

Grace

“The story of a wise cat and a cruel man.”

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By

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Abstract

Morgan, a widower and police detective, is quickly promoted from constable to captain after a series of successful criminal investigations, creating enemies in the process. One of the convicted and incarcerated is Paper, a gang leader with a violent upbringing. After a lucky release from prison, Paper, now Morgan's fierce foe, plots to hurt him in the worst way possible – by killing his only son. The story is narrated by a cat named Grace, whose presence and companionship comes from another dimension and helps Morgan to keep sane.

1.

I am in my room, in bed ailing with my kitties.

While waiting for mother to bring us medication, I noticed a couple of dry leaves on my window pane. The poor things looked like they missed the love only a branch carved on a strong, grounded stem can give.

They said we had some strange strand of cat flu, but it seemed to overpower humans also. In the news father liked to watch on TV every night at seven o'clock they said governments across the world were doing everything they can to get rid of the scourge. Father did not believe it, but I knew him to hide hopeless optimism behind the proverbial veneer of doubt.

So when he said out loud that he doesn't believe they were doing anything about the scourge, I knew he was in fact hoping for the best. And so in spite of us cats being diagnosed with the said flu, I remained hopeful and, like him became quietly optimistic about our situation.

I could hear their voices. They sounded traumatised. Fear dominated their usually gay voices. But I was not scared, just worried like any mother would be when her kitties have fallen sick. I knew they would help. My family always took care of us. So after checking on us she went out of our bedroom to get us medication. My kitties had just rejected their food, not even wanting milk. They were sick; too weak for anything. They lay on my chest, not wanting to go anywhere.

So imagine this. Imagine mother leaving the bedroom to get my kitties medication at two o'clock in the afternoon and by eight o'clock in the morning of the next day she had not returned. Weird. Even weirder was the fact that nobody came to check on us.

Instead I in the morning heard voices outside my door, voices of strangers.

I heard people crying. I heard them say they were sorry. I heard them say mother was a wonderful person. Puzzling. Why would anyone come here to say mother was a wonderful person as if we didn't already know? Why do we need to be told of this, especially so early in the morning by so many different voices?

I am not sure, but one of those voices was that of my father's colleague. He visited a lot, having lengthy discussions with father. At times it would be about soccer, at times about cases they were investigating, at times just about sitting there quietly, smoking and having a drink.

They shared a very close past, those two. I nearly said that is a story for another day but can it really wait? Can the fact that they, father and his colleague, dated the same girl in high school, and that that girl – well, I really should call her 'woman' now, ultimately became father's wife? I told you. That could not wait at all. Anyway, let me not digress.

The voice outside my door was certainly that of my father's colleague. I could hear a bit of their conversation. "I cannot believe this. I cannot believe that a family such as yours deserves anything like this at all."

He seemed to be facing my door, judging by how clear his voice became as he continued. "Max at the station seems to think this has to do with the cases we have been investigating."

He was now pacing up and down. Curious, I had stepped away from my warm cushion and walked close to the door. It was sufficiently ajar so I could hide myself behind it to see what was happening outside.

"Max is wrong, partner." It was my father; dejected.

For as long as I have known their relationship, even before they became cops, they always called each other 'partner', which is strange because they insisted that everyone else call them by their surnames. Father's voice was dense with sheer anguish as he spoke. He held a glass in his hand. It contained his favourite drink. I could see it on the table, the drink. It was too early for it I thought but what could I do? He was having it.

"He is wrong," continued father. "All the serious losers that I put behind bars are still there. The rest are really nothing to worry about. They most certainly do not have the guts to do something like this."

Father sounded sure as he spoke, but I heard his glass smash to pieces and the whiskey in it splashing against my door. A certain criminal called Paper came out on parole a little more than a week ago, his partner had announced rather poignantly.

*

Imagine then, imagine mother leaving the bedroom to get us medication at two o'clock in the afternoon, and by eight o'clock in the morning of the next day she had not returned. That bothered me so much, most especially because by the time anyone bothered to come into my room that morning, mother had already passed on.

I remember him walking in and, amid tears, holding me tight and telling me the sad news. He also told me he was sure in his heart that this was the vile work of one scoundrel called Paper.

And so I also finally got to know about the disaster. A frenzy of events took place immediately afterwards, sealing what was to be the permanent departure of mother, and my kitties.

*

Something told me I would find you here. I asked how I would know if it is really you but the answer was a prickly 'you will just know.'

So etched on my mind has been this place. Well, here I am now with you. I know it is you because over and above feeling it, I can see you. In my mind's eye I can see that small scar I caused you on your left cheek. I also know it is you because all of a sudden I feel loved in the same way I felt when you left that afternoon to get us medication. That you never returned hurts, even to this day.

I since developed a similar relationship with the boys at home. They know now that I am more than something that relishes at the sight of white milk. We have become a unit, stronger and tighter. We miss you though. We need you.

You did not close our window when you left that day. Cold air blew in freely, and that upset me a bit. But what really broke my heart was to watch my kitties die on my chest. A great part of me died that day, and life has been hard.

*

That day Paper walked slowly. His deportment was that of a man about to give up. Battered, his face was wrinkled even when he was just twenty five. He had seen things people twice his age in his community have never seen. His mother had run away with a younger man, leaving his father alone with him.

His father in turn took this pretty bad, he was told. They told him that his father's strong heart – he was a sensational athlete in his youth - became weaker and weaker without his wife by his side.

“Maria will come back soon,” he would say.

“Why is she gone, father?”

“Your mother is just a little upset with me, son.”

And the boy would believe his father. But they had both waited for far too long for the mother to return, so the boy started asking more questions.

One day as he walked past the local shebeen where every *grootman* except for his father chilled after work and during weekends, uncle Ben called him and told him a story that changed his life forever, which in part was the reason why he was walking slowly towards the direction of the church that day.

You would be right and deceived at the same time to imagine he was bored and without purpose that day. The man wearing a deep blue short sleeved floral shirt and a black scuff was anything but bored. Behind his multiple-scarred face his mind was operating optimally. He had harboured way too much grief and hate for a single man since he was fifteen.

When his father returned from prison a few years ago, the boy was only eighteen. His father had spent two brief spells in jail. First, it was for theft.

One night he went to a nearby sheep breeding farm. He had earlier sat and listened to his wife and son talk about things they like but never have the pleasure of enjoying. One, for his boy, was a BMX bicycle. “Every young boy in our street has one,” he heard the boy say to his mother. “Next Christmas, my boy,” the mother said, hugging him to show love and at the same time to make sure he doesn’t see her drop a tear. It pained her to promise her boy a bicycle because she knew that in their current circumstances, it will not be possible. She was not working, and her husband was also not working, even though he woke up every day to look for work.

“What do *you* wish for, mother?” The boy asked. “Tell me. What do you wish for?”

“Me? Oh I just want some juicy mutton for dinner. We have been having *pap en melk* for far too long now in this household.”

So his father, having listened to his poor family expressing their wishes without saying a word, decided to do something about it.

“I will get a piece job for that bicycle, I promise you, my son,” said the man to himself as he went on to clean the back yard. “I will.” Stopping tears from dropping freely as his wife brought him a glass of water, he said “thank you” and took a gulp, almost emptying the glass immediately.

“Must I bring you some more, my husband?”

“No, my wife. That was enough. *Ke a leboga.*”

She kissed him and walked back inside the house. There was no juice or tea to give her husband, but she was happy she could give him some water to keep the thirst at bay. It was a Saturday, so she returned into the house to find their boy still sleeping. She, just like her husband, also played the conversation she had with her boy last night in her mind and dropped another tear.

She went to his small single bed to look closely at him and made him a promise. “You will get that bicycle come Christmas, my son. Your mother will see to it.”

*

Our lives as cats and that of my family changed after a call father received one morning. He was at work, just after their regular middle management meeting.

I remember that Monday morning like it was yesterday. The orange sun had slipped out of the clouds, and the mud filling the streets was thick and red. It had amassed densely since last night after the torrential rains had stopped. Even the children had been unable to go to school for the whole week, and I, like most cats, was forced bathe a few times that day because we played carelessly in the red mud. It had been complete mayhem in our community. Huts had fallen and windows of cars and houses alike were smashed and shattered by the hailstorm.

Ahead of the storm, we were hit by a disaster of untold proportions, with twenty people dying all at once as result of a terrible accident that saw a combi full of family members colliding head on with a taxi.

So the preceding Saturday saw most people attending a mass funeral that left everyone in our small community scarred.

Immediately after that mass funeral, we were ravaged by a storm that painted the community red with sand. The speed of the sandstorm was reported to be no less than eighty kilometres per hour. After it had passed, I saw two separate rainbows stripped on either side of the sun.

So this call that saw our lives change was also preceded by disastrous weather ravaging our community and surrounding towns.

It was also a Monday morning, only a day before the Pretoria High Court was to deliver sentencing on the matter that had captured world headlines for months now, the matter of the star para-olympian who turned villain overnight after admitting to having fatally shot his girlfriend four times on the morning of Valentine's Day. Strange enough, ensuing also on that Monday morning was a High Court session where a prominent British businessman was defending himself against a charge of having hired hit-men to take the life of his wife. Interesting times, those.

"Captain Morgan here," he answered his desk phone. *"Who is this?"*

"I will not tell you my name," said the voice, *"and don't even try to trace this call. Just listen carefully because I shall not repeat myself."*

"OK. I am listening," he responded while at once waving to the nearby officer to set a trace on the call.

"I have lost everything. You should know that, you heartless prick!" The voice was cold; angry. *"I have nothing anymore to lose. So, Mr Top Cop, you would do well to watch your back. I know everything about you. Watch your back."* And the line died.

"Hello? Hello?" He called 'hello' for the third time before accepting the line had died.

"Got that traced?" He knew even as he asked that the trace would not have succeeded. The man who just threatened him was way too clever to allow for a successful trace. *"Dammit!"*

And so our lives changed.

*

One morning when father was off duty - he had had too much to drink the night before - his partner came to the house and asked for him. The visit caused father to sober up immediately.

"Morning, partner. Why aren't you at work? It is ten thirty am already."

“I have a headache. Why are you here? Unable to work without me?”

“I actually can. From five am until this landed on my desk about an hour ago.”

I saw him place on the table a tape recorder as I finished drinking my milk. Quickly licking my fur and, with my curiosity increasing, I listened on.

“What is this?” father asked as I took a gulp of my morning milk.

“A recorder. There is a tape inside. Stop talking too much. Your foul breath nauseates me. Play the bloody tape.”

Father would ordinarily look embarrassed at the mention of his breath smelling foul on a Monday morning, but he didn't seem to care. He pressed the play button and two voices filled the room as both father and his partner kept quiet, listening intently.

“Deacon, I am about to commit the most heinous of crimes.”

“No, my son,” the deacon started. We could hear him clearing his throat. “You are about to tell me everything that bothers you. You and I will pray and God will take away all that burdens you and you will walk away from here a changed man, a free man. Now start from the beginning, son. Don't be afraid.”

“I have lost everything,” started the man. The baritone in his voice was mild but chilly, menacing even. “My father, my mother, my whole family. Gone! Even my girlfriend left with my child. They have disappeared. But you know what aches my heart even more, deacon?”

“No, son. Speak freely, please. I am listening.”

“What aches my heart even more is the fact that the one who caused my family all this grief is alive and well. He enjoys life like he's God's chosen.”

The sound of the thunder interrupted the two men, but they continued listening to the tape.

“Son,” it was the crispy, soothing voice of the deacon. It sounded like he knew he had to stop the man, whoever he was, from committing the atrocities he was clearly determined to cause, “vengefulness should not have a place in the heart of those who believe in God. You need to be – and I teach this almost every Sunday ... were you here last Sunday? Because if you were here last Sunday, you would remember that my theme was for all God-fearing people to be generous in their forgiveness. Forgive in order to let healing start. Do you hear me, son?”

Silence.

“Do you hear me, son?!” There was deafening silence again as the deacon repeated himself loudly. It seemed like the man was gone, because all that could be heard at the end of the tape was deacon saying in his now weakened voice: *“Oh my God, please help that man.”*

*

Back in our living room father barked, his voice echoing throughout the house: “That voice! That voice is Paper’s!”

“It is, yes, and he is on a mission to kill.”

2.

Paper's father had a weird penchant. It had to do with him recording almost every piece of audio he comes across.

If he went to church on a Sunday, he would record the sermon. If he listened to a radio broadcast of a soccer match, that too. He would then play it over and over again at home, to the irritation of his family.

He harboured a dream of becoming a lawyer, and so he would go to court where he would secretly record the exchanges between the prosecution and the accused and the magistrates, including all the witnesses. "I can become the greatest," he would say, "and get all my friends out of jail." Even in his thirties and without matric, he still aspired to become a heavyweight lawyer.

One day when things looked pretty bad at home and after weeks of going to town daily looking for piece jobs, he met a stranger next to the busy N12. She had a flat tyre and couldn't fix it. Paper's father, a young man who had spent most of his free time helping his uncle to fix cars at the back of his yard, quickly went to work, replacing the punctured tyre in no time.

Later that day without his father showing up, they all became worried at home.

Instead of his father, Bra Tuesday, the longest serving petrol attendant in town showed up with a small plastic bag. He handed Paper the plastic bag, stating that his father had forgotten it at the garage.

"I saw them together," said Bra Tuesday to Paper as they walked towards the gate. "First at the coffee shop, yesterday, and then along the N12 this morning when I came to work."

"Who did you see, Bra Tuesday?"

"Morgan and the lady on the tape. I saw them together."

"But what does it matter? How does father get involved here?"

"I have known both your father and Morgan for a long time. I know that Morgan believes that your father and his wife are seeing each other."

"What?"

"Yes. Play the tape I say. See the connection for yourself."

The old man left Paper standing at the gate, confused.

So while everybody was happy because there was now food to eat, Paper held on to his father's recorder. He found the tapes fascinating. Everybody else wished they did not exist. He ate his share quickly, impatient to hear what his father had captured today before he got back, looking for his tape.

*

Now, returning from the confessional, Paper played the tape again:

"But I could help you, if you want. If you are really hungry enough for success and freedom, I can help you. Do you want my help?" It was a woman's voice.

"I am ready to do anything to put food on the table for my family, and to take my mother to the doctor. I will do anything, madam." His father sounded like a beggar on pins and needles.

"Then take this parcel and give it to my husband. He is in prison, just a few meters from here. Walk over there, ask to see him, and secretly hand him this small parcel and you are R10000 richer," It was the woman. Paper assumed she had put the parcel on the table.

"I can do that, yes." His father's voice sounded hesitant; thoughtful. "He must have worn a pensive face," said Paper to himself as he continued to listen.

"But what is this, madam?"

"Ag it is some stress reducing medication he uses. The officers there don't allow it into prison, so you will have to be extra careful not to be caught. Do you understand?"

"I understand, madam."

"OK." Measured excitement could be discerned from her voice. Also obvious in her voice was a clear American accent. Paper wondered what her husband was doing in a South African prison to start with. *"Look,"* it was the woman again, *"there are two important things for you to remember. One is under no circumstances can you get caught with this. Two - if you do get caught, I will increase your fee to twenty thousand rand, and I will hand it over to your mother. I will also take her to one of the best doctors in town. But you have to promise that you will not be caught, and in the event you get caught, you must promise not to reveal my involvement in this whole thing. Do we have a deal?"*

Paper recalled his father had been unemployed for almost ten years now, and, young as he was, he could at times detect frustration and traces of hopelessness on his father face.

"Boy, contrary to my current circumstances of hardship, I had a colourful time at school. Like in all the previous grades, and while a lot of kids had trouble with logarithms or calculus, photosynthesis or chemical coordination, *gedig* or trig, I waltzed through Std 6 like a sharp razor through some unsuspecting butter. I was also merciless on the 100 meters race track. I was way too good at school and was as a result the envy of many."

Now, as he sat alone, listening to the woman making such a wild proposition, he wondered what was going through his father's mind as he grappled with the offer. Did he decide to reject the deal, or did he take the woman's offer?

"Do we have a deal?"

After a few seconds of silence, Paper's father's voice was clear: *"We do, yes. Hand me the money and the parcel and I will do it."*

The sun was emerging out of the clouds as Paper sat back to imagine his father entering the high gates of prison that day.

"My father must have wondered if he will find it raining when he walked out of prison, or if he will in fact walk out at all that day. Well, he went in and never came out. He perished in there, and the family that got him into prison in the first place will pay. I will see to it."

He stood up, wiped his tears, felt his father's razor sharp *oukapie* in his pocket, and quietly went out into the street to become one with the dark night.

*

The next day before breakfast Morgan had already attended to three murder scenes. All victims suffered identical stab wounds. Even though the bodies were found in different places – the son was leaving a school mate's house after an hour of studying, the mother was having red wine, waiting for her son and husband to come home, and the husband had just concluded a business meeting in a nearby hotel - the whole family was killed in the same way.

They had their throats slit from one ear to the other and left for dead.

*

"Morning, Chris. Where's your father?"

Father has since mother's death resigned himself to drinking. At times he even forgot about work.

They had even proposed that he should take long leave from work, after which he should enlist the services of a psychologist who would hopefully help him through the trauma of the passing away of his wife. He refused. "I will not sit in front of a woman who does not have a life to tell me about life; never," he said to his colleagues, some of whom were part of the program before.

"Besides," he would continue while grooming my fur, "alcohol is the greatest psychologist one can ever ask for."

This worried Christopher. He had nobody to confide in except for his girlfriend, Gloria. Once he was done with his daily chores and school work, he'd spent most of his time with her. She was his sanctuary, and he told her everything.

"I wish mother hadn't died."

"It's OK, Chris,"

"No it's not."

"You have us. You have me. I will always be there for you. But most importantly, you have your father. It is not all lost."

"But he does not even know that there are school meetings to attend. He never checks my books, never assists me with my assignments. We don't even talk. I miss him. I see my father everyday but I miss him so much, Gloria. How can that be?"

On this particular day he had a serious problem that he needed to discuss with father, but he was too drunk to even keep his eyes open.

"Pa, I am in trouble," he had started. "Pa?" But father had blacked out, snoring heavily.

Out of frustration, Chris got on the phone and called father's partner and friend.

"*Malome*, I am in trouble and I have nobody to talk to. My father is..." the boy stuttered a bit, "... he is tired and fast asleep. Can you please come over and hear me out before this thing gets out of hand?"

"I'm actually not too far from your house, son." As usual, Chris had put the phone on speaker. I could hear the man take a breath before continuing: "I think I know what bothers you. I will be there in a few minutes."

"This is serious, clearly," he put the phone down, walking to the kitchen to brew himself a fresh cup of coffee.

"Chris, is it true?"

This was the first question father's colleague and friend - hot coffee in hand, black and strong, no sugar - asked when he sat down on the sofa.

"It's false, *malome*."

He addressed father's friend only as uncle, never by his name.

"I was home. Preparing for my exams. The whole of last weekend."

"And who can attest to that, Chris?"

"No one. I was alone in the house. Father was out on duty. I was alone, studying."

“Well, the only witness, her grandmother, says you are the attacker.”

“She’s wrong!”

“She says there is no way she’d mistake you for any other person.”

“I was home at the time she says she saw me.” The boy’s voice was now trembling. “I was home, studying. *Malome, that old lady is mistaken! I swear!*”

“What are you doing interrogating my boy?” It was father, dropping me gently on the nearby sofa.

“Sit down, partner. Sit down and try to be useful.”

“Chris, what’s going on?”

“They say I attacked and raped a girl...”

“What?!”

“They are wrong!” He was struggling to restrain tears.

“Partner, what is happening here? Are you accusing my son of all this nonsense?”

“There is a rumour that he is the perpetrator, yes. No case has been opened yet.”

“So my son has no case to answer. Why are you bothering him?”

