

CANARY
IN THE
COALMINE



26 AUGUST 2024

The gun pointed at my head is one of ours. A black Beretta 9-mm pistol. I know this because my job, up until a few months ago, was to procure weapons on behalf of the South African government. I respect this model of weapon as much as I respected my job. That was before they took it away from me.

The Beretta 9 mm used to be standard issue for armed forces in many countries around the world. The go-to weapon for hitmen in the underground criminal world. It takes something special to design a product widely regarded as the best of its kind by characters on both sides of the law.

As for me, I'm no longer on the side of the law I always believed I was on. Not that I've committed any crime that I am aware of, but have been persecuted as if I have, which is why I now stand here with a gun pointed at my forehead. The law, I have learned, is open to interpretation and it is those in power who decide what is right and wrong. Forget democracy. Forget fairness. Forget justice. Just don't forget what you stand for.

The cold consolation I cling to in this moment is that I'll be killed with a weapon I respect. Maybe I can find some honour in that, not that I think I have any left – they've taken that away too. But this is my story and in these final moments I can tell it in the way that makes most sense. I mean, why not?

Everything is a story, right? The law. The history that created it. The reasons people give for their actions. Anything is believable if you tell it a certain way. The facts are for the birds. The birds are there for the taking. For a long time now, they have witnessed the endless taking and taking and taking.

I hear them now – the birds – as I stand here outside before sunrise. They chirp and sing. They urge us to listen, but we don't. They know things they

shouldn't. Nobody notices them. Most of what they know goes untold. The birds perch on their branches ready to witness my murder. Nobody cares what they have to say. Nobody will care if I die – especially for this.

'Close your eyes,' the man behind the gun says. His voice is as steady as his arm. He's dressed in dark clothing, a grey hoodie pulled over his head. His face is fully exposed: hard, unshaven and determined.

I look up to the sky. If this is how I meet my maker, then so be it. For a while there, I had lost my faith; only recently has it returned. Not even this can take it away and for that I am grateful.

The trigger clicks.

Chirp, chirp.

The birds sing.

A cold wind blows.

The man's stance is steady. He has used the weapon before. He will not hesitate.

'Don't do this,' I say, more for him than for me.

'Shut up.'

'You're making a mistake.'

He sneers, takes a step closer and raises his arm.

And so I close my eyes. A shiver runs down my spine. I'm not begging. I'm not even sorry. I'm trying to help him. But he's the main character in his own story, and I'm just the same in mine. Is it fair when main characters die?

'Don't do it.'

'This is what you get, you son of a bitch!'

The birds go quiet.

MARCH 2024

This story could begin at just about any point in the last eighteen months. But the moment that makes the most sense is about five months ago. With *that* performance review.

It was all I could think about in the weeks building up to it. The days creeping closer. The last night's sleep before the big day.

Whatever I did, from the moment I climbed out of bed – still tired and short of sleep – felt like I had a hundred pairs of baleful eyes watching me. I didn't know whether to brush my teeth first or take a dump. I stood in front of the mirror, crusted sleep caked around my eyes and dried saliva at the corners of my mouth. My bowels were solid with concrete.

A run was imperative, despite the grogginess. It was still dark outside; the best time to run. My neighbourhood was under constant development; new, bigger houses always coming up, and grander, more expensive complexes sprouting everywhere. Private schools. State-of-the-art hospitals. Malls. Coffee shops.

It was the place to be for people on the move.

The streets were wide and even. The hills were moderate. I blitzed eight kilometres in forty minutes. It was a push. I should have only done five, but I was trying to outrun the anxiety. A monkey at the circus. A hamster on a wheel. A cog in a machine. Pavlov's dog, classically conditioned. Against the wind, I put one foot in front of the other.

Nausea.

I fought it like I fought the fatigue. I couldn't stop. Couldn't allow it to get me. Couldn't give up. Not now. Not ever.

The pain in my muscles was ecstasy. The burn gave me hope. My reward was a good, relieving shit.

