill still haunted him. "Such a great and pointless loss of life," would invariably be his response when asked to talk about the victory.

Sylvia's husband, Andries, had been killed by a herd of stampeding Afrikaner cattle just two months before Markus was born. Jan had taken on the role of father to young Markus and loved him as a son. By the age of three, Jan had already taught him to ride a horse and fire a .22 calibre rifle.

Jan had given Markus a Boerboel puppy for his fourth birthday, who Markus had named Kaptein. The two were inseparable. Jan had chosen a Boerboel for their fierce protective instinct over their owners. Markus was an adventurous little boy, and Jan wanted him to have the company of a formidable companion when he ventured any distance away from the homestead. A child the size of Markus made an attractive meal for

any leopard, cheetah, or lion that strayed onto the farm. The stealth and honed hunting abilities of the cats meant that they would hold the element of surprise when they attacked. Dogs, with their keen sense of smell, were a perfect foil for this and had deterred many a cat, and no doubt saved lives, by alerting their owners to the lurk of a predator.

Jan had bought Kaptein from the Du Plooy's after hearing how his father, Majoor, had bravely held a male lion at bay at the low fence surrounding the farmhouse. Mrs Du Plooy had told Jan how, when hanging up the washing one day, the dog had begun to growl viciously with the hair standing up on his back. Looking in the direction the dog was facing, she had been terrified to see a lion crouching on the far side of the four-foot fence. Snarling, the dog had charged at the beast, giving Mrs Du Plooy precious moments to make it safely into the house, while the two fought ferociously, ripping at each other through the thick wire. The firing of a single shotgun shell was ultimately enough to make the lion flee. Majoor came limping back proudly to Mrs Du Plooy with only a few deep gouges on his snout. There was no doubt that he had saved her life that day.

As Jan approached the stone farmhouse, Markus came running towards him as fast as his little legs could carry him, with Kaptein barking excitedly at his side. Jan's heart swelled with joy. He loved the lad and missed him, even though he had only been gone two short days.

"Oom Jan, Oom Jan," cried little Markus as he ran. Jan pulled on the reins, bringing Samson to a halt, then leaned down and pulled Markus up onto the saddle in front of him as they continued. As he passed by the house, the smell of beef stew cooking for lunch told Jan he was home. Markus laughed gleefully as he bounced up and down on the saddle all the way to the stables, where another greeting awaited.

"I see Master has been fighting," said Kabbo, as he reached for Samson's reins. The Bushman tracker, a descendant of the San people, had worked for the Fourie family for as long as Jan could remember, as his father had before him, passing on the skills and ways of his culture. True to the meaning of his name, as "having a clever and inventive mind,"

Kabbo never missed a thing and had noticed the cuts on Jan's hands and the purple bruise on his forehead caused by the crushing headbutt dished out during the Klopper fight.

Kabbo could track anything, over any terrain, and had stamina that kept him going for days. Even on horseback, Jan would get fatigued keeping up with the Bushman as he jogged ahead, reading spoor that only he could see. Be it a tuft of hair, a drop of blood, or tracks on the ground, he would stick to a trail like a bloodhound glued to the scent. It was Kabbo's job to tend the horses and keep the stables clean when he wasn't out tracking. The San people, referred to as Bushmen by the settlers, had a special connection with animals, and Kabbo was no exception. Samson was a wilful horse that Jan had taken time to master, yet from the beginning he had yielded to Kabbo's bidding in a way that astounded Jan.

Sylvia smiled as she watched Jan walking back to the farmhouse with Markus perched happily on his broad shoulders. The loss of Andries had left her devastated, but with the love and support of her father and brother, and the sheer joy and love that Markus had brought into her life, she was slowly recovering her lightness of being. With their mother having died of a mystery illness when Sylvia was only fifteen years old, she had automatically stepped into the role of homemaker, and they had survived and grown into a close, tightly knit family unit.

"Who gave you that bruise on your forehead?" Sylvia asked accusingly, hating the thought of Jan having been involved in a brawl.

"No one gave it to me, Sis, I had to fight for it myself," Jan replied with a mischievous grin, sitting down to a cup of steaming black coffee, brewed just the way he liked it, as Sylvia shook her head in fake annoyance while muttering softly under her breath.

* * *

Early Friday morning on the 13th of October, Jan woke and got up quietly, careful not to wake the household. The day before he had been urgently summoned to a meeting of the military command structure of

the Free State army. He was in a sombre, reflective mood. The talk of war dominated conversation all over the Free State, and he grasped the seriousness of the crisis. As he tiptoed through to the kitchen, he was surprised to smell the welcoming aroma of coffee.