“I’m not bothering him. All I’m doing is to find out from him if it is all true. Were you not absent from work for the past few days, you would be doing this yourself.”

“Chris, go to your room.”

Chris stood up and left. Father fetched a bottle of apple juice – their favourite when they were not drinking alcohol, and filled two long glasses.

“There.”

“Thanks, partner.”

“My son did not do any of this. You know that, don’t you?”

“I do. I know him too well to believe otherwise.”

“Alright. You say the grandmother says she saw the assailant?”

“Yes. I saw her. About an hour ago. She confirmed that,” he retrieved a note book from his jacket. “Among other things she said, and I quote: ‘the boy who came in here to attack and rape my child is the son of that cop called Morgan. It is Christopher who did this. I saw him when he ran away. I saw him.’”

“She’s clearly delusional. It can’t be.”

At that moment his partner’s phone rang. “Pope here. Who is this?”

“Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Who’s handling it?”

“Oh hell.”

“Alright. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Cheers.”

“We have a problem,” said the man, putting the phone away.

“What is it?”

“A case against Chris has just been opened. Madala is investigating.”

“Dammit.”

“And this thing has just become complex.”

“How?”

“The victim has just been confirmed dead. We are now dealing with murder.”

“Oh my God.”

“I’m told Madala is on his way here.”

“For an arrest; or for questioning?”

“He has a warrant.”

“Dammit!”

“Don’t worry too much. I’ll speak to him; see if I can’t stall the whole thing.”

A knock on the door interrupted their conversation.

“I’ll get it!” screamed Christopher from the other end of the house.

“No you won’t. Don’t come out unless I say so. Do you understand?”

Chris nodded and walked back to his room.

Father placed his glass on the table and walked towards the door.

“Step in, Madala. Step in.”

“I know I’m not welcome here, Morgan, but business is business,” said Madala. “Where’s your son, Christopher? I have a warrant for his arrest.”

He handed father the warrant as they walked towards the living room, where father’s partner was sitting.

“Oh you are here,” said Madala as he recognised his colleague. “I checked you in your office before I came here. I’m told you have been digging. What info have you got on this case?”

“What I can tell you is that Christopher is not the perpetrator.”

“How do you know that for sure?”

“Besides the fact that he is incapable of what he is being accused of – I mean I have known the boy from his childhood, he says he was at home at the time the crime was committed.”

“Oh? Anyone corroborating that?”

“We have none at this point.”

“None at this point?”

“We have to prove that he was here when the crime took place.”

“Oh I see,” replied the investigating officer. “So now what happens?” he asked, taking a sip of the juice.

“Madala, you are going to have to delay my son’s arrest while we are working out what really happened here. Someone is obviously framing him.”

“Nope, Morgan,” replied the cop, “I have a warrant of arrest to execute.”

“Come on Madala!” It was father’s partner.

“I’m expected to bring the boy in. You guys are not thinking straight.”

“What do you mean we are not thinking straight? You reckon imprisoning my son for a crime he did not commit is to think straight?” said father. “Someone is obviously trying to frame my son. Can’t you see?”

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While sitting on his bed, frustrated and not knowing what to do, Grace meowed, and right then Chris remembered something. He immediately ran out of his bedroom.

“I can prove that I was home when that girl was attacked!”

“Oh really? How?” It was the investigator.

“Son, I told you to stay in your room!”

“But I can prove that it wasn’t me. It wasn’t me!”

“Son, you do not have to say anything to us at this point. Go back to your...”

“Grace made funny noises on that day while I was ...er, while I was writing Gloria a poem.”

“Christopher, how does that prove anything at all?” asked the investigator.

“Please, sir, let me finish.”

They all went quiet.

“Because she distracted me, I stopped to attend to her.”

“And?”

“And upon a closer look, I realised she had a lump on her lower left leg.”

“Grace was sick?”

“I was not sure. That is why I took her to the vet for a check-up.”

“Wait a minute.” interjected the investigator. “About what time did you take Grace to the vet?”

“I left home just after calling the vet. I called at 20:43pm. I must have arrived at his office 15 minutes later. I walked.”

“Which vet, son?”

“Dr Bhia. He is the nearest.”

“Give me your phone, son. I want to check the time that you called the vet.”

Christopher gave him the phone, and he went through the call list.

“20:43pm. He’s right.”

“Great. Now we must just get the vet to confirm that he saw Christopher that night.”

“Let’s call him,” said Morgan, redialling the number on Christopher’s phone.

He put the call on speaker and a few minutes later, Christopher was no longer a suspect.

“Good,” spoke Morgan’s partner, “we now know that it was not Christopher.”

“Yes, it was definitely not Christopher,” said the investigator. “The question now is who would want to frame him, and why.”

“Indeed,” it was Morgan. “I think I know who it is.”

3.

I hated our neighbours. There were four of them, all looking old, dirty and uncared for. Well, they were in fact properly cared for. This I know because they at least ate properly – we kitties like our oats and cooked eggs - and they went to the local private veterinarian regularly. Besides, two of them – the smallest and the eldest, always looked neat. But when they were together they all looked uncared for. Dirty. That is the price you pay for keeping bad company. But with my fur thick and healthy, I worried not.

So one day when father and Chris decided to take me along to get milk on the other side of town, we walked. It was not such a long walk, and it would have been fun were the two men in good spirits. I sensed there was trouble when Chris spent most of his time chatting away on his smart phone, while father's pitch black lips burned one cigarette after the other. The tension between them was just way too much to miss.

In no time we had arrived on the other side of town. I was a first time visitor there, so my experience of the place was fresh.

I soon discovered that we were enveloped by many pockets of jumble. It was like we were in some waste quarry. There store we went to get milk from was in all fairness neat, but just why this section of the community looked so creepy boggled my mind.

Nobody seemed to care that water ran from broken pipes. At times the roads in this section are simply not passable for the ones as neat as a new pin like me. And the graveyard! Oh gosh, that place is a pigsty. The equally dirty dogs meet there to mate and to share the spoils once they have captured some small prey. Sometimes it is a rabbit, sometimes a jackal, yet at times it is another dog. Spine-chilling.

In truth I think I should learn to be less interested, less curious about stuff in this community. I heard them say now the other day that curiosity killed the cat. What a reckless metaphor! But I really do feel like I should curb my curiosity and let them be.

Now the other day they found a child trapped in some gutter, some open drain. She had been dead for days. The rats had feasted away on the corpse while the father was partying with girls and friends, drinking *umnqombothi* – the African beer.

I see them sitting under a tree, father and Chris. They look preoccupied, lost in thought. As they sat there, quiet, deep in thought, I knew there was trouble. They never really sit next to each other and not talk, unless there is major trouble brewing. Plus father had gratuitous amounts of whiskey and slept early last night, while Chris did not even touch his food during supper. And now here they are, sitting next to each other without exchanging a word.

It is during such moments that I miss mother even more desperately. She would never allow us to go to sleep in this state. These two would talk. And they would most certainly never neglect me like this.

Sitting under a tree waiting for the delivery guy to arrive, I don't even think they could hear the dogs barking as they chased after chicken and some poor kitties. Their thoughts were too absorbing.

But they both couldn't live without their daily measure of fresh milk. So they sat there, waiting for the late guy from the farms. It is a Saturday morning. He must have been drunk last night. Perhaps even got laid.

Father was worried. He had a strange, somewhat complex case to investigate. The commissioner had approached him a few days ago regarding a sensitive case he wanted investigated. "I am told to find the victim or her body," I overheard him speaking to his brother now the other day, "and that promotion that has been spoken about in recent weeks will be mine," he had added.

The woman concerned, I gathered, was the ex-wife of his colleague. What complicated the matter further was that there were no suspects in the crime. He chose to believe that there was no suspect because in fact, the only suspect in this case was his colleague. "He is the last person to be seen with the victim," the commissioner had told him. "You will have to question him at some point."

A woman had disappeared. I know this woman. I have seen her a few times with her husband. This is really sad. Who could do such a dastardly thing? It's been six weeks now. She is suspected to be kidnapped; murdered even.

The boy on the other hand worried about his girlfriend. She looked devastated by the fact that her mother had disappeared rather mysteriously. "They don't know how much they loved each other," I overheard her tell Chris. "My mother showed me how to love a man, and I saw the smile on my father's face whenever he looked at my mother. All these people don't know how much my parents loved each other. How could they suspect my father for my mother's disappearance?" Tears fell down her cheeks. "How could I, your lover, do that to you?" she asked Chris, who just held her tight, trying to console her. "Equally, how could you love me and make me disappear like that, even kill me? No, they are wrong. Lovers don't do that, and my father is in any case incapable of such deviousness."

"It's alright, babe," was all Chris could say.

"Mother is somewhere out there. Maybe captured by those who hate my family, but she's out there somewhere. They must just find her."

But Chris knew things that made him doubt her innocence. Among them was what she wore yesterday when they went to the movies.

They said she had her black scarf on and a red and white dress when she was last seen. They don't remember what she wore, apart from it being mentioned that two pairs of her flat shoes were missing from her shoe drawer. The pastor who saw her the day before she disappeared said she looked sad. It was obvious to him that something was troubling the poor lady. He said the lady had said she will come visit one of these days to explain what was so saddening about her life, but it seemed like something really significant bothered her. The meeting never happened. She instead mysteriously disappeared.

Chris noticed the scarf she was wearing yesterday. She had confided in him that she loved that scarf. She wished that her mother would have bought her that scarf instead of the other boring gifts from her trip to Dubai. She'd be happy to own her mother's scarf if she could. Now her mother had disappeared. And she was now wearing the very scarf that her mother is said to have had on when she was last seen.

*

Meanwhile father knew he had to arrest his colleague, but courage eluded him. Chris on the other hand was almost certain his girlfriend and her father are both involved in this case, but did not want to risk his girlfriend being arrested and sent to prison for a long time.

So there they were, sitting under a tree in this creepy section of the community. Both lost in thought, oblivious even to the stink of the sewer water running the streets, with green, buzzing flies everywhere. On the one hand it was father needing help to solve the mysterious disappearance of his colleague's ex-wife. On the other, Chris needed to help his father crack the case but was not willing to send his girl to prison.

So they sat there, quiet, and so deep in thought that the buzzing flies seemed to bother them not.

*

One afternoon, while enjoying shot after shot of whiskey, father took his time to explain to uncle John Drake why he did not want Gloria near his son.

Uncle John Drake, a short man with a long nose and a flat neck, was a very patient man if he needed to be. He could listen to you talk forever without interruption, as long as he had a filled glass of whiskey in his left thick hand, and a cigarette on his right. He would only interrupt to get clarity, or if he thought you were repeating yourself. Or if he thought you had been smoking too much grass before speaking to him. He also hated small talk about football.

He sat on father's favourite garden chair – it was black and white in colour, having his drink when father arrived.

“John Drake, *broer*, how are you?!”

“The finest Captain Morgan!”

They embraced, patting each other on the back.

“How are you, brother?” repeated father.

“I’m alright, Mo. Happy to see you again. You? How have you been?”

“Great,” father replied. “I am all good too; just been busy. I’m glad to see you too.”

Having had another sip from his near empty glass of whiskey, father decided to tell his brother another story before he speaks of Chris and Gloria.

“When captain Case of the Special Branch Unit ... you know him, don’t you, Drake?”

“I know him, yes.”

“When he offered me a voucher to go to Meropa Lodge in Limpopo, I was hesitant.” He paused to light a cigarette. “Why, I wondered, would a street-wise, hard-core cop like me want to waste time in some lodge far away from action, spending my time swimming and having English breakfast and scrumptious dinner and taking lazy game drives in search of the elusive leopard?”

“You can be thoughtless and ungrateful at times.”

“Thoughtless? Ungrateful? Me?”

“Did you end up taking the offer, and what has this got to do with Chris and his girlfriend?”

“I did, yes. Had no choice. The commissioner and Case wanted me away from the station after my partner and I bungled a key case. I went, yes.”

“Oh. And? Did you at least enjoy it?”

“I did, actually,” came the answer, “but let me tell you about a strange thing that happened on my way there.”

“A strange thing? What?”

“I took the N12 from home on a Saturday morning, later getting onto the N1 heading north of Johannesburg.”

“I know the road, Mo.”

“It was fun throughout. I listened to our late father’s favourite jazz band, The Crusaders.”

“I take it ‘Way Back Home’ was on repeat the entire time?”

“You know I will never get enough of it.”

They both smiled, one taking a sip of whiskey, the other a smoke.

“So I left downtown Johannesburg behind, quietly going past the flashy Sandton and then Midrand and then Centurion ...”

“I said I know the bloody road, Mo!”

“No need to snap at me, *broer*.” Father reached for the bottle of whiskey, replenishing both their glasses. “There. Enjoy.”

“Forgive me for being rude. But for Pete’s sake do get back to the strange thing you referred to earlier. And I am still waiting to see how this connects to Chris and Gloria.”

“It’s OK. And no, this story has nothing to do with Chris and that girl. I will get to that in a moment.”

Uncle Drake said nothing, so father continued. “Having accepted the offer to go away rather grudgingly, it didn’t help matters much that along the way I thought I was being tailed.”

“Tailed? What made you think you were being tailed?”

“A silver VW Golf 4 kept – always and whenever I checked, it kept three cars between us. Even when I slowed down, we still had three cars between us. Even stranger, this had been going on since the first tollgate just outside Pretoria.”

“Now why would a silver VW Golf 4 on the N1 towards Polokwane mean anything at all to you, Mo?”

“Paper,” father replied.

“Paper?”

“Yes. Bloody Paper.”

“Is the snake not locked up?”

“He was. He got out a couple of months ago. Early parole. Good bloody behaviour; some nonsense like that.”

“Oh. So did you get to ascertain if it was really him? What happened?”

“Following my suspicion, I decided to speed up a bit until I reached 150km per hour. So in a minute or so I had opened enough space between myself and the silver Golf, only to be stopped by the bloody traffic police!”

“Oh no.”

“I quickly looked for my green light but realized I had left it at home. So I stopped.”

“And?”

“While explaining to the bugger that I was a cop, and that I sped because I thought I was being tailed, that silver Golf raced past us.”

“And?”

“And at that point I realised I had been worried for nothing. Paper, as you know, is a black man. The driver of the car was white – a white old *tannie* for that matter. Hell!”

Uncle Drake burst into laughter, while father took another sip of his beloved drink.

“Alright, Mo,” uncle Drake was still smiling, “enough of your N1 shenanigans. Let’s get on to hear what bothers you about Chris and his girl.”

At that time Christopher appeared. He was a little late that day. He normally returned from school at around two in the afternoon. It was now just about four.

“Uncle JD!” he screamed, running straight into his uncle’s wide open arms. They loved each other deeply. For a long time when father was busy working double shifts at work, Christopher stayed with uncle Drake.

“He is my other father, uncle JD,” I heard him once say to his friends when they were looking at the family photo album. “He does not have much but he is forever willing to share. I just love him.”

“My boy! My boy!” replied uncle Drake. “How are you doing, son?”

“I’m OK, uncle. Thanks. And you? What brings you here?”

“I’m good too, my boy. Thank you,” said John Drake. “I’m here to see your father.”

“Well, I hope you are not in a hurry to leave. We have not spent time together in like forever now,” said the boy as he turned to his father. “Pa, please persuade uncle JD to spend the night. Please?”

“Don’t worry, Chris. He will stay, even if it means I must use handcuffs to confine him here,” smiled father as he looked at uncle Drake. “Besides, you and I have a lot to discuss, Drake. You are staying.”

“Yes!” shouted Christopher excitedly.

“Chris, stop jumping up and down and bring me a new pack of cigarettes. Go.”

And so Christopher left them there and later returned with a sealed pack of Lexington. “Your cigarettes, father.”

“Thanks, Chris. Now go do your homework. I will check it in the morning.”

As Chris turned to leave, father spoke again. “And, Chris, do not for a moment think that I did not notice that you arrived almost two hours later than normal. I will listen to your

excuse later, and then tell you what chores I will add onto your normal ones to make you pay for this. Go.”

“Yes, father.”

“He’s my son too, you know, and I don’t like it when he frowns. You just made him frown now. I don’t like it.”

“Drake, that boy knows he should be here by two. They have a structured, steady transportation system at school that makes it impossible for him to be here earlier or later than two o’clock in the afternoon. I can’t allow him to do as he pleases.”

“Still, do not be too strict with him. He might use that to go astray, and we don’t want that.” He paused to take a sip of his drink. It was an Altimore 25 year-old limited edition. I heard him brag one day while on the phone, saying “this holy water of mine tastes like some creamy vanilla fruit cake I tell you! And guess what, I have it in two bloody full crates!”

“Drake, I have been told that Christopher has a girlfriend. Now, him turning eighteen this year makes it an undesirable thing for me to stand on his way if he believes he’s found love,” he paused to watch his brother light a cigarette. He also went on to have his drink, savouring it’s obviously magnificent taste, judging by the transformative effect it had on his face. It always caused him a smile, a strange smile because he was the kind that smiled without showing teeth. No matter what mood he might be in at the time of taking a sip of it, he would smile.

“I really don’t know what I’d be or do without my Altimore. It’s some great, satisfying company.”

“Morgan, you were telling me about Christopher.”

“Yes, yes,” recovered father. “Gloria. I am sure you know the rich family she comes from. Many years ago I arrested her uncle for beating up her mother.”

He took a sip again. The air had now become cooler as the sun went to rest in the west.

“So what’s your objection exactly, Mo? A lot of men have once or twice beaten their sisters and women in general. It is bad. But is your objection that she will beat Chris up? That would be ridiculous!”

“Don’t be silly, Drake. This is a serious matter. Chris needs to be stopped.”

“But why?”

“Because, *my broer*, about five years ago I briefly detained her uncle, again.”

“And how is that Gloria’s fault?”

“It is not her fault at all. She was in fact a victim. His.”

“Her own uncle’s victim? How? Did he beat her up too?”

“Worse, Drake. Worse.”

“Worse?”

“That old man – may his soul never rest in peace, actually slept with his own niece, repeatedly!”

“Oh my God Mo please tell me you are joking.”

“No joking. The case was dropped because the church intervened and took her away from them, and the family requested that he not be arrested because, Drake, because the bastard was dying already.”

“Dying? Dying of what, Mo?”

“Cancer, or so they said. His disease had advanced too greatly by the time we discovered he was abusing the child.”

“Oh hell!”

“But the main reason why Chris cannot be involved with Gloria is that her uncle did not really die of cancer. It was the virus eating him up.”

“Mo, is this going to get worse? What virus?”

“HIV, Drake. And you know what’s worse? What’s worse is he gave it to her.”

“Oh my dear God!”

“Yes,” said father, “so if Chris went out with her, he becomes exposed. We must stop him, Drake. The boy listens to you. You must help me stop him.”

“Oh my, oh my. I guess I really need to be spending the night.”

4.

When Inspector Madala had left, rushing back to the cop station where the commissioner awaited, the two old friends sat there for a while, silent. When they finally spoke, they said the same thing at the same time. Grabbing their jackets, they aimed for the car, downtown bound.

“Sit down, gentlemen. Sit down. Where are you hurrying off to?” It was uncle John Drake, addressing the two cops as he settled on the nearby couch.

“Morgan, please hit me with a shot of whiskey. *Sommer* refill yours also.”

“My brother,” responded father. “When did you arrive here? How did you come in?”

“Oh, I have been here for a while now,” replied uncle John Drake. “Chris called earlier, and I have been with him in his bedroom for the past hour or so. I know everything, and I might be able to help out in your investigation,” he said. “Now where is that bloody drink I asked for, Morgan? What is wrong with you?”

“Coming up,” snapped father gently. “Please have a seat, partner. Let’s hear what my brother here has to say.”

Father’s partner sat down as he walked to the cabinet to retrieve a bottle of whiskey. The mat I was resting on was not comfortable, so I quickly jumped on to the nearby sofa.

“There are two shops we must look at,” said father’s partner.