I took a cold shower afterwards. I thought of times in my life when I had little to no luxuries. When I still had the hunger of a person striving. Hustling. Persevering. *Wanting*.

I needed that fighting spirit. The cold water and pain through my muscles helped bring focus. The nausea, though, persisted.

Nevertheless, I smiled as I put on my navy suit, the one from Top Man. I had bought it many years ago when the store was still in Sandton, before the entire brand left the country for good. A plain white shirt – Ben Sherman. Yellow tie – Armani. Brown shoes – Kingsley Heath. Natty. My power suit.

I usually didn't eat a big breakfast, unless I had something important to do that day. My mother always taught me to face my troubles on a full stomach. And considering what I had to face, a farmhouse breakfast was what I needed now, but my stomach was not up for it.

The queasiness stayed with me even as I sat behind the wheel of the Mustang still parked in my garage. If anything could give me confidence, it was this vehicle. Masha was yellow with two thick black stripes running over the length of her body; she was a beauty. I had procured her four years ago, after being promoted from Senior Manager to Executive Manager. We were a unit: Lone Ranger and Silver. Together, nothing could stop me and my steed.

My daily affirmation helped bolster belief:

I possess the focus and clarity needed to navigate any situation.

Challenges are temporary; my resolve and spirit are eternal.

I am fully aligned with my goals and manifest them into reality with each step I take.

The nausea was still there, though, even after my third recitation, my palms clammy against the steering wheel.

'We can do this,' I said.

Masha the Mustang didn't respond – not in words. She did provide comfort, though, as she always did, her engine purring as she carried me through the early morning to the office.

Even though it wasn't far, I still liked to get there early, before anyone else.

It was the third Wednesday of March. Right before the Human Rights Day long weekend. Technically it wasn't supposed to be a long weekend, but most people had planned to take the Friday off to make it one. The day promised good, sunny weather. No wind. Few clouds. Just dry highveld air. Nosebleed stuff.

I greeted the security guards with a smile and a joke about the local premier league soccer midweek fixtures – something I didn't really care about but followed for the sake of office banter.

I bought the daily paper from the vendor downstairs and holed up in my office with a large cup of tea – two tea bags of vanilla chai from Woolies and three teaspoons of honey. Everybody needs their fix; this was mine.

A story on page two made me spill a little of the chai:

Whistleblower murdered outside her home

The Golden Daily

Whistleblower Gabriella Simelane was slain outside her Waterfall, Midrand home in the early hours of yesterday morning. Neighbours, alerted by the sound of gunshots, found her body in the driveway. She was dressed for jogging, apparently set for her routine morning run.

Simelane came to prominence in October when she disclosed high-profile acts of corruption in the state-owned entity, Eleckor SOC Ltd. She had been a loyal civil servant in the organisation for sixteen years. The alleged criminal activity she exposed involved high-ranking executives in the organisation as well as politicians with significant influence in the ruling Democratic Party for Change (DPC).

There seems to be something deliberate and calculated in the untimely death of the Executive Manager who worked in the procurement department of this once proud state-owned entity. Although law enforcement is yet to release an official statement with the details of this brutal slaying, sources have speculated about possible connections between her murder and the spate of recent killings of whistleblowers. A rogue faction within the ruling DPC has given breath and life to a group of overzealous

supporters who call themselves Iintloko Zeenyoka, which translates to Heads of Snakes. This unscrupulous group is allegedly responsible for the assassination of whistleblowers who stand up against the cartels that have turned the procurement landscape of state-owned companies into their personal feeding troughs.

The death of the woman known simply as Gabby to those who loved her most, seems intended to send a strong message ...

The nausea returned, stronger than before. I couldn't finish the chai. I dashed to the men's room to splash water on my face. I wasn't sure what affected me more: a story about yet another whistleblower slain, or the fact that this one lived in the same neighbourhood as me, was also a morning jogger and also worked as an executive manager for a state-owned company. What were the chances?