“What are you doing up at four in the morning, Sis?” Jan asked, pleased yet curious.

“It’s the least I can do for my important big brother who goes to meetings with the president,” Sylvia said teasingly. “So, until you manage to find a wife, I will have to be the one looking after you. And if you’re not careful, you’re going to grow into a lonely and grouchy old man.” She laughed as she handed him a fresh rusk to have with his coffee.

Jan chuckled and thought he’d keep the night he’d spent enjoying Anika and her considerable charms to himself. Sylvia would most definitely not approve. Then again, he did recognise his need for a wife. Yes, Anika and others like her helped to satisfy his desires from time to time, but there was doubtless one special woman still waiting for him. Who or where she was, he didn’t know, but until she appeared, he was happy to remain “lonely.”

“You’re a gem, Sis,” Jan said, preparing to leave. “Tell Markus I’ll be home soon.” He leaned down and kissed Sylvia farewell on the cheek.

* * *

The sun rose behind Jan as he rode west towards Fouriesburg, casting a long forward shadow, making the man and horse appear comically tall and thin. Jan smiled to himself, wondering what it would be like to be as tall as his faithful shadow.

He thought about coming across the Klopper boys again and how they might react. Friends from Fouriesburg had told him that, since the beating, they had caused no more trouble in town.

His mind quickly switched to the serious matter of the pending war with the British. “Surely sane and rational men can and will avoid war?” Jan questioned Samson as he rode, enjoying the warm African sun on his

back. The bright colours of the spring landscape lit up by the morning's rays contrasted with the sombre mood he felt at the thought of war.

The town hall was abuzz with conversation when Jan stepped through the heavy wooden door. The meeting was due to start at midday and Jan had just enough time to wash and have a mug of coffee at the Fouriesburg Inn before it started. He also booked a room for the night, as experience told him that these meetings tended to run well into the evening. Besides, a night at the inn meant a night enjoying Anika's company, which was a night to look forward to.

The members of the Raad made their way up onto the stage and President Steyn sternly called the meeting to order.

"Gentlemen, on the 11th of October the Republic of the Orange Free State and the South African Republic declared war with Britain." The short, sharp announcement drove the breath out of Jan like the kick of a mule. His worst fears had been realised; fears not for himself, but for the lives of his family and friends.

President Steyn continued grimly: "On Monday the 9th of October an envelope containing an ultimatum from President Kruger was delivered to Sir William Greene at his residence in Pretoria." The president turned to his notes and began to read. He did not want to miss any key points from the ultimatum's contents. Steyn looked up as a loud cheer of support went up around the room when he read, "The Transvaal authorities agreed that the British Government was unlawfully interfering in matters of internal affairs." The Boers were a fiercely independent people and the threat of being ruled by foreigners, or of foreigners having a say in their government, abhorred them.

Steyn's voice became graver still as he continued to read out the terms of the decree. "In order to protect the interests of the Republic, the Transvaal Government feels obliged to request the British Government to accede to the following four demands ..." Steyn hesitated and raised his gaze to the audience for a second before continuing. "That all points of mutual difference shall in future be settled by arbitration; that all British

troops on the borders of the Republic shall instantly be withdrawn; that all reinforcements of troops that have arrived in South Africa since 1 June 1899 shall be removed from South Africa within a reasonable time, and that the British troops that are on the sea on the way to South Africa shall not be landed in any part of South Africa”.

The first demand had drawn derisive laughter from many of the men, but each of the remaining three were greeted with loud cheers by the excited throng.

Clearing his throat, Steyn went on: “The ultimatum ended with the statement that should the British government not give a satisfactory answer within 48 hours, the South African Republic will, with great regret, be compelled to regard the action of Her Majesty’s Government as a formal declaration of war, for the consequences of which it will not hold itself responsible.” The president looked up solemnly from his notes before continuing: “On the 10th of October, the following reply was delivered by Sir Alfred Milner ...” Steyn proceeded to read the response of the British Government, whereby they rejected the terms given and thereby deemed war as the only way forward.

Excited chatter broke out. Steyn held up his hand to silence the room. Once order had been restored, he looked up, leaned forward on the podium and read out the manifesto that he had issued that morning, binding the Orange Free State to join the South African Republic in its battle against British aggression.