“Three, in fact,” said father, “and with all the traffic we won’t find them open.”

“No, gentlemen,” interjected uncle John Drake slowly. “No. You have only one store to look at.”

“But...” it was father’s partner speaking.

“... Yes, there are three shops to visit here if you wanted to discover who came looking for a custom made mask, and when,” continued John Drake. “But trust me, the shops here do not design masks. They only buy and sell them. Shouldn’t you clever cops be knowing that already, huh?”

“You’re right. You’re bloody right,” admitted father’s partner.

“Here are your drinks, gentlemen.”

“Oh. Finally. Thank you.”

“So now what? Are we not even going to check these stores just to make sure?”

“You could, brother. Nothing should stop you from satisfying yourself, but even if you put on your famous blue lights, you will find the stores closed. So sit down, have your drink, and think about this carefully.”

“OK. Now what?” father’s partner showed irritation. “We cannot be sitting here doing nothing while there is a criminal out there who has caused the death of a young innocent girl. We can’t.”

“Morgan, my brother, please, you are more experienced. Speak to your partner. He needs to relax in order to think properly. Speak to him.”

“Okay. Okay, I’ll shut up,” said the man, resigning himself to drinking his whiskey.

“Good,” said uncle John Drake. “Now tell me. Who is our suspect here? Who could have framed Chris?”

*

When Paper learnt that his foe’s son was not going to be arrested, he grew furious. But he was shrewd. He suppressed anger as he would happiness. The death of his father and the time he spent in prison hardened him, messing with his emotional wiring. When he raped the girl – the crime he wanted to frame Christopher for, he actually believed that his manhood hardened because of anger, and so he became more and more vicious as he forcefully deflowered the young girl.

That morning he woke up very early and hitch-hiked to the nearby town called Grassville. He had two things in mind as the truck he got a lift on cruised laboriously towards the east. One was to go to the confessional there. He couldn’t risk going to his local confessional because the Father there could connect him to the last visit.

The second reason why he was travelling to the nearby town was to go to the shop from which he acquired the mask he used to impersonate Christopher. Knowing Captain Morgan, he expected the matter will be investigated thoroughly. So he went to see the shop owner to shut him up.

It stopped raining furiously as soon as he got out of his lift, but it continued to drizzle. It surprised him that the heavy summer rains still persisted. It was uncommon to have it pouring for any meaningful stretch of time on this side of the world just before winter. The wind was known to be dry, and grass battered and brown. So farmers were happy to have the rain, but at once worried that if it didn’t stop, it will destroy the very same crops it gave life to.

So he paced unhurriedly on the walkway opposite the mask shop to see if it was indeed the owner behind the desk. It was him alright.

He had history with the owner of the mask shop.

A few years back when he had a 'job' to do, he needed a mask. He heard of the small store in Grassville and began to investigate it. He learnt that the owner was a miner plying his trade in the far flung platinum mines of the North West province. The store was being run by his only son, his only family member.

The two only had each other, having lost their wives in an accident that saw them drown in the Vaal River as they lost control of the vehicle they were travelling in. They were driving behind a twenty meter long truck loaded with steel when the bridge gave in. Everybody involved in that accident perished. Their bodies were found at the floor of the river, kilometres away from the accident scene.

So a few years back when Paper got his mask from the son to conduct a heist that went wrong, he returned to silence him because, as he put it, the man was a loose end.

One night – having put a few key amenities in his small black bag, he jumped on top of the late night train, heading for Grassville.

He walked through the veld to avoid the prying eyes and the ubiquitous police patrols and arrived at the station in time to blend with the multitudes – some were disembarking, other embarking, while others were selling their merchandise at the station - and ended up on top of a third class compartment filled with a mining legion from the Northern Cape. They all spoke Afrikaans. They were headed for that platinum mine in the blooming town of Rustenburg. Laying stomach down on top of the train, he could hear the police checking for tickets and interrogating the men in blue overalls. The police demanded their identity documents. They were clearly desperate to find one of the thugs who attempted a heist a few days earlier.

Thirty minutes later he had arrived at Grassville. He couldn't get off at the station without a valid ticket and ID, so he waited for the train to take off and then jumped off into the dark night, away from the snooping eyes of security personnel at the station.

Brushing off the dust, Paper swore quietly as he felt piercing pain below the rib cage. He walked swiftly through the dark to the other side of Grassville. He needed to arrive without being noticed, execute his mission and return to the train station– all in forty minutes.

Fifteen minutes later he was standing outside a yard fenced by a huge white wall. He already knew there was a dog to worry about, so he brought a large piece of steak. "Just one bite will be enough for a thirty minute sleep," he was told.

Under cover of darkness from out in the street, Paper could see what was happening in the moderately lit yard. Spotting the guarding dog, he threw the piece of meat over the wall, away from the door through which he was going to enter the house to meet his target.

The piece of meat thudded on the neat pavement. He watched as the dog wrestled with it for little over thirty seconds. "Damn, when is the bloody poison going to take effect?" As if listening to him, the dog quietly fell to the ground, becoming motionless. "Finally!" hissed

Paper as he quickly jumped over the wall, walking quietly towards the door. He tried the handle once and it opened.

“Is this Frederic Chopin?” he wondered as soft sounds of music greeted him, but immediately dismissed the idea. “I am the only one who still has that Polish composer’s music. This must be some copycat.”

Spotting his target, he removed his *oukapie* from his inner pocket and swiftly moved to position himself behind the target.

The miner’s son had no chance. Paper, an agile and strong man who lifted weights – a habit acquired in prison, was too much for him. Before the man could react, Paper held his head tight and with the speed of light raced the razor sharp knife through the man’s neck – from the left ear to the right.

Blood splattered out on to the carpet, followed by the man’s light body.

A couple of minutes later, after having stopped for a second to inject the dog with a formula meant to cleanse the poison he had fed it earlier – he loved dogs like he hated cats and would rather kill a man - Paper was running against the darkness towards the station. He had no more than fifteen minutes to run the three kilometres.

The brutal death of the miner’s son made headline news across the country. Captain Morgan and his partner were tasked to find the killer, but to this date they had not succeeded.

Now Paper was back in Grassville. Having satisfied himself that the man he was looking for was indeed behind the counter in the store, he quickly turned the corner, heading towards the nearby church.

He got into the confessional and sat down.

“Speak, my son. God the almighty is listening.”

“I don’t really have much to say, Father.”

“Speak, son. Confess and be free. Speak. God has already prepared a response for you. Just confess it all and be ready to receive His guidance and love. Speak now.”

“T-today is going t-to be a d-difficult day,” he stammered.

“How, son? Speak freely.”

“I think blood will flow...”

Both Paper and the Father went silent for a brief moment.

“Blood? Son, what do you mean? Are you planning to hurt someone, or do you know of someone who is going to be hurt?”

“I...” faltered Paper. He exuded a demeanour that would outwardly be understood to be nervousness, but his nerves were as tough as steel.

“Speak, son. Don’t be nervous. You are safe in the house of God. Speak.”

“I...” The fury of the cracking lightning outside caused Paper to stop mid-sentence. Unlike the Father on the other side, it was not that he was scared. Nothing really scared Paper. Having witnessed and been part of gang violence in and outside of prison, he had toughened up.

The Father coughed nervously after the lightning subsided, moved a bit to relax his overweight body on his chair. He removed his asthma pump from the bag he carries all the time, the very bag that carries his bible and hymn book. He shook the pump aggressively, opened his mouth and pressed the spray button several times. He replaced the equipment, coughed again and brought his senses back to the current business.

“Forgive me, son,” began the Father. “I have a condition which requires constant use of a pipe. Continue, please.”

Silence from the other side of the confessional caused the Father to repeat himself. “Speak, son. Do not keep God waiting. He is listening.”

But Paper was gone. He had grown worried that his target might move if he spent too much time at the confessional.

He quickly moved through the streets of Grassville towards the mask shop. Scores of people, old and young, were moving about in different directions, minding their business as he quietly entered the store just when the owner was about to close.

“I will be your last customer,” he said with a sardonic smile, closing the door behind him.

The shop owner studied him for a brief moment. “I helped you now the other day,” said the man when he finally placed Paper. “Is there a problem with the mask, or do you want another?”

“No, old timer. Nothing is wrong with the mask you sold me.”

“Oh, okay. So why are you back? Anything else I can help you with?”

Swiftly removing his *oukapie* from his small bag, Paper replied: “I am here to make sure you don’t tell the next person about the mask you sold me.”

“W-why? W-what? Are you going to hurt me? Why?” stuttered the frightened man.

“Because you are a loose end.”

Blood poured out, and air found no way to his wanting lungs. He died quickly, with his eyes and mouth wide open.

A few minutes later, Paper hurried across town to the N12, where he was going to catch a lift back home. On his way out of town he saw a police car parked near the church.

Suspicion enveloped him. “Shit! So the evil Father told the police about me?” He watched the overweight Father gesticulate almost too furiously for a clergyman to the two police officers.

Paper increased his pace as he walked into a large crowd of people returning from work. He walked in the opposite direction, taking the long route to the hiking spot. He was lucky to find a truck stopping to pick up a young man as he got there. They had space for one more person.

He hopped in, greeted everybody and asked how much he would pay for the trip.

“R50, my brother,” answered the truck driver. Bits of saliva flew out of his toothless mouth as he spoke. This upset Paper a lot but he restrained himself. He needed the lift.

He would ordinarily refuse to pay more than R30 for the trip, but he needed to be far away from Grassville when the body of the old man in the mask store was discovered. So he got a R50 note out of his back pocket and paid without a word.

He immediately closed his eyes and pretended to fall asleep. His thoughts raced back to Grassville as the truck gained momentum.

“What would the stupid Father be saying to those cops? Did he see me?” He retraced his steps back into the church, his conversation with the Father, and his way out to the mask store. “No, he couldn’t have seen me. I made sure of that.”

The truck veered suddenly to avoid a pothole, interrupting his thoughts.

“So what was that meeting about? Why did it happen immediately after I left? Was he reporting my confession to the cops? What was happening there?”

The greying clouds had gathered above, promising a storm. The air also carried the promise of rain when he walked to the hiking spot. When sudden lightning brought temporary light to the gathering darkness, Paper was hit by a very concerning memory. “Oh my God. The last time I went to visit the Father at home the same thing happened! The cops! I saw a police car parked next to the house of the Father after I had confessed to him! Oh my bloody God!”

He opened his eyes briefly, wanting to confirm if he had not drawn the attention of the two fellow travellers by speaking his thoughts out loud. He found them quiet. The one had his headphones on and the driver was listening to a motivational speaker on the radio. He closed his eyes again.

“Well, I am going to have to deal with the bloody Fathers. They will pay.”

*

It was beginning to drizzle when he arrived at home that night. He put on the kettle to boil water. A few minutes later, hot cup of coffee in hand, he sat on the couch and switched the TV on.

A picture of the murdered mask shop owner greeted him. He increased the volume and listened attentively as the newsreader continued her report.

“... he was found in a pool of his own blood by the police after the owner of the neighbouring store found it weird that he had left without switching the lights off – ‘he never leaves without switching the lights off. He in fact encouraged all of us to spare electricity and only leave essentials on when we go home at night. But now here he was, having left his own lights on. So I used my spare key to go in and switch them off when I came face to face with his blood-spattered body sprawled lifeless across the floor, his throat cut open. This, mind you, is exactly the way his son died a few years ago when he was running this store. It is all hair-raising.’ – reported the openly traumatised businessman...”

“When asked for comment, Captain Morgan of the famous South West Murder and Robbery Squad said they had a lead they were pursuing, but requested members of the community to come forward with any information that might lead to the arrest and conviction of the perpetrator. The number to call is 0 800 1...”

Paper took the last sip of his already cold coffee and switched the television off.

“I must move quickly to silence those bloody clergymen. They make my work look all too sloppy.”

5.

“You do realise that,” it was Morgan’s partner closing the door behind them, whispering, “you do realise that there is in fact no lead that we are following at the moment, and that you in fact lied when you said on TV that we had one, partner? You do, don’t you?”

“I am aware, dammit. I am aware.”

“So why would you lie like that?”

“To get the assailant out in the open. To get him to make a quick move.”

“How?”

“He would want to retrace his steps to see what clues he left behind, and maybe he would then do something stupid to connect himself to the murder.”

“He might, yes,” replied the partner. “But what if he doesn’t? What’s plan B?”

Morgan’s phone interrupted them.

“Captain Morgan?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Right away, sir.”

Morgan stood up as he put the phone down. “The Chief wants to see us in his office right now.”

“Both of us?”

“Of course. Let’s go,” said Morgan as he led the way to the other side of the police station. As they walked past the many office cubicles, their colleagues gazed at them as if to say they knew trouble was brewing.

“The super cops will be cut to size today,” Morgan caught one of them saying as he dispiritedly made his way through the long passage to the commissioner’s office.

“Why the hell would they think we are in trouble?” asked his partner. “I mean, we killed nobody, did we?”

“They are just jealous of us. We have been lucky to solve a lot of high profile cases and got promotions while they made it their business to watch us do our job. When we succeed, they hate. Let them be.”

As they approached the commissioner's door, the secretary picked up her phone, pressed four numbers and spoke briefly. She put the phone down and let the two men inside the spacious office.

"You wanted to see us, commissioner." It was Morgan, after they had saluted their chief.

"Sit down, gentlemen. Sit down." The commissioner was known to repeat himself when he speaks. This, believed many officers, was his way of exerting authority. The two men sat down.

The office was cold for a summer afternoon. The commissioner, having worked with the men for years now, knew that they hated cold weather, and so he set the air-conditioner at its coldest just before he summoned them. "I don't like my juniors being too comfortable in my presence."

"Captain," the commissioner addressed Morgan directly, "you are the senior, most experienced between the two of you, not so?"

"Yes, sir. That's correct."

"Good. I will ask you directly then," said the police chief as he swung his big leather revolving chair, throwing his gaze to the top left corner of his office. Morgan could hear lurking in the background a song he liked very much, one by George Duke called "No Rhyme, No Reason." Just when he was about to tap his feet to the quiet beat, his boss brought him back to life with a question he was not ready for.

"Who killed the mask man in Grassville? Have we arrested anyone yet?"

Surprised by the question, given that the mask man was found dead only a few hours ago, Morgan straightened his tie, sat a little bit forward towards the edge of his chair, proceeded to look his boss straight in the eye and replied: "We don't know yet, commissioner."

"You don't know? Is that it, captain? You don't know?"

"That's correct, commissioner. We don't know yet."

"Well, captain, let me tell you something..." the phone interrupted him.

"Dipuo, didn't I say I don't want to be disturbed? Huh? We are dealing with murder here for Pete's sake!"

"Yes, commissioner," replied the secretary. She spoke like one who has lived all her life behind the high gates of a nunnery. "But..."

"But what, Dipuo? Speak quickly."

"It is the PC on the line, sir. The provincial commissioner himself. I thought we should not keep him waiting."

Almost jumping on his chair, with trepidation suddenly written all over his face, the commissioner pressed a button on his desk phone to switch off the speaker, now taking the call privately.

“Put him through, Dipuo.”

“Commissioner Phoka here.”

“Oh yes sir.”

“Yes sir.”

“Yes sir.”

The commissioner put the phone down and looked gravely at the men in front of him.

“Gentlemen, you said on TV that you are following a lead, not so?”

“Yes, sir,” answered the men simultaneously.

“Well, my boss saw that, and he wants a suspect in custody by midday tomorrow. Midday tomorrow, gentlemen. Now go.”

The men stood up, saluted, and walked out of the huge office without a word.

*

Paper sat under a tree not too far from The Synagogue of the Shining Power. Many locals went there to worship. It was one of the oldest churches in their community, with branches in all the surrounding towns, including the one he went to in Grassville before he murdered the mask shop owner.

In his right hand was a small device. It was part of the three components he acquired last night from an underground contact of his.

The man had travelled hundreds of kilometres to meet Paper, who himself had also travelled away from home to meet the man halfway mainly to ensure his hometown or someone from it was not linked to the purchase of the devices. Another reason why he had travelled to meet his underground contact was because he would be able to pass by Grassville on his way back home.

So they met under the cover of darkness and, when Paper left him only after about ninety seconds of their meeting, the man had ten thousand rand in his hands and Paper three small parcels.

On his way home, he made a detour to Grassville, where he planted one of the parcels he received from the man, and, instead of going straight home, he also made a brief stop at the local church.

Now, sitting below a tree not too far from the church, he was preoccupied with only one strong feeling – revenge.

He carefully felt the small device in his possession, inspected it again and, satisfied that it was ready for the task at hand, lit a smile.

*

The night before, uncle John Drake had a conversation with father. It was about Christopher's girlfriend, Gloria.

Enjoying the quiet, cool gentle wind that blew outside, the two brothers sat under a tree. Father, barefoot and a burning cigarette between his lips, was listening attentively.

“Regarding Chris's girlfriend...”

“What about her, Drake? What about that girl?”

John Drake lifted his glass and took a sip of his whiskey, looked up as if to study the full moon appearing on the vast blue sky. “Does it not bother you at all that there are no stars tonight, Morgan?” he threw the unexpected question at his brother. Being his usual self who forever questioned everything he came across, John Drake asked the question for two reasons. The first was his genuine interest in the answer. The second was to express protest for being interrupted.

“I don't know why there are no stars in the sky tonight, Drake. How the hell would I know? I don't.”

“No need to be all grumpy,” replied John Drake. “You are the one who is rude, interrupting me like that.”

“Forgive me, please. I'm just too impatient to hear what you would have discovered about that girl,” replied father. “You know I hate that relationship, and would do anything to put a stop to it. I want it to bloody end.”

“What the hell!” It was father again, startled by droplets. “Is this rain? Really?”

“Yes. Yes.” John Drake, wiping the water off his face, was openly intrigued. “This is interesting. Rain falling from a cloudless sky? Interesting.”

“But how can this be? I mean, I have never experienced this before.”

“It happens, Morgan. It happens,” replied John Drake. “There is a meteorological term for it.”

Father could see from his face that he was now deep in thought. Rare occurrences like these fascinated him a lot, and he made sure to read about them as much as he can. “I like the feeling that comes with knowing stuff that people generally know nothing about,” father

recalled his brother answering him many years back when he asked why John Drake kept so many strange books, especially encyclopaedias in his study.

“Serein, yes! Serein,” said John Drake, his excitement increasing. “This type of rain is called serein. The name originates from French ‘serein’, which means serene.”

“Huh? Really interesting. I didn’t know that.”

“I can understand, Morgan,” replied John Drake. “This form of rain is quite rare. It is more like dew, actually.”

“It definitely is.”

“I read somewhere that at times this kind of rain happens because there *is* in fact a distant cloud not visible to us,” John Drake continued. “The cloud evaporates. The wind then carries the droplets with it until they hit the ground, or come into contact with us like it happened earlier on.”

“It truly is amazing.”

“Enough about it,” John Drake changed the subject. “We were talking about Gloria.”

“That girl, yes,” replied father, replenishing their glasses.

“You said now the other day to me that she was carrying a virus, remember?”

“Yes, she does,” replied father, handing his brother his whiskey.

“Thank you,” said John Drake as he took a sip, uncrossing and then crossing his legs again.

“Look, Morgan, two things. First, I asked Christopher if he knew about the abuse that Gloria went through.”

“Yes?”

“He told me he knows. He says Gloria told him.”

“Oh. OK. So he knows that the girl has the virus but he continues seeing her anyway.”

“No, Morgan. He knows that Gloria was sexually abused by her uncle,” replied John Drake, “but he also knows that Gloria does not, contrary to what you claim to know, have HIV.”

“She doesn’t? How come? Her uncle died of it, and we know he slept with her many times without using protection. We know that. It is in her testimony.”

“That is where we are all wrong, Morgan.”