Iintloko Zeenyoka. Heads of Snakes. Overzealous Supporters. Unscrupulous.

In the photo accompanying the article, Gabriella Simelane looked so unassuming. Smiling, eyebrows raised, as if she would've preferred not having her picture taken. She doesn't look like someone who created problems. She doesn't look like a whistleblower. She doesn't look like someone who knew what she had coming. Like someone who would die in a barrage of bullets.

I didn't want to face anyone that day. It seemed to be more than just coincidence that I came across that article. Its contents lingered in my mind right up until the time for my performance review.

Late afternoon.

The office was deserted.

Most of my colleagues had taken off early.

Outside the boss's office. Laptop in hand. Not a second late. I was ready, even though the doubts still hissed furiously around my head. On the other side of the glass, the big man swivelled on his chair, chatted casually on the phone and ignored me.

Knock-knock. The sound echoed off the glass as if the office were an airlocked chamber.

He glanced up in my direction.

I raised a hand.

He turned his back.

The building, this late in the day, was funereal; subdued by an expanding vastness. A vacuum cleaner wailed from the floor above. A printer choked and spluttered from behind a closed door. Whispers

from the security guards floated up from floors below. Keys jangled like bones down a shaft. Unmanned workstations gaped like empty caskets.

Minutes lapsed.

My shoulders sagged.

The sun was setting.

I massaged my temples.

Eventually the boss beckoned with a flick of his fingers.

The office was warm and stuffy. Barnabas Rivombo rarely switched on the aircon. The blinds were closed, casting the corner where he sat in a semi-gloom.

'Barnabas,' I said, staring down at him with no more sense of power than a man on the banks of a river looking down at a crocodile.

'Mlungu,' he said, exhaling through flared nostrils.

I hated his nickname for me, but what could I do? He was my boss. 'My performance review was scheduled for' – I checked my watch – 'seventeen minutes ago.'

He watched me through filmy eyes. 'You have thirteen minutes left.'

I sat down, set up my laptop on his desk and stretched my neck from side to side. I had been preparing for this moment all week, expecting at least forty-five minutes of discussion. Sweat dripped from my armpits. Nostrils and throat dry. I cleared my throat.

'This past year has been a great one for my team,' I said, finding my voice, despite the choking feeling. 'Two of my members have been promoted. Our expenditure has been lower than any other department. We have fewer audit findings than the previous financial year.'

He checked his watch.

'If you look here.' I turned the laptop screen towards him.

'Tell me what you want, Mlungu.' He spoke without taking his hooded eyes off me.

A distinct body odour hit my nostrils. I couldn't tell if it was his or mine. 'The past two years I have turned down a bonus. I haven't requested an increase.' I cleared my throat again.

'So?'

Double heartbeat – a sharp pain in my chest. 'My department is still the best performing.'

'And?'

Triple heartbeat – a numbness in my shoulder. 'I think I deserve' – swallowing spit – 'not just my annual bonus but a twelve per cent salary increase.'

He leaned back in his seat; it squealed as he forced himself back into it. He watched me in silence. The smell around us intensified. I was certain it wasn't coming from me. 'But that's not what you really want, is it?' he said.

'It's my humble request,' I countered.

He smiled. The pockmarked flesh of his face the scaled exterior of a reptile.

I squirmed. The numbness spread. Pins pricked my skin.

'Take over from me,' he said. 'You' – he pointed – 'the new Chief Procurement Officer. Me gone.' He blew his fingertips for effect.

I waited. Double heartbeat. He wasn't serious, was he? I thought for a moment while he smiled. Triple heartbeat – a wobble in my liver. 'Are you being sincere?'

He scoffed. 'Ah, Mlungu, Mr Fancy English.' He chuckled precisely five times before the smile dropped from his face. 'You people think you're better than the rest of us.'

'You people?'

'Clever blacks. Just because you schooled with the whites, you think you have an advantage.'