The rest of Steyn’s speech, which dealt with the burghers being called up to go on commando, was lost to Jan as he tried to digest the full weight of the message. Steyn had emphasised the fact that the Transvaal was at war with Britain, and in light of the kinship and treaty between the two republics, the Free State was now also at war.

It made no sense to Jan. Could the shedding of blood be the instrument of ultimate peace? The war would not last forever and would ultimately end in peace negotiated around a table. “What is it that dwells in the heart of a man that so easily draws him to violence?” he wondered, shaking his head at the tumultuous applause at the end of Steyn’s speech

that broke his silent reverie. With a sense of foreboding, he stood to leave the hall. Despite having lost his appetite, he followed the jostling crowd as they made their way to the inn for a late lunch as the reality of war sank home.

* * *

Jan, like most Boer men, was part of the commando structure, which was formed in the mid-1800s when the government couldn't afford a professional army. All men between the ages of 16 and 60 had to arm themselves with guns, ammunition, and horses, and be ready to defend the Republics against attacks from local tribesmen or any other intruder.

Jan's ward, Clarens, fell under the Harrismith District, which was considered small compared to larger areas, such as Bloemfontein, that could easily muster a group of up to three thousand men. Jan, as a natural leader, became Commandant-General of the Clarens commando. The Boer style of leadership was in sharp contrast to that of the British. Those in charge led their men from the front in battle rather than issuing orders to be obeyed. To retain their leadership, they had to keep the confidence and loyalty of their men. President Steyn had subsequently ordered that Jan head an elite commando unit that would operate behind enemy lines, and for this he gave him his pick of men from the Free State.

Jan was so lost in thought as he ate his meat pie drenched in heavy gravy, deeply troubled by the impact that the war would have on his family, that he failed to notice the Klopper boys approaching his table. On looking up he tensed involuntarily. Gratefully, it appeared that aggression was not on the menu, and he relaxed when their intentions became clear.

"Sir, we have come to apologise for our poor behaviour, and to ask you to consider us for your special unit," Willie offered a little sheepishly.

"We would be honoured to serve under your command if you'll have us," Piet hopefully chipped in. Jan was relieved that it was not a confrontation, and oddly enough felt that the fight had created some kind of bond between them. He believed that he would be a lot safer having

them fighting alongside him, as they were strong, fearless boys with a reputation for being good marksmen.

“I had the two of you at the top of my recruit list,” Jan replied with a broad smile as he stood and reached out to shake hands with the humbled but smiling young men. This, for Jan, was the only positive moment of an otherwise dreadful day.

* * *

Jan looked forward to the peace and quiet of his room at the inn to mull over all that had transpired. But he had no sooner closed the door when a firm knock interrupted his thoughts. Irritated, he opened the door sharply to find a young man standing to attention. He held a note requesting that Jan attend a meeting with the president at the Town Hall at 6pm where he would receive his orders on the deployment of troops relating to the tactics that the commanders had decided.

The small town of Fouriesburg was filled with an air of barely subdued excitement. Although Jan was sure that many burghers were unhappy with the turn of events, they were by and large undaunted and full of faith in their leaders, each determined to do his duty to protect the land that their fathers and grandfathers had bought with their blood. The young men were eager to advance to the battlefield, giving no thought to their survival in their determination to make a contribution to the sovereignty of this, their beloved country.

Jan walked into the Town Hall shortly before 6pm and took a seat towards the back of the room.

“Come to order men, come to order.” President Steyn’s bark instantly stilled the room. “Good evening gentlemen, we have a serious matter before us, so let’s get straight to the point. Our best estimate of the men we can collectively muster to fight this war is sixty-two thousand. In the Free State we make up roughly twenty-two thousand of this number, the Republic about thirty-two thousand, and the other eight will be made up of available men in the Cape Colony and foreigners who will come to our aid, having their own reasons to despise the British.”

A soft murmur filled the room. Jan had not expected that the Boers could assemble that many men. The foreigners would be held in suspicion by many of the Boer soldiers, but Jan knew that a great number of them would have fought against the British elsewhere. They would bring hardened battlefield experience to the Boer fighting units.

“We will be outnumbered ten to one, but we have overcome these odds before. This is our home, after all, and we will have God on our side.” Murmurs of approval greeted Steyn’s statement. “Our cause is just, and this is our Fatherland which was given to us by The Almighty. We know the intricacies of the land, and as marksmen we have no superiors. We will drive this evil from our country!” His words fired up the men as a loud cheer filled the room.