“No, Drake. That is where *you* are wrong,” retorted father. “I have seen and read the statement written by the social worker who was assigned to help her through her horrendous past. I saw the report. It says she is HIV positive.”

“Listen to me, Morgan. Listen,” insisted John Drake as he took another sip. His bright eyes lit his pitch black face through the darkening night. “With Chris having told me that his girlfriend does not carry the virus, and with you being too busy with police business, I tracked down the social worker who handled Gloria’s case to see if I couldn’t extract some information from her.”

“‘Extract’, John Drake?” Father was openly worried. “What did you do to that lady? Did you hurt her? Oh no please tell me you didn’t!”

“Morgan, I am definitely not like you!” exclaimed John Drake. “You go around intimidating and beating people up for a living, not I!”

“OK. OK,” said father. “But how did you extract information from her? How could she have told you anything at all in the first place because Gloria’s HIV status is supposed to be confidential?”

“Morgan, that lady has always liked me. She has always wanted, you know, to spend time with me.”

“Well?”

“Well,” John Drake smiled, “I gave her that time in return for information.”

“You are a bloody heartless snake, John Drake!”

“Don’t be too harsh on me now, Morgan. I did not hurt her, or force her into anything. It was a simple trade-off. Sort of.”

Father read from the brightening smile on his brother’s face that the two had a little more than a chat during their encounter. “What did she tell you about Gloria that is not in the report she submitted?”

“Well, she, my brother, admitted that the district laboratory to which they sent Gloria’s blood for tests experienced a technical glitch, a mix up, which resulted in a few results being false that day.”

“Really?”

“Why do you sound amazed? You are a government official. You know how careless you guys can be.”

“I am always careful. I do my job diligently. Don’t be like that. You know I do my job well.”

“Alright. You are an exception.”

“Good. So were Gloria’s results false? Was the report false?”

“They were requested to send the samples again for new tests, and the results for Gloria came negative.”

“Oh really? That can’t be!”

“It is true, Morgan,” replied John Drake. “By the time the new set of results returned from the lab, it was already late – according to her, to communicate this to you.”

Father just stared at him. Words failed him.

“She says they approached Gloria afterwards to inform her of her real HIV status.”

“Amazing.”

“And it does not end there, *broer*.”

“There is more?”

“Yes,” said John Drake. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice. “The bastard got her pregnant!”

“Pregnant?”

“Yes. He was not using protection, remember?”

“The bloody bastard.”

“Because she was still a minor at the time, the social worker told me they assisted Gloria with an abortion. All safe, of course,” said John Drake gravely. “She certainly does not have the virus, Morgan, and Chris knows it too.”

*

“My children,” the priest was looking Gloria in the eye as he spoke. Pausing momentarily to sit properly on his cushioned chair, he continued, now throwing his quiet gaze at Christopher, “my children, I need you to know that you are aiming to take a big step in your lives. It is one for which, rest assured, we shall all support you. I for one am happy for you, just like I am sure your parents will be when you finally tell them the news.”

It had rained spiritedly earlier. They had waited just long enough for it to subside before walking in the direction of the church. They had taken a decision last night, determined to get married, no matter what their parents had to say about it.

“We will get married and walk away from here,” it was Christopher. “Father does not like our relationship. He judges you without knowing the facts, and would do anything to see us apart.”

“Oh my love, but he is just being protective,” Gloria had replied. “All parents are like that. He just loves you too much. That’s all.”

“If he loves me he will let me be happy, and my happiness is you.”

“I love you too, Chris. So much.”

“Then let’s get married. Tomorrow.”

“What?” responded Gloria. The proposition had taken her aback. “Did you just say we must get married, Chris?”

“Yes,” he responded while going down on one knee. “Please marry me, Gloria.”

A broad smile accompanied with tears of joy beamed on Gloria’s face as she stood there, too happy to speak.

They hugged and kissed and for a great part of the night made love like it was the first time ever.

“We have lots to celebrate, my dear,” Gloria whispered. “They could have sent you to jail for a crime you did not commit, and I would have been miserable for years without you in my life.”

“I don’t even want to think about that,” responded Christopher. “But I am also very happy that your health situation is not what it was said to be initially. You and I have a bright future ahead of us.”

“Oh yes we do.” Gloria planted a deep kiss on her man’s neck, and they made love - again.

Having woken up early in the morning, they decided to go and see the Father at their local church to seek his advice and blessings on their plan to get married without the knowledge of their parents.

“Father,” offered Christopher, “our parents do not know of our intention to get married.”

“But why is that, son?”

“Because, Father, they do not approve of our relationship. They want to see us apart.”

“That is worrying. Why would they not approve of your relationship? Is there any specific reason?”

“Chris’s father has a misunderstanding about my health.” It was Gloria. “He feels sure that I am HIV positive and therefore a danger to Chris.”

“Really?”

“Yes, Father.”

“What makes matters worse is that we went for tests, a few times now, where it was proven that none of us carry the virus, but my father would have none of that,” interjected Chris, holding Gloria’s right hand tight in his left.

“But why would such a clever man base his dislike of your relationship on something that has been proven to be wrong? This is just unbelievable. Are you two sure that that’s the reason why he doesn’t like your relationship?”

“I don’t know why he persists with this attitude of his, Father. I really don’t.”

“OK.” Father paused to think. “Would you rather have me talk to him?”

“Please do, Father. Because quite honestly, we have decided to get married whether he approves or not. We love each other, and we want a future together, but we would be happier if we knew he approved.”

“I will visit him later today, my children,” said the clergyman. “I am happy that you came to the house of God to confide in Him, and to seek His guidance.”

“We are glad too that you gave us a hearing, Father.”

“Always, my children. In times of happiness and sadness, this will remain your home. Now let us kneel down and pray before you leave.”

*

Father: “Our Father who art in heaven...”

Paper: “*One...*”

“Hallowed be they Name...”

“*Two...*”

“Thy Kingdom come...”

“*Three...*”

“Thy will be done...”

A lone bird on the nearby tree fell off its nest to the ground and died at once as the church building exploded, with debris and smoke mixing momentarily in the air before settling on top of collapsed pillars, cement bricks, and broken glass.

School children and teachers alike screamed at the top of their voices, scared and shocked. Mayhem ensued. Cats meowed like dogs barked as they ran for cover, while the sounds of goats, cattle and sheep formed a maddening cacophony as the blaze intensified.

Simultaneously, the church in Grassville exploded, shocking the small community into fear. Children in the nearby crèche cried in unison, frantically calling for their mothers. Scared minders tried to maintain control, but some of the kids were already running away in the direction of their homes.

A few minutes after the explosion, people began to recover from the shock and ran toward the church, wanting to help.

“Are there people in there?”

“Where’s the Father? Oh my God.”

“He is inside! He had two parishioners with him inside when I came looking for him moments ago! He is inside!”

While women rushed to the nearest homes to fetch water, men braved the heat and scattered debris on their way into the church. One of them shouted: “Father! Father! Can anybody hear me!”

Silence.

“Watch it!” cautioned the other as a pillar came crushing down along with a section of the roofing.

Men and women defied the scorching heat and continued their mission. They believed they’d save the victims.

The ambulance and the police arrived almost at the same time, with Captain Morgan screaming a series of rapid instructions at his team, while warning everyone to stay clear of the scene.

“Were there any people inside? Where is the Father?” he asked the paramedics.

“We are told the Father was inside with two young people when the building exploded, captain. We must find them.”

“Told by whom? Who and where is the witness?”

“Over here, sir.” It was a police constable, showing him to the other side of the burning building.

As Morgan moved over to see the witness, a team of fire fighters with sirens making deafening noise also arrived.

“Always bloody late,” murmured Morgan as he walked away.

“What is your name, lady? Are you alright?” It was Morgan to the witness. She looked distressed. “Would you like to see a paramedic?”

“No, please. I am fine,” said the lady. “My name is Presh.” Morgan worked out she must be in her late twenties. She was tall and thin and strikingly beautiful even amid tears and fear.

“Alright. Let’s walk away from the noise. I want you to tell me exactly what you saw. Here. Have some water.”

“Thank you,” said the young woman. “Father was in there with at least two young people. I saw them walk in and, since I was waiting for the school gates to open – I sell snacks and soft drinks at the school kiosk - I never saw them come out before the explosion. They should be in there somewhere. You need to rescue them!” her voice raised sharply.

“Alright, Presh,” said Morgan. “They are busy searching the whole place for them as we speak. They will find them and whoever else was in there in no time.”

“They must. This is horrible. Nobody deserves to be trapped in a burning building like this.”

“They will,” said Morgan. “Is there something else suspicious, anything at all that you saw before the explosion, Presh?”

The lady hesitated for a second before saying: “No. I only saw people going about their ordinary business.”

“Thank you, Presh. Thank you very much. Now I insist that you see a paramedic just for ...”

“They have found the bodies.” It was the voice from behind, his partner’s.

“You mean they are dead? All of them?”

“Yes, sadly.”

“How many are they? Are they identifiable?”

“Three. Just like the witness said. And no, the paramedics can’t immediately ID them. The fire was intense, they say.”

“Oh my God.”

Pointing the witness Morgan was interviewing to the paramedics, Morgan’s partner pulled him away from the scene and whispered a few words to his left ear.

Morgan, both his hands in his pants pockets, looked straight to the ground and maintained that posture for a few seconds. Inside his head a wide array of emotions took over. He wanted to cry but tears defied him. He collapsed.

*

“...Moving on to other news, Newstime can now confirm that the names of the two bodies of the three found among the rubble of The Synagogue of the Shining Power church are those of the leader of the church, Father Seretse, and that of Christopher Morgan, Captain Morgan’s son. The third body is yet to be identified. The police have confirmed that there are no leads at this time, and no suspect has been arrested for what appears to be a carefully orchestrated explosion of the two buildings. We will give you more on this story as it unfolds. In sports news...”

While Morgan, distraught and grief-stricken, was being treated for depression at the nearby hospital, Paper switched off the radio and stretched his short, hardened body across his favourite couch.

He beamed a smile and, moments later, fell asleep.

6.

Nobody is really taking care of me these days. My milk saucer is always empty. Things have changed. Drastically. Father is always drinking. The air in the house is stifling. It feels like we have one long, undying cigarette burning in here. That's because he smokes one cigarette after the other – all day long. When he is not doing either, he just sits there, staring at our family picture, the one we took that Saturday afternoon at the Hail Park while we were having a picnic to celebrate Chris's appointment as captain of the school's junior soccer team. Remember that day, mother? I know you know it but I must add that your smile makes the picture a wonderful story of warmth, of love, and of the beauty of a united family.

Anyway. Back to father. Even when I try to console him, it does not seem to help. His mood seems to deteriorate each day, and he goes less and less to work. I think he misses you a lot. He misses Chris too. He is clearly troubled.

By the way, Lucy – you remember her? Our neighbour? – she passed on a few weeks ago. She vomited a lot of blood too quickly for anyone to help her. That's how she died, they say. So with father losing himself to alcohol and junk food, and with you and Chris gone, she has been keeping me company. But now I am all alone with father. I want to be all sorts of comforting things to him, but he doesn't seem willing to let me in, or any other person for that matter. The wall he has built around himself is hard to break. I sometimes wish you would come back and bring us happiness again, mother, because since you left, and since Chris left, we have known no happiness at all in this house.

He was on the phone for a long time now the other day while I was trying to draw his attention to the fact that my milk tasted a bit off. As I listened – he always puts his phone on loud speaker, as if too lazy to keep the small thing close to his ear, it became clear that he was speaking to uncle Drake.

“You know, Drake, I miss my wife badly.”

“Of course you would miss her. She was wonderful. I think of her a lot too.”

“Only if I can turn back the hands of time, Drake, only if I could have my life back.” With a fresh cigarette burning through his blackened lips, he lifted his half empty glass of whiskey to take a sip as I gently stroked his ankle, trying hard to not make him feel alone.

“What is done is done, brother. Move on. Make her proud by becoming the greatest you can ever be. You are alive, Morgan. Live for her. Work hard and shine, all in her honour.”

“I hear you, brother, but did Chris also need to go? Did he, Drake?” A tear was rushing down his left cheek.

I remember touching his lower ankle, the one with the bullet in it, wanting to warm him up, but he cried on. Uncle Drake continued speaking on the phone, but father was not interested. He just cried. I made sure he couldn't see my face, because I dropped a tear too.

An hour or so passed while we both sat there. He said nothing, only breaking the silence in the house by lighting a cigarette and filling up his glass, until his work phone rang. It rang a few times and, I could see it was out of sheer irritation, father finally picked it up.

“Captain Morgan.” Silence again as he listened intently to the person on the other end. “What?” His face turned all gloomy. “When?” I could now see madness all over his face. “I’m on my way.”

He grabbed his jacket, got his service pistol, and we both quickly got into his car. He never left me alone at home. As usual he made sure I sat comfortably, safely strapped on the back seat. We drove to the other side of town and ended up arriving at an accident scene on a national road just outside of town, the N12.

I meowed a bit when I realised he wanted to leave me in the car. He turned to get me, taking me along to the accident scene.

The air carried a promise of a storm as we walked quickly through scores of paramedics and police officials. Father produced his work card, occasionally shouting “Captain Morgan!” to access areas to which only cops were allowed, and the cops, quite junior it seemed, occasionally screamed “Yes, sir!” and “Go through, sir!”

“Over here, Captain.” It was father’s boss. He was a big man, the commissioner. I have seen him a few times at home. Him and father had loud arguments, fights even, about work related matters in our living room. But they would always have a drink together, and even watch a soccer match together. Other than their common love for jazz, they both hated Kaiser Chiefs, a football outfit that rivalled their favourite, Orlando Pirates Football Club.

“Watch it there,” the commissioner had to warn father to walk carefully past the body of a man sprawling across the road. “I walked over his brain, Morgan,” said commissioner. “I trampled over his brain earlier.” I could see raw pain on the commissioner’s face. He was definitely not the usual macho man whose voice carried so much authority and confidence whenever he spoke.

One of the officers went to join them: “Commissioner, he didn’t make it. Officer Madala is dead.”

I know father and officer Madala were never really on good terms. I have overheard many conversations between him and his partner, where stories about Madala being jealous and wanting to be as popular and senior like them were discussed. There were times when the language they used when referring to him was entirely not cordial, such as when father’s partner referred to Madala as ‘that fucking pig.’ I take it they would then be very upset with

him because father would allow usage of such words without calling his partner to order. They quite clearly loathed each other passionately.

But now, looking at father's crestfallen face, I could see, I could sense, actually, that father was not really hating officer Madala. All I could see was a man too hurt for words. He just stood there and said nothing.

"This has to do with the case he dealt with," it was the voice of his partner, coming from behind us. "Remember the case where Christopher was framed to have assaulted and raped a girl, that girl that ended up dying at the hospital?" Father shook his head in the affirmative. It was clear his mind was racing now. I could see his frown. He was thinking hard, or trying to remember something important.

They took a few steps away from the prying ears of the busy paramedics and police officials. "He killed the mask man, remember?" Unlike the commissioner's, father's partner's voice was firm and full of life. I could tell by his trembling left hand that behind the veneer of calm was some deep seated anger and pain at the loss of a colleague.

Father took out his handkerchief, blew his nose clean and uttered a whisper: "if it is who I think it is then we bloody sure will get him."

*

Paper had a girlfriend. Her name was Toogood. She owned and ran a salon after having being dismissed from a bank for pilfering money from unsuspecting clients. While a bank official, she was rumoured to be the one financing Paper, taking care of him since the poor man was without a job, coming from an impoverished background. She was also believed to be at the centre of the many robberies of the bank's customers, reported to be carried out by her boyfriend.

On the afternoon of officer Madala's car crash, exactly at the time when his small VW Fox collided head on with a truck fully loaded with steel, Paper was helping his girlfriend out at the salon.

He had gone out to meet one of his contacts the previous night, a truck driver who also happened to be an inmate with him at Forever Maximum Prison in Limpopo, the north-most province of South Africa. It was a special prison run privately on behalf of the government. It only housed hardened criminals who faced no less than twenty five years or life in prison. Their crimes ranged from murder to rape to armed robbery to cash heists. Some of them were sent there after being re-arrested, having escaped from prison more than once.

Before meeting his former prison mate, he had followed officer Madala for over a month, wanting to know his plans and studying his daily routine and route. The night before his tragic demise, Madala was called out to attend a family emergency. It turned out to be a false alarm.

Paper, having cut himself a set of keys, went into the cop's house the night before and found officer Madala's near empty pack of tablets. He quickly but carefully mixed Madala's migraine tablets with the illegal drugs he had brought with him and left. Following his daily surveillance of the cop, he knew that Madala would take two of them in the morning before he drove to the nearby farm to see his ill sister.

Once he was satisfied that Madala's body will be found to be laden with traces of illegal drugs, he gave his truck driver friend the details of Madala's car and the time at which he will be on the busy N12. The plan was simple: when you see a red VW Fox with a large black horn on the bonnet, swerve toward it and smash it, making sure its driver dies on the spot.

According to the video clip the driver sent Paper, Madala stood no chance to avoid the collision. When the truck driver sighted the red VW Fox, he waited until about fifty meters and then crossed over to line to face oncoming traffic. Surprised, Madala failed to dodge the truck racing towards him. On impact, his car was flattened as the truck went right over it.

When police and paramedics arrived at the scene – they were called by the truck driver himself - they found part of Madala's skull on the back seat, and when they opened the driver's door, another part of his skull fell down, spilling his brain on the tarred road.

Explaining the accident to the police, the furious truck driver described the driver of the VW Fox as a drunk maniac who was hell-bent on killing himself and other road users. "I am bloody lucky to be alive, even luckier that my truck did not overturn with my boss's load," said the man.

"What does the truck driver owe you that made him agree to your dangerous scheme, love?" the ever curious Toogood asked.

"At times you really surprise me, *skat*." Paper never explained his actions to anyone, including the person closest to him, his girlfriend. But she knew. She knew a lot of things, including why the truck driver would endanger his own life in order to kill a man for Paper.

Slavo, the truck driver's name was Slavo, was one of Paper's most trusted lieutenants in prison. When Paper slept, he would be awake, watching over him. He was loyal to Paper alone in prison. Paper in turn ensured that Slavo received all the benefits, from access to a cell phone, to television, good food, access to female prisoners, etc. But the one thing that made Slavo completely loyal to Paper was when his family – he left a girlfriend and a son outside when he was arrested for a bank robbery gone wrong, was threatened by other gang members who believed he was paid to foul the robbery.

One morning while they were exercising on the prison grounds, a package was handed to him. Upon opening it, he discovered a finger, a note, and a video clip showing just how his boy's finger was cut off. Angry and terrified, he couldn't muster the courage to read the note, so he passed it on to Paper, asking him to read it for him.

Paper read the note twice before raising his eyes to meet those of the sobbing Slavo. “Read it,” insisted the man amid tears.

“We are going to cut off one of his fingers each month, and if by the time we deliver his twelfth finger you have not told us who you worked with against us, we will start with his toes. It is your choice.”

Slavo broke down, crying like a child. “I did not sell them out! We got caught. I got caught! I am in prison because our plan went wrong. I swear I did not sell them out!”

Paper, for some reason believing the man, snapped at him, telling him to stop crying. “I am walking out of here in a fortnight. Tell me who the bastards are and I will stop them.”

Within a week of his release from prison, each of the four men who were terrorising Slavo’s family lost an eye. Paper visited them at their homes in the middle of the night and pressed a razor sharp knife through each of their left eyes. He made sure to leave the same note when he left the men screaming as a result of the excruciating pain. It read: “Leave the boy and his fingers alone, or I will be back to rip your heart out of your chest.” The next day he pretended to be a journalist and visited all four men at the hospital, taking pictures of each man lying on a hospital bed to ascertain that they have indeed lost the capacity to see through the left eye.