We stared at each other, neither of us speaking. The heat in the room pressed against my eardrums. Despite feeling like I might cry, my pupils felt dried out.

He whistled. Four sharp notes that could have come from a bird. *Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp*. It almost seemed impossible for a person – especially one so large and grotesque – to make such a musical sound.

I stared at him, not sure what to do next.

He whistled again, eyes still on me. *Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp*.

Again, I didn't respond.

'What should I do about an informer in my team?' he said, in a voice that might have been mistaken as friendly.

I drew in a deep breath. 'I don't know. Maybe find proof? Irrefutable proof?'

'And if I already have that?' He sat forward in his seat. Again he whistled. Triple heartbeat. 'I'd confront the person.'

'And?'

'Give them a chance to explain.'

His odour hooked me by the nostrils, drawing me involuntarily closer, as he lowered his claws onto the desk. 'What if you don't deserve that chance?'

'Who are you to decide?' Double heartbeat. *Boom-boom*.

'So ... you are guilty?'

I couldn't breathe. *Boom-boom*. I needed to escape this predator's den. *Boom-boom*. 'Are you accusing me of something?'

He leaned forward, closer still. *Chirp-chirp. Chirp-chirp.*

The heat. The silence. The stare. What was I doing here?

Rivombo grinned as if he'd snatched up something between his teeth. 'Your time is up,' he whispered.

Boom-boom.

Boom. Boom.

Boom.

The walk of shame back to my office was dizzying. The only comfort was that I had survived – barely – the tropical heat of Rivombo's office. The motion-activated light panels above me came on with each step. I was at least grateful for a sense of direction, illusory though it surely was.

I attempted to dull the sharp pain in my chest by rubbing it with my thumb. My doctor had warned me to take it easy. Even suggested I should give up long-distance running. He suggested it was neurosis. He wasn't even a psychiatrist. What did he know?

Was Rivombo onto me?

Never. I had been careful, hadn't I? Still, I didn't have a good feeling about this. Every time I met with him, the unsettledness got worse. *That smell.*

The newspaper was still on my desk. The caption about the dead whistleblower caught my eye. Her self-deprecating smile, her unassuming demeanour. Was it worth it?

I needed to get away from this place.

It was getting dark by the time I drove out of the Arms-Tech office park in Midrand. The traffic was as bad as you'd expect at the start of a long weekend. The traffic lights were out, which meant everything took that much longer. Restless frustration and the smell of clutch pads hung in the air.

I knew I had to get out. The feeling was getting stronger every day. It was difficult. For so long, Arms-Tech had given me an identity, one that I was proud of. But I no longer recognised the place. I didn't know who I was becoming by staying there. My story was no longer making sense. It was being told for me rather than by me.

I flexed my fingers on the steering wheel, encouraging blood flow. The radio was on but I wasn't really listening. The numbness in my right shoulder wouldn't go away. I watched the other motorists inching for space in the congestion. Teeth gritted. Faces taut. Nerves strained.

This was becoming the norm, yet none of us could quite get used to it. We were all hanging on to our sanity by a thin, fraying thread. But could we even acknowledge that?

I was a civil servant. It was my job to serve the people. Not for me the luxury of losing hope. But times were bad, not just out here but in the institutions that were supposed to be holding everything together. I was part of that but I no longer felt like I belonged.

I had to do something. I just wasn't sure what.

Whistleblower murdered in her home.

What had I done with that newspaper?

I slammed on the brakes.

An accident up ahead was adding to the usual long-weekend traffic. Three cars. Two men and a woman (she looked like the whistleblower from the paper – what was her name?). They argued while a tow-truck driver, with thick hairy legs revealed by tight-fitting shorts, hitched one of the cars to his truck with the fervent glee of a school-yard bully.

The country was a mess.

The radio host was discussing exactly this with two guests. A man with bad sinuses, and a woman who spoke in a sharp shrill voice that constantly guillotined the words of the others. Loadshedding. Potholes. Mismanagement. Poor service delivery. Indifferent policing. Corruption. State-owned entities. Ever-increasing crime. Slain whistleblowers.