Listening to the president, Jan was not as confident of a Boer victory as Steyn clearly was. His mind was racing as he searched for a tactical angle that could tip the odds in the Boers’ favour. “Britain will have learned from the last war,” he thought. “Soldiers have arrived wearing khaki uniforms and not red tunics with white crosses as in the last war. They have faster ships that can ferry more and more men to the battlefield in a fortnight. Fresh troops to bolster tired ones.” Jan’s attention was drawn back sharply as Steyn brought the subject of strategy into the discussion.

“President Kruger and I are in agreement that the way to win this war quickly is to attack the British on two fronts. The South African Republic will attack northern Natal while we attack the northern Cape Colony. Our attacks will be focused on Mafikeng and Kimberley, while President Kruger and his men will attack the British garrisons based in Ladysmith. At the same time, a special commando led by Commandant-General Fourie will move into Natal and take control of the railway lines to halt the movement of the Khakis north.”

Loud chatter broke out among the senior officers as they considered the strategy that had been put forward. Jan could not believe what he was hearing. To his mind, the plan was heavily flawed and doomed to fail. He stood up and, after asking permission to speak, addressed Steyn and his fellow officers.

“With respect sir, how could this strategy possibly win us this war? Britain will keep sending over more troops, which will relieve the grip we gain over those territories. It takes less than three weeks for a ship, laden with troops, to sail from England to Durban, and then one or two days by train to get those same troops to the battlefield. With Port Natal as a beachhead and Pietermaritzburg and Estcourt as forward bases, the English will advance, securing the railway line as they move north. The Cape Colony will support the attack on our southern boundaries, and our forces will be divided. We are already outnumbered by the Tommies, and as long as we allow the British to land fresh troops we cannot win this war.” Jan spoke fervently, with the certain knowledge that the Boers could not withstand a prolonged war with Britain.

“Sir,” Jan continued, “the only chance we have of winning this war is to surprise the British by focusing our combined forces on Natal and preventing them from landing troops in Durban. Simultaneously, we must utterly destroy the railway line from the Cape. If we don’t do this, we will eventually be overwhelmed by the sheer weight of reinforcements sent from Britain.” As Jan spoke, many men, including fellow senior officers, nodded in agreement.

Steyn could see that the strategy proposed by Jan had merit, but having already settled upon the two-pronged attack with President Kruger, he was not at liberty to change their strategy. Steyn sharply brought the meeting back to order. He had a great deal of respect for Jan but felt that his questioning of the operations in front of the men verged on insubordination. He would deal with Jan privately after the meeting was brought to a close, and once he had allocated missions to his officers.

* * *

Back at the Fouriesburg Inn, a cheer had gone up when it was announced that most of the Uitlanders had already boarded special trains headed for Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, and Durban to flee the Transvaal. Jan saw the irony that it was the fleeing foreign workers who, by sending a petition to Queen Victoria requesting protection, had been the catalyst for war.

By and large they were educated, intelligent men – mining engineers, accountants, and businessmen. It was undeniable that they had brought vital skills to the region, which would now be lost. They had justifiably asked for equal rights with the burghers, which included proper schooling and the right to vote, which Kruger and his Raad had denied, for fear of being voted out of power. Had the twenty-one thousand Uitlanders who signed the petition known that their actions would prove a stimulus for war, Jan had no doubt they would have approached their grievances differently. But now it was too late; the die was cast. The Republics were at war with Britain.

A growing sense of dread had come over Jan upon hearing news of two fatalities of war without a single shot being fired. Hermanus Grobler had been run over by his wagon that got stuck on the upward slope of a drift while he attempted to pull its brake. Another burgher, from Smithfield, was struck by lightning. Both were on their way to join in the fight for their country.

The evening spent with Anika came as a welcome relief from the stress of the day, which had been exacerbated by Steyn, who had berated him mercilessly in front of his fellow senior officers after the meeting. On reflection, Jan knew that he had been out of line by publicly challenging the president. While he respectfully accepted the correction, he remained adamant within himself that the leaders were erring in their chosen path. Not only was the Free State going to war against the dominant world power, which had hundreds of thousands of trained and battle-hardened soldiers, but it was deploying a strategy that Jan felt certain was doomed to fail.

Anika had fallen into a deep, satisfied sleep as Jan lay awake contemplating all that had transpired that day, struggling to come to terms with the reality of being at war with Britain. The naivety of the Boer strategy astounded him, and a chill ran down his spine as he realised that the cost in terms of lives lost by the Afrikaners could well threaten the very survival of the nation.