When Slavo heard the news about the four criminals, he smiled. He was happy that his family was now safe from the terrifying rascals. And he cried because he realised how deeply loyal to him Paper must be to undertake such a dangerous exercise. He vowed from that day to return loyalty with loyalty, and that is how he got to carry out the mission to kill Madala without even thinking twice. As it turned out, post-mortem tests revealed traces of illegal substance in Madala’s body, and Slavo, just as Paper promised, was absolved of all culpability in officer Madala’s death.

*

When he returned after spending part of the night at his girlfriend’s, Paper was faced with a worrying development at his place.

At first he chided himself for having left the back window open, but he quickly recovered and realised that it cannot be. He recalled that he never left any of his windows open. Ever suspicious, he was always concerned about the security of his house. He made sure to lock all the doors whenever he went away.

Growing even more worried, Paper scrutinised the entire back yard for anything out of the ordinary. Walking close to the open window, he realised it was not broken, albeit forced open. Further inspection revealed that the colourless thread of wool he always placed on the window pane had dropped. He knew then that someone very circumspect, and clever, broke into his house.

He quickly opened the door and walked in. The kitchen looked untouched, but his bedroom was ransacked. The drawers were open, and the contents scattered across the floor. His shoes were also removed from their drawer. Now worried, he focused his gaze at the corner of the room where his records, the ones he inherited from his father, were heaped. He was initially relieved to see that they were untouched, but realised almost immediately after that that they were in fact tampered with and then heaped back again in the order in which they were found. He saw the short red thread of wool laying on the floor next to his bed's headboard. The red thread of the wool was always placed on the knob of the small safe behind the records. The safe contained the device, the detonator that Paper used to blow-up the two churches a few days earlier.

He removed the records, opened the safe and found that the detonator was missing.

7.

When Toogood closed her salon for business that day, she felt drained. While Paper wanted to have a good time with her in bed, she protested, albeit mildly.

“I helped twenty three customers today, love. You were here. You saw how busy it was.”

But Paper was in the mood, and not even the tired Toogood was going to stop him from having sex. He wore his disarming smile and moved forward towards her. In spite of her fatigue, Toogood was already growing wet between the uppermost of her voluptuous thighs. She smiled back at Paper and they gently clasped at each other, becoming one. They began to breathe heavier, faster, with Paper’s huge black dick now exposed for Toogood’s brownish round eyes to marvel at. She moved to plant a firm kiss on Paper’s neck, her warm tongue moving slowly downwards. A few passionate minutes later, Paper stood motionless as he looked up the ceiling. With Toogood’s left hand gripping his right ass and the other gently fastened around his balls, Paper’s monstrous dick was lodged deep in Toogood’s throat. He came in her mouth without warning.

That night, they made love many times. None of them remembered when they finally fell asleep.

*

One morning when father was still admitted in hospital, I got out of the house, setting out to stretch my long tail and rear legs around the yard. I must say it does not look as good as when mother was around. Uncle Drake occasionally attends to it when he visits, but that is too infrequent to bring the garden to the state it used to be in when she cared for it, or when Chris did. I would not for example come across the nauseating stuff that those impolite dogs leave behind as if every little corner is some defecating site. Really disgusting.

Well, one morning when taking my regular walk, I found uncle Drake speaking quietly to himself. The summer wind blew quietly that morning. It was cool and invigorating. For a change I felt alive, and my rear leg had also suddenly stopped giving me grief. Father had taken me to that appallingly ungentle vet now the other day, and the monster injected me three deep times in my behind. Imagine! I protested but he just carried on unfeelingly. When I saw his smug face I knew he was a bloody sadist! He finally gave father some meds for me, saying I have some inexplicable infection which affects the veins on my rear leg. But I feel better now, much better.

Back at the back yard I moved closer to uncle Drake. I could discern in his voice a great deal of pain, of sadness. I even felt sure that if we came face to face, I would see tears on his face.

He was speaking as I approached: “A lot of people simply die in this community. They die horrifically; some having their neck slit from one ear to the other, others burning to death or

just coming across strange accidents, yet not a single person gets to pay for these dastardly acts. My brother on the other hand is morphing into something else, a shadow of his former tough self. Each day a fraction of life leaves his body.”

As I moved a little closer to him, I thought he was praying, but then I remembered that he refused to say grace when father asked him to. He was an agnostic, some said an atheist. Still, I wanted to hear more.

His voice was trembling: “I need to find a way to make that scumbag called Paper pay for all the horrible things he did to my brother and our family. I swear he will pay...” He suddenly became aware of my presence, and I moved even closer, caressing his ankle and releasing my warmth in an attempt to make him feel better, stronger, and hopefully stop him from crying. But my presence seemed to worsen matters. As he bent down to pick me up, tears fell on me.

Uncle Drake, one among many who did not know that I could understand humans, continued speaking while holding me close to his chest: “He killed ... he killed the mask man, Grace, just like he killed his son many years ago.”

I was scared. Uncle Drake, in my many years of knowing him, was never the kind to show emotion so openly. Father cried at times, but uncle Drake never. I felt like crying myself. “He killed the mask man to avoid being linked to the assault and rape and ultimate death of that young girl, the very one who was said to have been assaulted and raped by my nephew Chris. He did that to make sure he avoids prison.”

Not knowing what to do, I momentarily licked his closest cheek to dry the tears. They tasted like salt, so I stopped immediately and wondered what else a feline ought to do to console a grown-up man.

Moving around the yard with me still in his big, safe hands, he continued speaking amid tears: “He then went to cause the explosion, killing both the clergymen and Gloria and Chris! Oh Chris my boy!”

It was now beginning to rain, but he seemed not to care. “Now my brother, who has lost everything because of that snake, is lying in ICU fighting for his life.”

He walked us to the nearby tree, and we took cover from the drizzle.

He dried his face with his free hand and swore like I have never heard before.

“I must find a way to stop him, Grace. I need to stop him. Fast.”

And that night, while Toogood and Paper were making passionate love and finally fell asleep, John Drake broke into Paper’s house looking for a device, a detonator that Paper used to blow up the churches.

*

They met at the commissioner's office. The air conditioner was not freezing the spacious office on this day. The commissioner was not meeting his subordinates. Neither was there any jazz tune playing in the background today. He was not in a great mood at all, and if you had sharp senses, you would smell, even taste the tension in the air.

The normally calm cop station chief had already spilled his coffee twice and blamed his secretary for it. "Why is this coffee so hot today? How am I expected to drink it?" Instead of protesting that the coffee was just the way her boss liked it, she offered an apology, cleaned the mess on the table and took the cup away, returned a few minutes later with another cup of coffee. She knew what the problem was, and it was certainly not anything to do with the coffee.

In a few minutes her boss will be in the company of the Provincial Commissioner, who is sure going to grill him regarding the spate of murders and explosions that were going on under his watch. To this date, the entire detective division had failed to get useful information or even leads that they could follow in order to find the perpetrator of so many atrocities in their small town.

The commissioner had no real suspects against whom a warrant of arrest could be issued. He was in a tight spot and felt severe pressure especially because he and his provincial chief were not on great speaking terms. Their enduring animosity was as a result of a family feud that remains unresolved to this very day, and it had to do with the two gentlemen's daughters.

The provincial commissioner's daughter, Low, was his only child from his first marriage, and he did everything in his power to make her life easier. "Before I die, I want to see you get married to a bestselling author, a reputable doctor, or a commercial pilot, my child. If I see that with my own two eyes, I will die smiling," he once said to her.

When his daughter started going out with a pharmacist from the nearby city, he approved. He was even more excited and proud when the man came to visit, but his near permanent smile was rudely wiped off his face one Saturday afternoon.

He had just arrived at a bar to join the well-to-do section of the community to watch a cricket match. Sipping brandy while waiting for the game to start, conversations about all sorts of subjects ensued, until he reverted to his old self – one who uses his prized daughter to show off, and to make other fathers feel like their children are inferior to his.

"Zondo," the provincial commissioner's surname was Zondo. "Zondo," repeated a furious man who could not endure the butchering of his brother's daughter's character anymore, "that wonderful, untouchable daughter of yours who goes out with the famous pharmacist from the city is nothing but a twisted little bitching snake!"

Everybody in the bar went quiet.

"What did you just say about my daughter?!"

“She is a bitching snake who on the one hand sleeps with the pharmacist, while on the other sleeping with girls! *Ja*, she has been sleeping for months now with a female friend of mine! Your precious little rat is filthy like that,” screamed the man. With silence now reigning in the bar, the man took a large gulp of his beer, hit his now empty glass so firmly against the wooden table, stood up and aimed for the door, leaving the stunned Zondo watching in utter disbelief.

It took a few seconds – they felt like minutes, for Zondo and all men in the bar to realize that they were not dreaming. The star child of the high flying Zondo is a two-timing bitch who sleeps with both men and women.

Zondo, recovering from the shock, looked at his half full glass of his favourite brandy and immediately hated it. He shyly looked over his left shoulder and discovered that all eyes were on him. Reaching for his inner pocket to retrieve his wallet, he put a couple of notes on the table and left the bar with his head too heavy to lift up and face the world.

“Yes daddy,” admitted the daughter when he confronted her, “I am bisexual, and I am young, and I am having fun!” she cried uncontrollably as she addressed her father. “You pressure me! You want me to be what you want me to be! That makes you evil, daddy! Evil!”

It has been years since that conversation, a conversation which led to Zondo’s only child leaving his home in anger. A few months after it, people coming home during holidays spread the rumour that she was now staying full time with her girlfriend, who, as Zondo’s quiet investigation revealed, was in fact a daughter of one of the area commissioners in the province.

They now sat in front of each other in a large office that suddenly felt too small for both of them. They had both decided before the meeting to conduct themselves professionally, free of emotion and family baggage, but it was clearly not easy.

“Commissioner Zondo, welcome.” A forced smile appeared on his face.

“Good morning, commissioner. Thank you.”

“Please step in,” said the commissioner nervously. “How was your 300km trip?”

“Rough. I did not want to come here, but you already know that, don’t you?”

The commissioner hesitated.

“Don’t be alarmed,” continued the provincial commissioner coldly, before he contradicted himself. “No. In fact you *should* be alarmed.”

They were now sitting down in the commissioner’s office. Coffee and biscuits were served, but the men did not touch them.

“Why should I be alarmed?”

“The minister wants my head because of the bloody murders that are happening in your area.”

“What?”

“Yes, he wants my badge and my bloody pension.”

The commissioner just sat there, offering no reply.

“Now, commissioner, because you have not submitted any report to me about this mess in the last two weeks, I am here to ask you personally as to why I must not get your head rolling right now before mine rolls. Tell me why not?”

An hour or so after the departure of the commissioner’s hostile guest, all members of detective division were waiting for the commissioner in the boardroom.

They waited and waited. The instruction was simple: be in the boardroom in an hour’s time and wait inside until the commissioner comes to address you. A lot of the cops at the station knew better than to disobey a direct instruction from the commissioner. Some knew him to be a strict, no nonsense leader, while others believed he is just a heartless, old tyrant always over-exerting himself.

A voice of the commissioner’s secretary suddenly came through the intercom. “Officers, please walk to the commissioner’s office right away.” All eight of the officers immediately walked out of the boardroom, happy to escape the heat. They walked unhurriedly towards their boss’s office, wanting to enjoy the mild temperature they were experiencing in the passage. Upon entry into the commissioner’s office, they were greeted by air so cold it was almost freezing.

“Gentlemen, one of my best men here, Captain Morgan, has been hospitalised,” the commissioner started. “His hospitalisation comes at an unfortunate time, but it is fine. I have my whole team to depend on, and his doctor told me he will be out anytime now.”

“Thank goodness,” said one of the younger officers quietly.

“Now, I want you to leave every case that you are handling and find me a person we can tie the recent flood of murders to. Bring me a man in very quickly. Here is captain Morgan’s file on the investigation. I read it, and it keeps on getting me to one name: Paper. Go get him and bring him to me. I will question him myself. Go.”

*

I meowed quietly when I saw father laying on his back in hospital.

It was painful seeing him like that. He had lost a lot of weight. The nurses complained that he was not eating much of the food they gave him, so the doctor decided to supply him with fluid supplements.

Against the hard mattress we could only see a shadow, a frame of what used to be my father.

He forced a smile when he saw me, urging me to come join him up in bed. Uncle Drake gently put me to the ground and I quickly walked to the head end of the bed, where father lifted me up to his bare chest. We kissed and played. While I felt the warmth of love, I also felt that my father was lonely and troubled. I know father very well. His normally lively eyes were withdrawn, looking spent. They made father look eighty years when he was only fifty one.

While I rested my small body on his chest, they spoke.

“How do you feel now, brother?”

“Like I’m on my last legs, Drake.”

“Don’t speak like that. The doctors say you should be fine anytime now.”

“So they say.”

“Cheer up a bit...”

“Enough about my health. Tell me about Paper. Did you get the detonator?”

Uncle Drake looked away. I realised he was preparing to tell father what he would not like.

“I went to his house as planned, got into his bedroom and found the safe behind the records.”

“And?”

“There was no detonator, Morgan.”

“What? That can’t be.”

“It appeared to me...” he lowered his voice, “it seemed to me like someone beat me to it. The safe was ajar and empty, and the house ransacked.”

“What?”

“Someone has the detonator, Morgan. Someone went ahead of me and stole the bloody detonator.”

“Unbelievable! Who would break into Paper’s house and steal the detonator?”

“That I don’t know, my brother. I don’t.”

As they sat there looking at each other, baffled by who else could have stolen the detonator, a person, a shadow of a person who looked exactly like someone I know turned away from the near window and left.

8.

When the detectives left the police station after their meeting with commissioner, they quickly got into their bullet proof vests, grabbed their R5 rifles and got into their unmarked cars, speeding into town.

“No sirens,” their commanding officer had instructed. “We must catch him unawares, and if he as much as moves in a way that suggests trouble, shoot him but make sure not to kill him. The commissioner wants him alive. He wants to question him personally, remember?”

So they headed east of town, where Paper’s house was situated. It was around six in the evening but dusk had already fallen with the cold breeze having forced everyone into the warmth of their houses. “Seasons are changing, autumn is no more,” said one of the cops.

When they finally got into Hustler Street where Paper’s blue and white painted four roomed house was, they approached from both sides of the street, with two cars covering the street directly behind Paper’s house. “We must surprise him. We must allow him no room for tricks.”

Four cops moved in, guns drawn, immediately covering the front of the yard. Two stood ready at the front door and the other two watched the two front windows. Four more cops went to the back, covering the back door and all other windows. They took no chances. When they were all in position, their commander barked: “Police! Open! Police! Open the door!”

Nothing.

“Police! Open the door or we will break the damn thing down!”

After repeating himself two more times, the commander gave an order, and the door went down.

A few seconds later they were inside the house. It was neat and orderly.

“The bastard is meticulous.”

“That he is,” said the commander, his eyes searching the small living room for anything suspicious.

“Chief, here’s something. Looks like a note.”

The commander walked quickly into the bedroom. Gloves on, he carefully picked up the piece of paper from the bed and began reading.

He stood there for a few seconds, his face brightening as sweat poured out.

“What is it, commander?”

“Call everyone around here, quickly.”

About a minute later everyone gathered around the commander.

“Gentlemen, Paper left us a note. I don’t want you to panic, but it must be read because I want you to know what we are dealing with, and for us to be ready.”

“Please read the note, commander. We don’t need the suspense.”

The commander hesitated, and gestured the officer next to him to read.

“Ek ken al julle fokon kinders, ouens. Whether I end up serving time or not, they will pay dearly for what you just did.”

“Huh? Is he threatening us?”

“He is,” replied the commander, “and if I were you, I’d take him seriously.”

Ten minutes later, they were on their way back to the station. They had failed. Paper had evaded them. Now they had the task of reporting their failure to their chief, something that the team commander knew might cost him his badge.

“Turn left at the intersection, Gambu.” The commander directed his driver to Paper’s girlfriend’s salon, where he was hoping Paper would be found.

When they arrived, the salon was open, with Toogood still busy with her last customer.

“Where is Paper? Tell me now!” barked the commander.

“You will not speak to me like that! Never!” said Toogood. “Hey! Hey you, stay out of my place! Where is your search warrant? Don’t come here and harass me! I have rights!”

But the cops just went past her and searched her small house. “He is not here.”

*

“Commissioner, I hear you are looking for me.”

While Paper was killing time with his girlfriend at the salon, a text message came through on his phone. He read it several times before standing up, gesturing Toogood to the backroom to have a word with her.

Quickly looking over his shoulder to make sure the customer was not listening, he whispered: “As expected, they are out to get me. That spineless piece of shit of a commissioner is frustrated and wants me in to save his bloody job.”

“Shit!” Toogood looked worried.

Outside a vehicle sped past. Paper looked through the window. It was only the bakery truck.

“Well, as planned,” he continued, “I am not going to give the lousy rats the pleasure of arresting me. I will trick them one more time and surprise their stupid boss.” He was now wearing his deadly, menacing frown. “You know what to do, babe. Things are going to get a bit interesting now, and you will be central to the success of my plans – our plans. I depend on you, you know that, don’t you?”

“You can depend on me, my love. I have depended on you for long. Now it is time to show you my loyalty. I will show you why that deep wound, why that scar across your chest was not in vain. I am here for you, all the way.”

“Good.” He moved closer to her, held her tight and kissed her forehead. “You and I are destined for great things, Toogood *my ding*, and no one in that entire weak police force, including that excuse of a man called Morgan, is going to derail our plans.”

She held him tighter and nodded her head. It was clear to Paper that she was as determined as he was to beat the police at their own game.

Now he was standing in front of the openly surprised commissioner. He had got tipped off that they were going to arrest him. He knew the time and how. So he quickly went home, removed all incriminating evidence in his house and left before the cops arrived. Interestingly, the police and Paper actually went in opposite directions at the same time. When they left the police station, his man in the force notified him, and he also left his house, heading towards the police station.

“This man went past the charge office like a maniac through to your office, sir. Without our permission! Must we detain him?”

“You were probably sleeping at your desk, Fire. Let him be. He’s here already. Close that door behind you. Go.”

Paper was relaxed, as if not in front of a top cop who wanted him behind bars. He saw on the commissioner desk Jeffrey Archer’s “Shall We Tell the President?” He had read the novel many years ago and loved it. He also heard playing softly a Duke Ellington song called ‘Mood Indigo.’ The cup of coffee the commissioner was having released into the air a strong, appetizing aroma.

“We are having a good day I see.”

“What informs that observation, Paper? Sit down.”

“You are having black coffee, Jeffery Archer and Duke Ellington. It must be a great day.”

As if to suggest Paper said absolutely nothing, the head of the cop station moved straight on to police business.

“I sent my whole detective squad out to go look for you earlier, and, while they are gone looking for you, you appear here. You walk yourself right inside a police station. Interesting, would you not say?”

“Unlike you, I don’t like drama, no.” Paper sat down. He looked at the two photos at either side of the commissioner’s large table. On the one picture it was him and his wife, on the other it was him, his wife and two children. “You send your whole detective squad to hunt me down as if I am some fugitive, commissioner. Why, exactly? Why would you want to arrest me?”

“You want to know why, Paper? I will tell you why. You are responsible for all the recent murders in my bloody town!” The commissioner hit his fist hard on the mahogany.

“No, I am not.”

“Shut up! Shut the hell up!”

Unfazed, with a mocking smile all over his face, Paper moved forward on his chair and spoke softly and coldly: “Cool it, mighty copper. You will end up in ICU like your pathetic Morgan if you don’t watch it. Cool it.”

“You son of a bitch!”

“Is there a problem, sir?” The constable, having heard his boss screaming from his desk at the charge office, came running into his office.

“Take him away, Fire. Read him his bloody rights and arrest him for the murder of Christopher, of Gloria, and of the two Fathers. Book him in for the mask man too. I am sure he is the one who killed that poor old man. Go on. Lock the bloody snake up!”