I switched the radio off.

The music from the car alongside intruded on my senses. Britney Spears. 'Hit Me Baby One More Time.' The driver was a chubby guy who couldn't possibly have a job, certainly not one that paid well, judging by his grey sweaty T-shirt, not to mention his taste in music.

I rolled up my window. It barely helped. We inched forward but it felt like we were going backwards.

I had needed a good performance review, but I had known all along that it wasn't likely to go well. Barnabas Rivombo didn't care about performance; he cared about loyalty. Fairness versus loyalty. What is unfair to the masses is totally fine with the ruling minority. Who was I loyal to?

Was he really onto me? What did he know?

Whistleblower murdered in her home.

A squinting beggar stalked slowly between the cars. He held a placard with the words: *all it takes is a smile*. If that were really the case, he wouldn't be on the streets begging. If he really believed his words, he wouldn't be looking so hopeless. *What did he know?* His hair, face and

clothing were covered in a layer of black as if he slept in a coalmine. At what point, down the sliding slope of poverty, do you stop caring about your appearance?

We made eye contact. I quickly looked away, but it was too late. He stopped at my window. I tried to ignore him. My hands tightened around the steering wheel. What was taking so long? The beggar waved. My neck stiffened. He moved into view, close to leaning on my car, hands clasped together in the beggar's prayer. *All it takes is a smile.*

Whistleblower murdered in her home.

In that picture, Gabriella Simelane – that was her name – had been smiling as if she had nothing to worry about. As self-conscious as someone receiving an unexpected gift.

I ignored the beggar – him and his advice. His problems weren't my problems. Were they?

Could I ignore my own problems?

I was fooling myself.

We were all ignoring the bigger problems.

Whistleblower murdered in his home.

We were all fooling ourselves.

The lights in my street were all out. During loadshedding it didn't matter whether you lived in a fancy neighbourhood or informal settlement. Despair was blackness everywhere.

I slowed down as I approached the house. A large black SUV was parked on the grass in front of my gate, facing in my direction. I didn't recognise the car. I figured it must have been one of my neighbours' visitors. In a world full of uncontrollable frustrations, the last thing one needed was inconsiderate neighbours. I was too tired for all this.

The SUV's lights came on as I reached the driveway. I shielded my eyes with my hand. The lights stayed bright. I hooted but still the car's lights glared back like an approaching UFO. Squinting and turning my head away, I pulled up into the driveway. I watched in the rear-view mirror as the gate closed slowly behind me.

What an idiot. What's wrong with people?

But I was too tired for drama. For a moment I just sat in the car in my garage. This power outage was unscheduled. I checked my phone. The neighbours were sharing their opinions on our street group:

@Kelly: Anyone else without electricity?

@Mdu: Loadshedding again.

@Margaret: This isn't loadshedding. Lights should have been back 45 mins ago.

@Kelly: Thanks, Margaret.

@ Margaret: Lots of areas affected.

Margaret had uploaded a letter from the municipality explaining the outage.

@Mdu: Anyone log a call?

Two others uploaded the loadshedding schedule.

@Kelly: No need, Mdu. Many areas affected. Might be until 2moro.

@Sarah: Hi Everyone, we don't have lights at # 45. Anyone know what's happening?

It just never ended with the neighbours. I never participated. Just observed. Not that anything useful ever came from doing that either.

The sound of generators rattled through the evening air as if we were in some refugee camp on the outskirts of yet another war-ravaged city in some godforsaken country. I didn't own a generator, choosing an inverter instead. I didn't even have solar panels, thinking that would mean accepting that things would never be right again. Maybe I was just being naïve – the evidence was clear. I fumbled through the dark, using my phone as a torch. The inverter was dead. I had forgotten to charge it. Definitely bed time.

When I got to my room upstairs, I was blinded again by bright lights from outside. The SUV – I could tell by the loud engine – had turned to face my house. What the hell?