Without being immediately charged with any crime, Paper spent that night in police cells. Unlike all his other cell mates, he did not sleep that night. All he had in mind was Toogood. He was not worried, because he knew if there was anyone he could trust with any mission, it was his loyal girlfriend.

*

“We only have a few questions for you, Paper.”

“And you, simple copper, you expect me to answer them without my lawyer.”

“You will not have that benefit.” A baton blow landed on his ribcage.

Paper fell to the ground and stayed there.

“Who killed captain Morgan’s son?” A steel toe cap boot landed on his ribcage, again.

No answer; just screams as pain begun running though his entire body.

Another blow to his lower back caused Paper to turn around and lay with his back on the cement floor.

“Who killed captain Morgan’s son?”

“I want a lawyer.” Blood was now flowing from his mouth; lips badly bruised.

“You will say when you are ready to speak.” A baton blow to his midsection.

Paper remained on the cement floor for a long while. He seemed unconscious, motionless. Half an hour later he came to, coughing painfully.

He sat up on the floor, feeling his ribs and back. He couldn’t move. Too much pain, but he wasn’t too worried. He knew they were going to torture him, wanting to extract information, a confession, from him. So as he sat there feeling like he was swimming in a sea of pain, he prepared himself mentally for the worst. He licked and swallowed some of the blood coming from his lips and moved to a more comfortable position. He realised there were other inmates in nearby cells and wondered why they didn’t call for help when he was being beaten. “Bloody spineless, ever-scared pigs! I better not see your faces,” vowed the man coming to terms with his pain, readying himself for some more.

*

Uncle John Drake thought I was being unusually troublesome that night. I would meow noisily, as if to protest about something. He did not seem to understand. “What’s bothering you, Grace?” Twice he brought a fresh bowl of milk, and twice I spilt it on the carpet, all in a quest to get his attention.

When he thought I had gone quiet, that he could now enjoy his sleep, I would come over, jump onto his bed and meow next to him, waking him up. I would then lead him to a window which opened earlier on, apparently by itself.

But no matter how hard I tried to draw his attention to the open window, uncle Drake would not understand.

Realizing that I was determined not to sleep that night, he decided to fill up another bowl with milk, serving me with fresh canned food. He had already lost the desire to continue reading a book he had picked up at the library earlier.

He shut his door to ensure I would not come through to bother him again.

*

While John Drake was walking up and down, the one moment to his bedroom, the other to check on Grace, the intruder decided to move to John Drake’s bedroom window. It was open. The moment John Drake went out with Grace for the third time, the intruder jumped into the room and took cover behind a couch and waited.

When John Drake came back, he closed the door and switched the light off and got into bed. Ten minutes later, oblivious to the presence of an intruder, he was snoring loudly.

It all happened very quickly.

The intruder, its eyes lighting the room like a brand new torch, walked barefoot towards the bed and stabbed the snoring man once, deep into his heart. Blood splashed up the ceiling as John Drake released a momentary shriek. The intruder silently and quickly left the room through the window, leaving John Drake bleeding profusely.

Carefully closing the curtain and the window from outside, the intruder heard a sound coming from the nearby tree. “It must be that cat of theirs,” murmured the intruder while rapidly pacing away from the yard towards the street, homebound.

Under cover of darkness, Grace, who saw everything from the window, followed the intruder. Applying her powerful senses, she worked out from the smell of the intruder that it must be a woman. She followed her for the next few minutes and turned back home when she saw her going into a yard, opening a door, and entering a house. Grace, through the Kaiser Chiefs flag flying on the roof top of the house – a flag similar to the one Chris used to keep at home, realised that the woman entered the famous local salon. Satisfied that the woman was safe inside the house, she climbed on to the roof and ripped off part of the flag. As quietly as she ascended, Grace came down the roof of the house with a substantial part of the flag clasped in between her teeth and ran home, where John Drake’s cooling body waited.

*

Paper’s inside man at the police station, the one who sent him a message warning him of his impending arrest, visited him briefly in the holding cells and, among other things, gave him a cell phone and pain killers. He quickly took the pain killers, hoping to feel better immediately. Nothing happened. He sat back and waited for the pills to take effect.

A few minutes before midnight – he was now feeling drowsy because of the medication he took earlier - the message he had been waiting for came through. He had begun wondering if the mission had failed, but immediately shelved his doubts. “Toogood is a beautiful pro,” he reminded himself and relaxed. Just when he was about to doze off, the inner pocket of his jacket vibrated. Making sure that all inmates were fast asleep, he retrieved the phone, opened the inbox and began to read. “It is done.”

He smiled, put the phone back in his inner pocket, closed his eyes, and snoozed.

*

I arrived at home after following that woman to that salon and meowed loudly at the neighbour’s bedroom window.

The next door boy, the one who was close to Chris before he passed on, was the first to wake up. I was happy it was him who woke up first because at least he plays with me at times,

feeding me when there's no one at home. When he opened the door, I meowed even louder, moving away in the direction of our house. Luckily, he followed. He must have picked up my irritation and became curious to find out why.

I stopped at our back door and meowed some more. At that time his father arrived to join us, having awakened because of the noise I was making. He must have worked out that I wanted him to open the door, because he went on and opened it. I rushed to uncle Drake's closed door and meowed even louder, and again, they opened his bedroom door.

"Oh my God!" the boy screamed, while the father screamed: "John Drake! Oh John Drake!"

Realizing that uncle Drake was not going to respond, he ordered the boy not to touch anything. He retrieved his cell phone, called an ambulance, then the police.

*

"I want to go home right now!"

The startled nurses did not understand Morgan. He was not ready to be discharged.

"I want to go home now!" he barked as he pulled out the drips, standing up from the bed and readying himself to leave. Scared, the nurses quickly called security and after a brief struggle Morgan was restrained and then injected with a sedative.

"Something is terribly wrong here," said one of the nurses. "Look at how shiny his face is. He's sweating profusely. Something is terribly wrong."

"He spoke to me! He was here. He spoke to me." Morgan started sobbing.

"Who?" captain, "who spoke to you? Who was here?"

"My son." He was sweating again. "Chris was here. He warned me to go home, that something terrible has happened. He was here." He seemed like he was hallucinating, speaking like a drunken man.

The nurses acted quickly, injecting him with some more sedatives. In a few minutes Morgan snored like he wasn't awake and shouting only a few minutes ago.

*

The commissioner arrived as quickly as he could at captain Morgan's house. One of the senior officers pulled him aside to bring him up to speed.

"One deep stab to the heart, sir. Captain Morgan's brother is dead."

"Oh my God."

"We got a call from their neighbour who, strangely, claims to have been drawn to the murder scene by captain Morgan's cat, sir."

“Really? How?”

“I interviewed him earlier. His son, who was here when they discovered the body, corroborated his story.”

“So the cat actually witnessed the murder? Could it be that the cat actually saw the murderer, officer?”

“It is possible, sir, but even if it saw the whole thing happen, it is useless to us because it being a cat means it will not answer our questions, neither will it point us to the killer, if it indeed saw the whole happen. It won’t even testify in court.”

The commissioner stood there for a little while without saying a word. The officer knew not to disturb him in times like these. So he also just stood there, waiting for his boss to say something.

“Have we informed captain Morgan?”

“Not yet, sir. We thought you would want to make that call.”

“Good, officer. Leave that to me.”

A helicopter flying too low hovered away with a roar. They waited for its noise to subside before continuing with their conversation.

“It is already past five, and knowing Morgan as I do, he’d be up.” It was the commissioner. “Officer, take care of this case. Do not mess it up, you hear me? I want that killer. I want him today!” The commissioner spoke while walking away towards his car.

He drove slowly towards the hospital. He knew the news of John Drake’s murder will probably exacerbate Morgan’s condition, but he had no choice. “Somebody must tell him, and that somebody is me.”

He found him drinking tea, fresh from taking a shower.

“What are you doing here so early in the morning, commissioner? Do you miss me that much?”

“I really want to scream ‘Fuck you! I don’t miss you!’ but I’d very much have you at your desk rather than here right now.”

“Why? What’s wrong, boss?”

“Everything, but let’s start with something personal.”

“Personal? Personal to you, or to me?”

“To you.”

Morgan felt for the first time that there must be a major problem he was about to discover. Here, in front of him, in a hospital ward just before six in the morning, his chief was about to tell him something personal, something that is obviously bothering him. Sitting straight against his bed's head board, he gathered enough courage to look the commissioner in the eye. "What is it, boss? Tell me."

"Are you able to, you know, communicate with your cat? Would it somehow tell you if, say, I was at your place earlier?"

"Grace is very perceptive. She is able to do a lot of things that other cats can't."

"Are you able to communicate with it? That's the question. Are you?"

"She would lead me to you if she felt strongly about it, yes," answered Morgan. "But why are you asking me questions about Grace? Is she fine?"

"Your cat is fine. At least I hope so."

"Commissioner, what is happening here?"

"Morgan, I have terrible news, and I think your cat is the only thing that can help us here."

"What are you"

"Your brother, John Drake, has been murdered." The commissioner looked at the surprised, speechless Morgan for a moment. "I am sorry, Morgan. Really sorry."

Morgan remained quiet.

Not knowing what to do, the commissioner continued. "The only thing that can tell us who the perpetrator is, the only thing that might have seen the murder happen, is your cat, Morgan. So, if you somehow are able to communicate with it, please come with me and help us find your brother's killer."

Morgan just sat there. Instead of shock, the commissioner could sense a scheming mind behind the blank face. The dream he had, the one where Chris warned him to up and go home came back to him, flooding his mind. The commissioner was trying to work out what to say next when Morgan suddenly spoke. He spoke so softly that the commissioner had to ask him to repeat himself.

"Oh my God, it was not a dream."

"What was not, Morgan?"

"Forget it," Morgan replied almost curtly, as if having forgotten completely that he was talking to his boss. He got off his bed and changed into his clothes.

"Let's go, commissioner." The nurses watched in silent bewilderment as Morgan hastily led the way through the hospital passage and out into the breezy winter morning.

9.

“You know, boss, I’ve only had trouble in the family since the death of my wife.”

Morgan, sitting on the passenger seat, was looking away from the commissioner as he spoke. He was not aware of it but his face had developed wrinkles of late.

A second cigarette was already burning between his lips as they turned another corner away from the hospital. “Chris died and left me alone. He burnt so much in that church fire that even I could not identify him.”

The commissioner turned another corner and stole a quick look at his passenger. He was expecting tears to flow – hysteria even. “Drake, my brother, has been my only family. Now he’s gone too, murdered in cold blood in his own bed.”

The commissioner did not really know what to say. “You have us, Morgan. The force,” he stopped his own tears from falling before continuing. “The force is your family. We have always been. We will always be.”

The commissioner hit the brakes to avoid hitting a school girl running across the street. “Bloody kid!”

Morgan went on as if nothing had happened. “Paper has done all this to me. Even without evidence we know he killed Chris and Drake, yet there is nothing I can do about it.”

“We have him in our cells right now.”

“I know, but you know he will be out tomorrow if we don’t gather enough evidence to charge him with all these murders.”

“The law says the scumbag walks if we don’t tie him to the murders, *ja*. But I have the keys to his cell. The devil will stay there for as long as I say so. Besides, we will find evidence against him, Morgan. We will.”

A few minutes later they were parked opposite Morgan’s house. There were too many cars parked outside the yard for them to drive in. As soon as he got out of the car, Grace ran toward him. He lifted her up, kissed her, and held her close to his chest and walked toward his house, which was now a murder scene sprawling with cops and paramedics, and prying eyes of neighbours standing in groups, gossip leaders having a field day.

“Where is my brother?! Show me my brother!”

“This way, captain.”

Covered in a blanket, John Drake’s cold body was ready to be moved to the coroner’s office for an inquest when Morgan walked in. They kept John Drake in the house for longer than

was usual because the instruction from the commissioner was for the body to wait until he returned to the house with Morgan.

Still holding Grace, Morgan bent down to look at his brother's body, then closed him up with a blanket and walked outside.

To everybody's surprise, he showed no sign of pain, or shock. For a man who has in a short space of time lost an entire family, Morgan emerged from the house showing no sign of weakness. Instead he looked strong, determined. In his mind was a picture of a dream he had last night at the hospital. He realised the seriousness of it all and, once again, spoke to himself. People could see his lips moving, but could not make out what he was saying. Even Grace was confused when she heard him say: "Oh my god, it was really not a dream."

The commissioner went to him, held him by his right hand and walked him back to his car. "Morgan, I speak for everyone in the force when I say I am sorry for your loss. We truly are."

"Thank you, commissioner."

"We have him in prison, you know that. We arrested Paper *yesterday* afternoon already."

"So..."

"So he has the tightest alibi ever. He spent the night in a prison cell. We cannot pin this one on him, unfortunately."

There was silence. Morgan appeared to be thinking hard about the situation. In his heart he knew nobody but Paper could have pulled this off.

"Since Paper is in prison," it was the commissioner, interrupting Morgan's thoughts, "who shall we say hates you and your family so much as to take John Drake's life in this way?"

"Paper, commissioner, is the only man who hates me with intense passion. He killed my brother, somehow, just like he wiped out my entire family."

"Then maybe I should go see him in his cell to see if I can't extract any incriminating statements from him."

"No," Morgan insisted, "let him be. He needs to believe that we are not linking him to this particular crime. Let him be."

The hearse reversed into the street where people stood in groups. Through the hearse's slightly open window, Morgan sneaked a look but could only see darkness. He accepted. John Drake was gone.

*

When she woke up in the morning, Toogood, as had become the norm, took a walk in her yard, going around the house to see if anything untoward happened in the past night. The air

was breezy, just like she preferred her mornings. “Only if the whole day can be as inviting as the morning.”

She felt sure that the gate was not tampered with, and that all the windows were still intact. Satisfied that no one tried to get into her yard, she decided to go back inside the house to make herself a cup of tea. On her way back, she saw what looked like tracks on her *stoep*.

Upon closer scrutiny, she realised it must have been a cat, but left the matter at that. “My neighbour must tighten the leash. That bloody cat of hers must stay away from my yard. She does not help me clean my bloody *stoep*!”

She walked back into the house, continuing to enjoy her tea.

“Toogood! Toogood! Come out here!”

She did not expect anyone to be shouting her name like that so early in the morning. She stood up and peeped through the window to see who was calling her.

“Toogood! What the hell is this now?”

The man did not wait for Toogood to come out to ask the question, and this annoyed Toogood even more.

“What the hell is Teenage on about?”

“Come out here and tell me what the hell is happening.” Teenage continued to address Toogood as she stepped outside. She quickly assessed him and concluded that in spite of the time of day, Teenage must be drunk.

“What is wrong, Teenage? Why would you cause so much noise so early in the morning *nogal*?”

“What-t is wr-ong? Huh?” stuttered the man. He always had to close his eyes before speaking. Many said that was indicative of how difficult it was for him to speak. “Does th-at f-f-f-f-lag look OK for you, T-toogood?” asked the man as he pointed to the roof.

While she looked up, tipsy Teenage held the gate with both hands to make sure he did not slip and fall to the ground.

Her face morphed from surprise to anger to shock and then back to anger again.

“What on earth happened here?”

“Y-you see? I t-told you,” stumbled the man, throwing his hands in the air and walking away. “I t-told you.”

Toogood knew for sure that the flag was intact yesterday. She also knew that there were no violent winds, or even rain, yesterday. “The sun was out the whole day yesterday, and the

wind blew mildly,” she said to herself as she paced up and down the front yard, wanting to know what happened.

Approaching her *stoep*, she noticed those tracks again and decided to investigate where they’d take her.

Turning the corner of her house towards the back, she realised the traces ended and started backwards at the pole upon which the flag was hoisted.

“Fuck! Fuck it! Could Morgan’s bloody cat have followed me here? Could it have gone up my house and tore my flag?”

She concluded as she walked back inside her house that it could actually have been any other cat which tore down the flag of her favourite team. Resigned to her loss, she decided to finish her tea but couldn’t. It was too cold. She went to the kitchen to put the kettle on again.

*

When everybody was gone and finished cleaning the house, especially uncle Drake’s blood on the carpet in his bedroom, father and I were left together, alone. All along he held a straight face, showing none of the expected emotion of pain or anything like that on the outside. But I knew he was broken inside. I knew he was fuming, and I knew he was plotting his next move.

Knowing him as well as I do, I expected he will find solace in the bottle, but he disappointed me. Instead he decided to take some of the medication he got from the hospital. He must have had a headache or something. Soon after taking the tablets he made food for me and went on to nap. I took a sip of milk and stopped. I couldn’t eat. I had things to tell him, so I jumped onto the bed to join him but he was already snoring. I kissed his right arm and walked out to my room where I had left that piece of the flag I tore off from the roof of the house of that murdering bitch. With it between my teeth – it tasted bad, filthy! – I walked back to father’s bedroom, got on top of the bed, put the piece of cloth next him and joined him for a nap.

*

It was just before eleven in the morning when Toogood walked into the police station. She had promised to bring Paper some decent food and toiletry in the morning. He was going to spend a while in those filthy prison cells, even though he was not charged with any crime.

“I am here to see...”

“... Paper, I know,” interrupted the young policeman behind the desk. He put his cup of coffee down and took off his spectacles, exposing his wide, grey eyes. “I am afraid he has been moved to a different police station for questioning by... let me see here ... yes, for questioning by the Provincial Special Investigating Unit,” said the man, leisurely taking another sip of coffee. “He will ultimately be returned here – to be charged or released, based

on what comes out of that questioning session. You can come and see him then,” concluded the young police officer, closing the file in front of him and getting back to his coffee.

Toogood just stood there, studying the officer. She was convinced Paper was in a cell somewhere in the police station. He said so himself in a text message to her twenty minutes ago.

“I see, officer,” said Toogood. She had a plan to know once and for all if her boyfriend was in a cell somewhere in the police station, or if he was indeed moved. “Tell me, please,” she continued without haste, “when was he taken away? I hope it was yesterday because the sooner they start questioning him, the earlier he will return home.”

The young officer wore a face that made him look like he was thinking when he wasn’t. “Madam, the inmate concerned in fact spent no time here. He was taken away as soon as he handed himself in.” That was how Toogood established he was lying, and that her boyfriend was indeed somewhere in the police station.

She stepped outside and made a call. A few minutes later she returned back into the charge office to face the same young constable again, but this time she was not alone.

“Good morning, constable,” said the man accompanying her. “My name is Jim Lelata, attorney at law.” The man presented a business card to the officer. “I am here to see my client, Paper.”

Moments later, Toogood and the lawyer were meeting privately with Paper.

“Could you please step outside for a minute, Jim.” Paper had difficulty speaking. He was bruised all over the face. His stretched out, plastered left leg seemed to be in great pain because he seemed unable to stand on it, instead preferring to speak from the comfort of his single bed.

“I hear that *daai vark* Morgan is out of the hospital. We must expect trouble.”

“Yes, he is out. He came out this morning upon receiving the news of his dead brother.”

“You did well last night, babe.”

Toogood flashed a rare smile. She knew Paper was not the kind that threw compliments around without good reason. Then she remembered that Morgan’s cat tore her flag and probably went home with the missing piece. She worried because she knew better than not to tell Paper everything. She worried also because she did not know how Paper would react after hearing this.

“Someone – something actually, saw me last night, babe.”

“What do you mean?” Worry shot up on his face. He struggled to sit up to watch Toogood straight in the eye. “Who or what saw you?”

“I didn’t really think it was a big deal, but I don’t trust that cat of his.” She was looking away as she spoke. “I am sure it will not be able to say who killed John Drake even if it saw me. Cats don’t speak, luckily.”

Paper looked at her menacingly without saying a word. This frightened Toogood so much that she continued speaking, revealing that she suspected that the cat followed her to her place and tore a large part of her Kaiser Chiefs flag.

“Toogood, go away right now and find that piece of the flag, and if you discover it was indeed taken by the bloody cat, kill it.”

When Toogood stood up, ready to leave, Paper asked her to dismiss his attorney, claiming he wanted to sleep his pain away.

*

Father woke up with his face bright with sweat. He had been talking in his sleep for a while now. Even though I couldn’t hear clearly, it seemed obvious to me that he was having a conversation with someone he would not want to stop talking to.

I heard him repeat ‘please don’t go!’ several times right before he suddenly woke up. There was sheer desperation in his voice as he pleaded with whoever he was pleading with to stay, but it was clear that person had left anyway.

When he saw me lying on the bed with him, he pulled me close to his chest, my favourite place, and began to stroke my neck. It always was wonderful to be held like that, especially by my father. I purred back at him to encourage him to touch and stroke me further.

I purred again when I heard him say “Oh Grace, you are the only one I am left with now. My wife is gone. My boy Chris is also gone. Now we have lost John Drake, my only brother. You are the only one I have remaining, and if you were to leave me now, I’d have nothing to live for.”

He tried amid tears to light a cigarette but failed. I let go of him momentarily and he got the cigarette alit. He inhaled and exhaled a large cloud of smoke towards the ceiling, coughed a bit and then, as if to remember that I was there, held me again with his one hand close to his chest.

His phone rang. He answered and listened, saying ‘yes’ twice before putting the phone down.

As he turned to face the other side of the room, the piece of the flag I brought in fell down. He obviously did not take notice of it because he said nothing about it. I needed to make another plan to get his attention to the piece of black and gold rag from that witch’s house.

His phone rang again. It was as brief as the one before. A few minutes later we were in his car on our way to the police station. I tried to get the piece of rag with me into the car but

father was too fast for me to be able to get it and then get into the car in time for the brief trip to the cop station.

When we got there, my heart nearly stopped beating as I momentarily came face to face with the devil who was at the house that night, the very one who murdered uncle Drake in cold blood. I meowed furiously, trying to draw father's attention to her, but she walked away quickly before father could turn to see what I was on about.

*

"We have reason to believe that scoundrel Paper might have been behind John Drake's murder."

"But I have already told you so this morning. I know he is involved."

"I said we actually have *reason* to believe he might be involved, Morgan." The commissioner was now wearing a serious face. "He had two visitors this morning – a man and woman. The man – one he did not even speak to, was his lawyer. The woman was his ex-convict girlfriend called Toogood. He spent time with her in that cell, talking."

"And?"

"And nothing," replied the commissioner. "I was just thinking, you know, if you were in here and you wanted something done out there, wouldn't your ex-convict girlfriend be the ideal person?"

10.

A few minutes after Morgan had arrived at the police station, chaos ensued. Standing on a pavement opposite the police station, Toogood appeared intrigued. First she heard a few shouts of hurried instructions, and then she saw police officials running around and police cars moving away from the entrance, almost like clearing it for some impending arrival. And suddenly the sound of an ambulance came screeching towards her. She looked up the street and saw it heading towards the police station. A few seconds later it was already reversing into the police station, guided in by the police commissioner himself.

The stretcher was instantly sprinted into the cop station and no more than five minutes later, the ambulance carrying Morgan turned left and sped away in the direction of the hospital.

Amid the commotion, Slavo, who had come in to see Paper earlier, stepped out of the police station and turned right towards the busy section of town.

*

“*My broer, eish*, when I heard that you were arrested,” it was Slavo, speaking quietly with his small brownish eyes darting all over the place, “I went to see *auntie Z*.”

“*Ja. Ous Ziphora van Britten*,” said Paper. “What did she say?”

“Well,” eyes still thrown all over, Slavo leaned forward to explain, “She threw the bones *en my broer* she told me straight to my face that this time she is not getting, you know, a clear message from the ancestors about your current situation.”

“*Nee fok man Slavo*, is that it? I mean, she never really is that useless. Is that it?”

“I was surprised too, but she did say something else.”

“*Wat?*”

“She said I must tell you that something regarding this drama will be revealed to you soon ... in a dream.”

“*In ‘n fokon droom*, Slavo?! For real?”

“*Ja, bra van my. In ‘n droom.*”

“*Jizas. Wanneer?* When am I supposed to be dreaming this dream?”

Slavo looked down as he replied, as if to say I know my answer will not satisfy you. “She just said soon.”

Silence.

Paper, worried that he had no straight answers about his fate, realised upon throwing his gaze Slavo's way that the man looked scared, almost as if he was the one facing jail time. Clearing his throat, Paper decided to bring an end to the consuming silence.

"Enough with the dream business, Slavo. I have a problem that I need you to solve."

"Yes?"

"I expect that pig Morgan to be admitted back in hospital in no time."

"Oh? How do you know?"

"I have an inside person at the hospital. She's the one that gave him his medication."

"Shit."

"*Ja*. The pig is messing with his weak heart whenever he takes those meds."

"Fuck. Nice work, *bra van my*. Clearly you have not lost your touch."

"Toogood will be dealing with his only remaining relative today – his cat. I want you to deliver it to him in his dying bed. I want the bastard to know that, just like me, he has lost everything!"

"That should be easy; too easy." The man stood up, thought of giving his friend a hug but, remembering where they were, quickly restrained himself.

*

Outside the sky was gathering dark clouds. They seemed to be speeding somewhere westwards, and the smell of rain mixed well with the air blowing in the same direction as the ominous grey hovering above.

"Officer, I came as quickly as I could. What happened?"

It was Morgan's neighbour's son. The commissioner had called him because before he fell into unconsciousness, Morgan had whispered that the boy be called to take care of Grace while he is away in hospital. "Him and Grace get along well," Morgan had said weakly.

"Please follow me," responded the officer as she led the young man to the commissioner's office.

They walked quickly toward the large office situated at the far end of the building. There was a fresh smell of paint that day because the walls had just been repainted white. On the face of the wall were pictures of past presidents, including the current president and the minister of police. The photographs smiled reassuringly at whoever looked at them, as if to say 'You are safe. We are watching.'

The commissioner was talking to someone on his cellular phone as they entered. He pointed the young man to an empty chair while winking ‘thank you’ to the officer. He spoke for a few more minutes and put the phone down.

“Sam,” started the commissioner. “You are Sam, aren’t you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He settled down on his big chair. “Captain Morgan, your neighbour, has had what the paramedics call a minor heart attack.”

“Oh no.”

“It is true, sadly. He has been rushed to hospital.” said the commissioner. “Now Sam, he requested me to ask you to mind his cat while he is away.”

“Any time, yes. I like Grace. Where is she?”

“Good. They will bring her in a moment.”

He pressed a button on his desk and spoke briefly. A few seconds later, Grace was resting warmly in Sam’s hands.

“Now, Sam, there is another matter that I want to discuss with you.”

“Yes, commissioner?”

“We believe that the cat could have seen what happened that night.”

A knock came at the door. “Not now!” barked the commissioner, and the knocking ceased at once.

Turning to face the young man in front of him, he continued. “Morgan told me that the only person who is able to connect with Grace is you. Is that so, Sam?”

“Grace and I share a unique connection, sir. Yes.”

“Great. Now how much time do you need to find out what Grace saw on the night of John Drake’s murder?”

“Well, I could take Grace to uncle Drake’s bedroom now and see what she indicates. If there is anything to tell, she most probably would. She’s very perceptive, our Grace.”

“Good, Sam. Good. Go now with Grace and inform me immediately when you learn anything about the murder,” said the commissioner. “Here’s my card. Call me anytime, or use the free 10111 number to reach me.”

*

While he was being briefed by the commissioner, Morgan felt a pain racing from his left leg up though to his chest. First he dismissed it as ephemeral because it abated almost as quickly as it started, but he had to sit down only a few minutes later because it hit again. The commissioner instructed the nearby constable to bring Morgan a glass of water so that he can take his medication.

He stabilized for a few minutes but soon collapsed. An ambulance was called.

Now, a few hours after admission, he awoke and realised he was lying on a hospital bed, something he hated quite passionately. “Those places smell like death,” he liked saying about hospitals.

Without uttering a word he sat there, replaying in his mind a dream he just had, a dream that caused him to want to leave the hospital and head home immediately. Unlike most of his dreams, he recalled this one clearly, every word spoken and every picture seen falling into place.

He was in conversation with his deceased son, Chris, the one who perished on that fateful day when the church exploded and burnt to the ground.

“Father, since when is the work of the force so sloppy?”

“Son, watch your mouth.”

Ignoring the warning, Chris continued: “But father, why have the police not established that Gloria and I were in fact murdered in that church? Why have you arrested no one for that deliberate explosion?”

“Son, it is not that easy. We need evidence to arrest anyone. Suspicion alone is not enough.”

And then Christopher said something that made him wake up and want to leave the hospital immediately.

“Wake up now, father, and go dig up the bed of our fig tree. You will find the detonator planted there. It will connect Paper to the bombings and he will finally rot in jail.”

Morgan sat there and remembered trying to wake up but failed. He then remembered Chris continuing: “You also need to go home right away to protect Grace. Something bad is about to happen to her because she saw who and how uncle Drake was killed. Please wake up and go home.”

Morgan, realizing he might finally have the evidence needed to send Paper away for good, was determined to go home. He went to the toilet first, compelled to respond to nature. He found on his return his nurse waiting for him. “Medication time! Come, sir. Here.” And Morgan hastily took the pills, downed them with cold water and handed back the glass to the nurse, immediately saying: “I need to go home right now, nurse.” He spoke while grabbing his jacket, ready to go.

“But you are not discharged, sir. And even if you insisted, you will see that there is really no point to you leaving now because the meds will take effect anytime soon. You will, unavoidably, be fast asleep anytime now. Rather wait. Sleep the medication off and then we can talk.”

“I am leaving. Right now.” Morgan, much unlike a man who was unconscious only a few hours ago, was firm and intimidating at the same time. So the nurse moved away, allowing him space to leave without having to shove her out of the way.

A few steps away from his ward, the pain to his chest returned, and Morgan collapsed, falling face down to the floor. The nurses assisted him back to his bed.

Minutes after the doctors had failed to bring him to consciousness, Morgan was declared to have suffered another mild heart attack.

*

Sam arrived at home worried. He did not know if Grace had actually seen anything that happened the night of John Drake’s murder, something that will be helpful to the police. He also worried that Grace might not be able to lead him to things that will actually show what happened. He relied mainly on his close relationship with her to find something.

“Uncle Drake’s bedroom,” he said to himself. “Let me take Grace there and see what she does.”

As Sam led her into the room where the murder happened, Grace only took a few steps into the room and stepped out, walking while meowing towards Morgan’s bedroom instead.

Sam, noticing that she was trying to communicate something, grew excited and followed her.

When he entered Morgan’s room, she was already having a piece of gold and black rag between her front teeth.

“What is this, Gracey?” wondered Sam out loud.

As soon as Sam held the rag in his hands, Grace suddenly raced out of the house and into the street. She walked briskly, causing Sam to up his pace a bit.

Children coming from school watched the cat and the boy, some amazed at the spiritedness shown by the leading cat, while some were amused by how the young man struggled to keep up. Sam was oblivious to the murmurings, quiet laughs, and the staring eyes of the school children because he was determined not to miss any sign that Grace might give as they rapidly moved through the street.

As they turned the corner, with Grace now moving from one side of the street to the other, Sam began to wonder whether there was any point at all to their crisscrossing the section of the community like that.

Still hanging on to the piece of rag Grace gave him at Morgan's bedroom, he continued to walk behind the gritty leader. It was only when they turned the next corner of the street that reality hit Sam. "My God! Is this what I think it is?" He slowed his pace a bit to have a clearer look at the gold and black rag. "My God, this *is* in fact a piece of Toogood's Kaiser Chiefs flag!"

As if sensing that it was all coming together in Sam's mind, Grace meowed some more as she slowed down in front of the salon.

It was now clear. Sam was holding the missing piece of Toogood's flag.

"Did she do it? Did Toogood kill uncle Drake?"

He picked Grace up, smiled and kissed her on the forehead and then took a short cut home.

"I must call the commissioner. He will know what to do."

*

Back at the police station, Paper was having a conversation with himself in his cell. He had just woken up, and was playing back the dream he had. Paper was sweating as he did in the dream. His face showed wonder and confusion.

"I did not die, my son."

Amazed, looking thunderstruck, Paper forced the words out. "Father..."

"Yes, son?" Delight at seeing his son again could be felt in his voice.

"I am confused." The admission was sincere.

"I can understand, my son. I do. I should not have disappeared like that, but there was no other way, believe me."

Words failed the flabbergasted Paper.

"Among other things, I could not live anymore with the realisation that I would not, hard as I tried, be able to provide for you. You, for instance, needed a simple bicycle and I could not buy it for you, remember?"

"Forget the bicycle for a minute, please."

"I felt I needed to expl..."

"If you did not die, dear father, what happened to you? Where have you been?"

"I have been away, son. I had to go under."

Paper's silence prompted him to continue. "And the woman you see with me is exactly who you think she is." He paused to look his perplexed son in the eye.

Puzzled, Paper had no words. He knew the woman appearing with his father in the dream. She was his mother, the one who left his father with a younger man.

Paper jumped awake, his face branding burning sweat, surprisingly dry lips, and gleaming eyes wide open, hoping to see his father sitting with his legs crossed on a chair across the room, holding his mother's hand.

But he found none, because, just like his friend Slavo told him earlier, it was just a dream. His father told him the unbelievable tale while he was fast asleep.

“Oh my bloody God, what on earth is happening here?”

*

“Commissioner, it is me.”

“Yes, Sam. Go ahead. Have you got something for me?”

“Yes, sir. Er... I think so.”

“Well, tell me.” The commissioner tried hard to hide the excitement in his voice. “What have you discovered?”

Sam hesitated. “Let me rather come over to your office, sir.”

“Alright, Sam. I am sending a car to fetch you right now.”

A few minutes later, Sam was facing the quiet old man in his office. He slowly told the story of how Grace took him to Morgan's bedroom all through until he worked out that the piece of rag the commissioner was now holding in his hands belonged to one called Toogood.

“Tell Fire to come in here immediately,” barked the commissioner into the small telecom device on his large mahogany table.

When constable Fire walked in, no time was wasted.

“Who is Paper's girlfriend, constable?” The commissioner threw the question at him rather unexpectedly.

“Err-r,” hesitated the constable, “I think it is a lady called Toogood, boss. She owns a salon in Water Street.”

“Go and pick her up right now. Pronto!”

Before Fire could salute and leave, the commissioner was on the intercom again.

“Get Gambu in here.”

“Yes, sir?” said Gambu as he entered the commissioner’s office. He had moments ago seen how his colleague Fire shot out of the office toward the parking bay. He knew great trouble was brewing when he was summoned immediately after that.

The commissioner ignored him and addressed Sam instead. “My boy, you have been of great assistance. Thank you very much.”

“Only a pleasure, sir.”

“Now, constable Gambu here will take you home. I need you to have Grace by your side all the time. Maybe she will reveal something new that will assist us further.”

A few minutes later, they were on their way to captain Morgan’s place.

*

“Where were you on the night of John Drake’s murder?”

“Which night would that be?”

“Last week Wednesday. Where were you?”

“Last week Wednesday was the 15th ... payday for my biggest market, government employees. I was busy the whole day and went to sleep immediately after helping my last customer.”

“What time was it? What time did your last customer leave? What’s the customer’s name?”

“Watch your tone of voice, officer. Do not think for a minute that I am scared of you. I am not.”

“Answer me, woman!”

“I will, but not because you scare me or something.”

“Answer me.”

“She left just after 8pm. I remember that because Generations was playing when I switched off the TV.”

“What’s her name?”

“Patience. She’s the head nurse at the local clinic.”

The investigating officer left her for a while in the interrogation room.

When he returned, he told her Patience had corroborated her story.

“You see? You are wasting your time with me.”

“There is one more question.”

“What is it?”

“Your Kaiser Chiefs’ flag... who tore it, where is the other part, and when did it happen?”

“I don’t know, but I swear I will kill whoever is responsible when I find them!”

The investigating officer wanted to continue questioning her, but a voice, the commissioner’s, barked into his earpiece: “Release her. She seems to know nothing about the murder.”

Thirty minutes later, Toogood was back at her salon, doing a customer’s hair.

*

After Gambu dropped him at Morgan’s place, Sam went looking for Grace but did not find her. He called her name repeatedly while searching all over the yard. Nothing. Worry enveloped him. “Gracey, where the hell are you?”

As per arrangement with Paper, later that day Toogood handed Slavo a small bag. He proceeded to the back of the house and a few minutes later, after having washed his hands clean in the basin, he was on his way to the hospital, carrying a small plastic container.

When he arrived at the hospital, he briefly met Paper’s security guard contact.

He gave him the small package and clear instructions, turned around and left.

*

When he finally woke up later in the day at the hospital, Morgan was still drowsy. He had not yet slept the medication off. He tried to toss his body to the other side to ease the pain on the other but failed. The nurses came in to help him, and he ended up sitting straight and having a glass of water. He picked up a newspaper which was lying on side drawer of his bed.

Next to it was a small parcel with his name written on it.

Curious, he opened the plastic container and came face to face with a guillotined head of a cat. Horrified, he forced himself to look closer, and there – green eyes wide open, whiskers stretched out and bloodied, was Grace’s face.

Morgan’s weak heart thumped one more time before he fell back into a coma.

*

I was about to complain to Sam about my sour milk when I saw her again.

She wore a look as ominous as the one she bore that night when she murdered uncle John Drake. When I saw her eyes dashing rapidly all over the place I knew there was trouble, so I quickly ran to our neighbour’s and went up a tree, hiding behind the thick green leaves.

She walked around our yard, at one point going past the very window she went through when she killed uncle John Drake, searching, until she met my friend Amanda, a fellow feline from across the street. I have heard many people say she looks just like me, so it must be the reason why uncle John Drake's murderer stopped looking when she saw her.

I wanted to jump off from up the tree behind the thick green leaves to land my paws deep in her ugly face but I would not dirty myself like that. So I watched her silently approach ailing Amanda, who was resting under our fig tree.

She didn't resist much, my friend Amanda, because moments later the cruel, vile bitch was on her way out our yard.

Now worried, I jumped off from the tree and ran towards Amanda. When I saw her white, beautiful fur coloured red I knew something was very wrong. Seconds later, I came face to face with the most grotesque sight ever – Amanda's lifeless body. It was lying there, headless.

I sobbed uncontrollably, because I knew the bitch had come to kill me. Amanda died because of me. I cried, but there was no one to console me, or to attend to poor Amanda.

A few minutes later father's partner walked in.

“Gracey! Gracey!”

In response I meowed to show him where I was without moving, but for some reason he did not come to the back of the yard to find me. Instead I left Amanda's cooling body there and walked to the front of the house where I found father's partner speaking on the phone.

He smiled upon seeing me and grabbed me up to his chest with his free hand. He continued talking on the phone while walking to his car. He opened the door and signalled me to jump onto the back seat. “I am on my way, commissioner,” I heard him say before we drove in the direction of the police station. He did not see me drop another tear for leaving poor Amanda's dead body by itself.

11.

He looked pale, his face deadened and yet Morgan's mind was racing. In the last hours he tried many times to catch the nurses' attention but his inner body was like a soundproof room. His voice seemed to be screaming inwards. Nobody paid attention to him.

*

"Grace is missing, commissioner."

The commissioner almost choked on the water he was drinking. Recovering quickly, he responded. "What? Have you looked for her, son? Have you asked the neighbours if they have not seen her?"

"I have looked all over for her, sir. I checked with the neighbours. They even helped me look for her. She's gone. Grace has disappeared, commissioner."

"Dammit!"

"Sir?"

"Forgive me, son. I was not referring to you," recovered the old man. "Look, we will find Grace. I will send an officer to help you look for her. Calm down, please."