The driver revved as if deliberately trying to get my attention. Smoke belched from the back of the vehicle like steam from a bull's nostrils. The car didn't move. It looked ready to bulldoze the front gate. I realised that as I stood at the upstairs window the driver of the SUV would probably have a clear view of me. I pulled the curtains closed, dropping my phone in the process.

I bent down on one knee. My heart pounded in my chest. *Boom-boom*. What the hell was I doing? A sharp pain twisted beneath my ribs. Now I was getting spooked in my own house.

Boom-boom.

When I opened the curtain again, it was complete blackness outside.

Boom-boom.

The SUV was gone.

Later that night, unable to sleep, I sat on my couch in contemplation. My living room was spacious. The walls were lined with books. The artwork was of nature: paintings of landscapes and plants, and sculptures of birds and animals. The colours were tranquil. This was supposed to be my place of peace.

My phone lit up with a message from my sister:

*Ndileka Ntaka: It would be great to see you over Easter. It's time.
We miss you, mntasekhaya. Please call me back.*

I didn't respond.

Sometimes, I wondered how much of a choice I really had in everything that had happened. I mean, I could have ignored what I had found, pretended not to see it at all. Maybe somebody else would have made the same discoveries. The reality, though, was that I wasn't the only person who knew. Everybody did. The question was: Why weren't any of them doing anything about it?

Because they had families, that's why. Spouses. Kids. Relatives. Responsibilities. Valid reasons to be selfish. I didn't have any of those. Was that what made me different?

I could have left the company as soon as I found out. Sought employment elsewhere. Some people had even expressed surprise at my decision to work in the public sector in the first place. Eighteen years. They said it was a waste of my education and background. They said I was crazy. Said I didn't belong there. I was supposed to be better than that. But weren't the privileged obliged to make a difference?

I never considered myself a patriot – that seemed too closely associated with overzealousness and exclusionary attitudes and behaviours. I did consider myself a responsible citizen, though. I voted in every election, doing my part for democracy. And I was willing to go above and beyond by working in the civil service.

The reality was that there was nowhere to hide from it any more – all the problems. Even if I had some cushy job in the private sector, one worthy of my private-school education, I'd still be living in a country with rolling power cuts, water shortages, mismanagement in state institutions and growing corruption, all backdropped by an insidious crime rate that had us all living in permanent fear.

This was what I was thinking that evening, sitting on my couch in my peaceful living room, working through the files I had been sneaking out of the office as evidence for the past few months. The institution was so

outdated that we still relied on paper files, stored in boxes and storerooms that took up too much space.

One way or another, everything led back to Barnabas Rivombo. He, and many others like him, had strong ties to the ruling party and, as a result, were completely disregarding the public good in the name of self-interest. It didn't matter that their decisions were destroying a once proud company. All that seemed to matter was correcting past wrongs by committing new sins. They didn't seem to care that being a civil servant meant attending to the struggles of all, not just the ones you identified with. What they were doing was simply exacerbating the existing divisions in the country.

Now they were making this my problem. I had little choice, really. What else was I supposed to do? Was this true patriotism, responding to a national call? Or was it treason? I had been careful in my investigation, all the while collecting evidence and trying to figure out what best to do with it. Someone had to save the country from itself. Maybe I could set an example and encourage others? Maybe.

Barnabas Rivombo couldn't possibly be onto me. But the disastrous performance review had raised some doubts. Was it possible that he did know? And, if he did, what was he going to do about it? Which of us would act first?

I needed a shower. Badly. Nice scalding water. To tenderise the flesh. To open the pores. To detox and breathe. I would probably stay in there, head down, until the hot water ran out. After moisturising my skin, I would collapse on the bed and sleep away my problems – at least until morning.

Wrapped only in a towel, holding a battery-operated LED light, I peeked out the window one last time to make sure I was safe. Generators hummed. Voices prattled on. Someone was passing in the street. The neighbourhood security guard was singing to himself. Everything seemed fine. There was no SUV and I felt silly for considering that it might be back. There was nothing to worry about.

Except ...

This is South Africa. There is always something to worry about.

I turned and flipped the tap in the shower. Nothing. Deep inside the walls, the pipes gurgled and choked, but not a drop came out. Unscheduled water outage.

The neighbourly chat group were already on it:

@Mdu: We should take this up with the mayor.

@Nicole: This is ridiculous. It's only been back 2 days.

@Grant: Expect this to get worse. Country has gone to the dogs.

@Nicole: How many times a day? Mdu, aren't you a ward councillor or something?

@Margaret: He's a lawyer.

@Nicole: Even better!

@Charlotte: Help us file a case against the province.

@Nicole: Against the state!

@Grant: Where did you study, buddy?

@Mdu: I'm actually a paralegal.

@Kelly: What's the difference?

I just couldn't with this group. Still wrapped in a towel, I paced up and down trying to figure out what to do next. I could boil pool water on the gas stove and wash in the basin. The idea was depressing. It was bad enough having to do that every other morning, but at night too? I would just have to go to bed smelly and slathered in misery.

I don't know how she did it, but she always seemed to know. I so wish this was the only part of my story that mattered: *her*. The only person who always seemed to be there for me (besides the sister I wasn't talking to at the moment). I was about to put my head down on the pillow when my phone rang.

'What's wrong?' she said.

'Emily. I thought you'd left already.'

'Just tell me.' She was trying to keep her voice down.

'Everything's fine. Where are you?'

She paused. 'We leave tomorrow. Meet me.'

'When?'

'Five. The park.'

That was in just under six hours.

'I'll be there.'

I didn't sleep.

It was windy the next morning. Branches groaned and leaves rustled. There were no chirping birds. No witnesses to tell tales or sing their stories.

It was still dark when I left the house. It wasn't far to the park. I jogged at a steady pace. The wind blew in my face, but I pushed against the resistance. I passed a couple of shoals of keen cyclists. They didn't greet. Neither did I.

Emily was already sitting on the bench when I arrived. Hands in her lap, looking at the ground, she was as beatific as a Byzantine artwork. She stood up to hug me. Her embrace was as tight as her outfit. Her kiss steadied me under the rustling leaves. Strands of brown hair blew across her face.

We were alone.

I wished it could always have been this way.

'I couldn't sleep,' she said, brushing a piece of her hair behind an ear. 'What's happening?'

'It's just work,' I said. 'The usual.'

She knew some things about Barnabas Rivombo – the little that I had told her, anyway. I had shared some information with her before the changes at Arms-Tech. Now I updated her about the bad performance review. But not about my investigation. She knew nothing of that. I didn't want her to carry this burden with me. But she always knew when something wasn't right.

'You could work anywhere you wanted,' she said, her tone giving away a subtle hint of disappointment at being kept at bay. 'My contacts could help you. I can help you.'

'I can handle it.'

She regarded me silently for a moment. 'You don't look so good.'

I didn't feel much better either. 'How long are you away for?'

'Three days. Bruce's parents haven't seen the kids in a while.'

Double heartbeat. *Boom-boom*. Chest pain on the left. 'You're not looking too good yourself. Has he done something to you?'

She didn't respond – not in words, anyway. What she *did* was much more enlightening. It was the reason I would always do anything to spend even a few minutes with her. She took my hands and brought them to her face, allowing the backs of my hands to brush against her cheeks. Then she placed them around her waist. She laid her head on my shoulder; pulled me in tight.

The leaves rustled all around us like hands offering applause.

We didn't need to speak.

We could feel each other's heartbeats. *Boom-boom. Boom-boom.*

Minutes felt like hours. Every second counted. Every heartbeat mattered. If only we could stop time. I wished this could be forever.

'I have to go,' she said.

'I know,' I replied, the corners of my eyes stinging.

'You should see your sister. It's been too long.'

I didn't respond.

'Don't be alone, Maks.'