"Could that bastard Paper have engineered the disappearance of the cat from behind bars? Could he?" said the commissioner as he put the phone down.

It rang again.

He left it to ring three times, picked it up and listened.

"Put her through." The commissioner took a sip of water and cleared his throat.

"It's the commissioner here. How can I assist, nurse?"

"He has relapsed into a coma again, sir."

"Who has? Are you talking about the captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"But how come? Why? You said he was getting better and better..."

"He received a parcel, commissioner," interrupted the nurse.

"A parcel? What parcel is that? Who sent it? What has it got to do with him relapsing into a coma? Speak, nurse."

“You are asking me too many questions at once, commissioner.”

“Forgive me, nurse. At the moment things are not going right at the station. Everybody is stressed. Speak about the parcel and how it connects to captain Morgan’s current condition, please.”

“I saw blood dripping from it.”

“What? Did you say blood? Whose blood, nurse? Is somebody hurt?”

“I think it is better if you came here to see for yourself, commissioner. Please come now.”

Half an hour later the commissioner’s car came to a halt at the private parking section of the hospital.

“Where is the parcel, nurse? Let me see it.”

“Over there, commissioner.”

The commissioner saw dry blood on the package as he approached the table. The parcel’s lid was closed. Wearing a glove the nurse offered him, he opened the parcel, had a brief look at the contents and immediately looked away.

“Who brought this in here, nurse?”

“We don’t know, commissioner. The security guard says he found it at his desk when he returned from the loo.”

“Where is that guard? I want to see him now.”

“His shift starts in two hours’ time, sir.”

“I will be here to see him in two hours.” And the commissioner left with the package.

Meanwhile Morgan, who has been screaming for attention the entire time since the commissioner came in to look at the package, decided to do something else other than scream. He knew there is a glass of water on the side drawer of his bed. “All I need to do is turn around, grab it, and throw it to the wall,” said the man to himself. He tried to turn but his body remained stationery. He tried again and again but failed.

*

“*Die fokon kat is dood.*” It was Slavo. He had paid Paper a visit in police cells to bring him up to speed.

“Great work, Slavo. Great work.”

“*Ja. En ek hoor daai moegoe is weer diep in ‘n coma.* What a shame!”

“Serves him bloody well.”

“But when do you finish him off, *ou Papier?* I mean, I can go back now and take him out if you said so. *Pap en melk.* Easy job.”

“No need to rush things, Slavo. No need.”

Slavo noticed an absence of the usual bite in Paper’s voice.

“Is there something wrong? You sound err - *wat is daai fokon Engels word nou weer?* – deflated, *ja.* What’s eating you?”

“*Elke ding is verkeerd, ou Slavo. Elke ding.*”

Slavo just sat there without removing his questioning gaze. He knew better than to ask Paper one thing too many times, but Paper also knew that Slavo will not relent. So they sat there, quiet.

A shrilling shout of a man broke the silence. It was like the guy next door was being tortured. He screamed non-stop for about five minutes and then suddenly stopped. The steel door made a loud noise as it shut, followed by quiet sobs from the beaten man next door.

As if nothing had happened, Slavo continued the conversation. “When I delivered the package to that fool Morgan in hospital, it somehow reminded me of how you handled those *moegoes* who threatened to kill my son when I was in jail.”

“No need to go there,” interrupted Paper.

“Let me finish, *Papier.*” The snap in Slavo’s voice was unusual. Paper kept quiet.

“Now, if there is something that is troubling you, I mean anything at all, you just tell me and I will at once fix it.”

“I know I can depend on you, Slavo.”

“So what’s eating you?”

“My father.”

“What? How is *jou ou toppie* troubling you when he is *oorla?*”

“Remember what you told me about *ous Ziphora?*”

“Oh my God. He actually came to you in a dream?”

“Ja, Slavo. *Sommer net ‘n kak droom* I tell you.”

“*So die suster was reg? Jizas, die bloody ousie was reg.*”

“He stood right in front of me, Slavo. My father stood in front of me and told me he wasn’t dead, that he faked his death!”

“For real, *Papier*? He said that to you?”

“Dead right, he was here. But it was just a dream, Slavo, was it not? I mean, I washed my father’s corpse at the mortuary.” Slavo was surprised by what looked like tears rolling down Paper’s face. “I made him that coffin with my two hands. I dressed him and put him in it, and I saw him go down that grave.”

“It was just a dream, *ou Papier*. Let it go.”

“He was in any case too poor to fake anybody’s death. He is dead, Slavo. My father is dead.”

Realising he was not going to get the much needed reassurance from his friend, Paper continued. “You know, Slavo, I never really got to know who got into my house and stole that detonator. I don’t know where that bloody thing is right now as we speak.”

“*Daai is mos nou ‘n lelike problem, ou Papier.*”

“It is, *ja*. The big relief is I don’t believe it is with the cops. They would have moved already because that is all they need to link me to the explosions.”

“True. What happens now, *Papier*? What would you like *jou man ou Slavo* to do?”

“Nothing at this point. As long as Morgan is immobilised and lying like a dying rat in hospital I think we are fine.”

“Why, *Papier*? Why do you think his being in coma renders you safe? You really think he has the detonator?”

“I think he has it, or at least he knows where it is,” Paper looked away as he spoke. “He is the only one who is clever enough to pull such an unbelievable stunt as to get into my house, find the safe, remove the damn thing and disappear without leaving a trace. Dammit.”

“*So hoekom lewe die vark nog?* Why are you keeping him alive, *ou Papier*? That man is *fokon* dangerous.”

“Oh don’t be too upset about him being alive, Slavo. I have a plan for him.”

“What’s the plan? I mean, if he wakes up now, he will know that he has lost everything, and he will most certainly want his revenge. What’s the plan, *Papier*?”

“Let us just say the next time our Morgan leaves that hospital ward, it will be to his grave.”

At that point Toogood walked in.

After exchanging greetings, Paper focused his gaze on Toogood. The searching look was brief but Slavo picked up the silent communication between the two.

“Am I missing something here?” asked Slavo.

“Not really, Slavo,” said Paper, who was now satisfied that Toogood had what he hoped she would bring. “Not really.”

“It was not easy though,” Toogood spoke, lighting a triumphant smile, “not with all these cops watching my every move.”

“It never is,” said Paper, beaming a rare smile. “Look, Slavo, you spoke of helping out to finish off that rat, right?”

“Anytime, *ou Papier*. What do you want me to do?”

“Good. You and Toogood will meet outside. She will give you something and then brief you on what needs to be done.”

Both Toogood and Slavo went quiet. They realised that the whole plan has escalated, and was now about to climax. They could see the measured anger, the scheming intent, written all over Paper’s pitch black shining face, and that alone filled them with excitement. They welcomed the moment of ‘action’. They watched Paper retrieve his phone. He read a message and put it back under his single bed mattress.

Clearing his throat, Paper spoke again. “I just received, you know, notification that the commissioner will be returning back to the hospital in less than two hours.”

“Returning?” It was Toogood. “Has there been any development in Morgan’s condition? Why would he return to the hospital? I know he was there less than an hour ago.”

“They saw the cat’s head, Toogood.” replied Paper. “They – the commissioner specifically, wants to interrogate my security guard contact there regarding how the parcel reached the hospital. He wants to know who delivered it.”

“That will be a bit problematic. He can’t find that out. He can’t.” Slavo was now openly worried.

“He will, Slavo, assuming that the guard gets my message too late to stay at home and not report for duty. But if the commissioner finds out, part of the plan is that you are going to make sure he does nothing about it.”

Slavo, perplexed, asked: “How the hell is that supposed to work out, *Papier*? I mean, why allow him to find out in the first place?”

“Because between now and him arriving at the hospital to meet my security guard contact there is nothing meaningful we can do without getting ourselves into unnecessary trouble.”

Slavo responded by keeping quiet. He just looked at Paper, clearly hoping that the man will explain how the crazy plan will work.

As if reading his mind, Paper spoke: “Do not look that worried, Slavo. *Eintlik hoe de fok ken jy my?* Huh? I have this thing all worked out. You have trusted me before, don’t stop now.”

“Babe,” it was Toogood, moving forward a bit to kiss her boyfriend on the forehead, “we are running out of time. Perhaps we should be going. I need to brief Slavo in time for him to be able to carry out his part of the plan without unnecessary delay.”

“You are right, babe. Go. Good luck, both of you.”

*

Just like the ominous clouds building slowly in the sky, Morgan was having a troubling time in his deep sleep. He had tried screaming for attention earlier when the commissioner visited the hospital but failed, falling back into his now ordinary deep sleep. He had his peace and quiet only for a few minutes before he found himself engaged in some altercation.

“Where did you think you will end up, Morgan? Where did you think you will end up with terrorizing my family, and making me lose my wife? What? You thought you are God? You think you are all invincible and stuff, Morgan? Huh?! Tell me, you piece of dying shit!” Even in a dream, Morgan could see thick saliva trickling uncontrollably from the man’s mouth.

“I did no such. Just like your son, you are an incurable moron and a heartless, hardened criminal who deserves to rot in jail!”

“Watch your tone, you dying pig! Watch it!”

“You don’t scare me at all. Just like you, I will eventually get your son to rot in jail for all the crimes he has committed, most especially for all he has done to my family. I will get him!”

“You won’t, Morgan. I know about the little device, the detonator. I know where it is, and I know you know where it is. The thing, Morgan, is I also know you will not live long enough to get it and use it as evidence against my son.”

“What do you mean, you rascal?! I will not live long enough?”

In his dream, Morgan repeated himself even louder but soon realised he was speaking alone. The man he was having an altercation with had left, and then again he fell into deep sleep.

A few minutes later, Morgan heard another voice. This time it was his son’s, Chris.

“Father, wake up, please. Wake up.”

He just lay there. No response.

“Father please, wake up. You need to leave this place right now.”

He tried to reply to his son, but the harder he tried, the more difficult it became for him to speak.

And just when Chris mentioned that Grace was in fact alive, that the bloody head that was sent to him was that of another cat that looks exactly like Grace, his voice got mixed up with the nurse's and another that sounded like the commissioner's.

"You say he has not turned up for work, nurse?"

"That's true, commissioner. The security guard who received the parcel for the captain called earlier to say he has come up with a bad case of flu. He won't be coming in today, I am afraid."

"No sweat at all, nurse. I will go see him at home," said the commissioner as he turned to walk towards Morgan's bed.

*

In the unmarked car parked outside, the bulky but agile policeman assigned to tail Slavo answered his phone.

"Yes?"

"Are you absolutely sure about this?"

"Dammit!"

Like a man gone mad he threw the car door open, rushing through the main entrance of the hospital aiming for Ward 6.

"Nurse, where is the commissioner? He must get out of here! Everybody must get out of here! Now!"

"He's gone to see captain Morgan. Why must everybody get out of the hospital? Are we in danger?"

"This place will explode anytime now, and the commissioner and captain Morgan are the targets! We must get everybody out of here! Now!"

At that moment Slavo, sitting in a car parked about a hundred meters away from the hospital, pressed the red button on the detonator given to him earlier by Toogood, and the hospital building erupted into a sea of fire, rubble and black, skyward smoke.

After a few minutes of tumult, the smell of blood and burnt human flesh filled the air.

There was no hospital building to point to anymore.

12.

“It’s done.”

Paper read the message for the third time before putting the phone away and stretching his stiff body over his prison single bed. The mattress made a sound that reminded him of his old bed many years back when his father was still alive, but he was too pleased to worry about that. Wearing a smug face, he took out the sleeping pills and swallowed a couple. A few minutes later he was still struggling to fall asleep. Giving up, he sat at the edge of his bed, toying with the idea of taking another sleeping tablet when he heard a familiar voice. Wanting to confirm, he stood up and walked to the wall closest to the charge room.

“Fucking hell!” Quickly reaching for his phone, Paper dialled a number. “Come over here right now.”

Twenty minutes later Toogood sat in front of him. She wore a black mini skirt and a red, sleeveless top. Paper realised when she uncrossed and crossed her legs again that she had nothing under the skirt. Tiny sheets of sweat shone on his face as his dick grew tight and pressed hard against his pants. For a moment he thought of pressing her against the wall, ripping the mini skirt apart and entering her, but he fought the desire.

They had difficulty hearing each other because of all the frenzy the inmates made as they spoke spiritedly about the hospital bombing, so Paper had to move closer to her to avoid speaking too loudly.

She listened to Paper for a few minutes, nodding a few times before upping and leaving.

She walked a few meters in the passage leading into the Charge Office and froze. She had come face to face with Grace, the cat she was sure to have murdered with her own bare hands.

*

“Captain, you have been Morgan’s partner and friend for years, not so?”

“That’s correct, sir. Yes.” Pope was trembling with anger and pain at the mention of his erstwhile friend and colleague.

“Good,” said provincial commissioner Zondo who came in earlier to take over the station after the hospital blast took the life of the commissioner, among others. “Take this file and nail that thug Paper for all the atrocities this town has suffered. Do you understand me, Captain?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Go.”

*

Pope stepped outside the commissioner’s office only to be greeted by loud screams.

Amazed, he moved closer to see what was happening. He saw a woman lying on the carpet, shouting and hitting a cat with her handbag.

Grace, who was viciously biting and planting her sharp claws deep in a woman's face was been restrained by a young man who just walked in the police station.

“What the hell is happening here?”

“This bloody cat just attacked me! Shoot it! Kill it!”

“Sir, please, I know what is happening here,” said the boy, holding Grace against his chest.

“My name is Sam. I am Captain Morgan's neighbour and I take care of Grace.”

“OK, Sam. Why would Grace attack this lady so savagely? For God's sake I don't know her to be this violent. What's going on?”

“It is simple, sir. It is because this lady here – her name is Toogood, is the one who killed uncle John Drake.”

“What?” Pope was openly shocked.

“That's pure nonsense!” screamed the lady back.

“Sir, she is the owner of the salon from which Grace tore that piece of rag. She killed uncle John Drake that night and then attempted to kill Grace but got Amanda instead. This woman is a murderer. Arrest her!”

Thirty minutes or so after commissioner and captain Pope had interrogated her, Toogood found herself detained in a cell across Paper's.

*

Slavo, who saw the whole tussle between the cat and the young boy and Toogood, turned back from the police station before anyone could see him. He had gone there to give Paper feedback about the successful hospital bombing.

Now he was walking rapidly through town, thinking about what the incident he witnessed at the police could mean for him, and for Paper, when his phone vibrated. He retrieved and opened the message. “They have Toogood. You are next. Leave town now! Run!” He read the message again, raised his head slightly and realised a police van was slowing down not too far from where he was standing.

He quickly went into the nearest shop and asked for the owner. “I am the owner, sir. How can I help you?”

“Good. Open the back door.” Slavo exposed his gun for the old man to see, coercing him to move without question. As if his pores just opened wide, sweat began to pour out of the frightened man's face as he led the way to the back door. From the bundle of keys he was holding, he found the right one and opened the door. Slavo hit him on the head with the gun and vanished into the throngs of people, leaving the old man lying on the floor, unconscious.

*

“She sang, Paper. It's over. Your girlfriend spilled the beans.”

Captain Pope was furious and struggled not show it. He needed to make sure Paper spent forever in prison for the things he did to his partner and friend.

“I want a lawyer.”

“You want a lawyer for what, Paper? To explain away the multiple murders you have committed? You think any judge will let you off the hook for that?”

“I will not say anything to you without a lawyer.”

Pope looked at him menacingly. “Yes, you won’t. You don’t have to. As I said, Toogood has already spoken, and as we speak investigators are looking for your lieutenant Slavo. He will also be in in no time. So keep quiet as much as you like, but rest assured that you are very unlikely to see the outside of prison walls ever gain.” Pope stood up and left.

Paper remained seated at the edge of his bed, thinking.

He stood up and walked to his cell door and stood there for a few seconds. He watched Toogood pacing up and down in her cell and took a decision.

*

“Toogood sang to that fool Pope earlier. She’s here.”

“That sounds bad. What do we do now?”

“Don’t worry about her. I want you to lay low a bit and then get that boy called Sam. Kill him, Slavo, do you hear me?”

“Will do, *ou Papier.*”

“Kill him tonight. I have no intention of rotting in jail because of his loud mouth. Kill him.”

Paper pressed the red button and ended the call.

He immediately typed a message to his inside man in the police station. He waited for an answer and when it came through a few seconds later, he took two more sleeping tablets. Minutes later, he was fast asleep.

*

Toogood initially doubted the decision she took earlier but as she thought more and more of it alone in her prison cell, it all made better sense. She had earlier confessed everything to both the commissioner and captain Pope in exchange for her exception from prosecution.

“All I have to do is testify, and both Paper and Slavo will go to prison for the rest of their lives, and suddenly all the cash heists millions Paper stashed away will be mine to enjoy as I please.” Lying on her back with her face facing the concrete ceiling, she smiled broadly and fell asleep.

She did not hear when her prison cell door went open, or when Paper’s inside man pressed a drug-filled syringe into one of her arteries, causing her to fall into deep unconsciousness.

The next morning when everybody woke up, they were greeted with news of Toogood having hanged herself in her prison cell.

*

“Captain, how could we have missed this? How could we have not known that he was going to kill his girlfriend?”

“Sir, we bugged his cell. We intended to monitor his calls, neglecting the possibility that he might text his contacts. That’s how we, er..., failed to detect and stop his plan to kill his girlfriend.”

“Dammit!” The commissioner’s face was reddening by the minute. He was livid, his left hand shaking uncontrollably. He grabbed a glass of water and threw it against the wall, smashing it into pieces. Captain Pope was now startled, even though he did not show it. He didn’t expect the commissioner to be this angry.

“We have confiscated his phone, sir.”

“And?”

“He has deleted all messages. The call log is also blank, but we have called a specialist from HO to come and work on it. We should know who helped him kill his girlfriend by the end of the day.”

“Good.”

*

“Slavo, you must know that Morgan and I were great friends.”

“So what,” said Slavo, spitting some of the blood coming from his lips on the floor.

“So I will get all the information I need from you in order to send that snake you call a friend away for good!”

“Pope, *jy gaan fokol by my kry nie. Niks!*”

“We will see about that,” answered captain Pope, gesturing to the nearby officer. The officer left and came back with a small bag.

Thirty minutes and a lot of yelling later, Slavo, just like Toogood, had sang. He could not take the red hot steel rod through one end of his right thigh.

13.

A few days before Paper's trial started, Sam sat alone with Grace under the fig tree. He thought hard about what he overheard when two cops were having a chat. "With Toogood dead and with Slavo's confession believed to be obtained under duress, Paper will certainly walk."

He sat there and thought of Morgan's death, and of the horrific murder of John Drake. Emotion overwhelmed him. He dropped a tear and clasped even tighter to Grace when he remembered of how Chris died.

"Paper will walk." "Paper will walk." "Paper will walk."

The words kept playing themselves over and over again in his head until he took a decision.

*

"Your Honour, the prosecution is basing its entire case on two things. The first is a written testimony by one called Toogood. But as we know she has since passed on, and so we are unable to verify that testimony. The second is a confession from an alleged associate of my client, a confession which we all know was attained under duress. Your Honour, I must submit that the prosecution is wasting everybody's time, and therefore respectfully ask you to do the right thing and throw this case out of court and let my client go."

A few minutes later, all charges against Paper were dropped. He hugged his lawyer and stepped out of court.

When he got to the gate, he took one long deep breath, lit a broad smile and turned to greet a shoe mender he has known from his boyhood, but only walked a few meters towards him before a bullet surprised him and went through his neck.

He fell down without making a sound, his blood forming a thin line which quickly ran into the nearby water drain.

When people began screaming and the police running towards Paper, Sam put the gun back in his sling back, turned and walked away.

*

I felt the warmth of the gun as it rested against me inside the sling back. Terrified, I could at that point think of nothing else but my dead kitties, and mother.

End.