

from what my brothers did, but that's not how it works, not with us. My brothers' sins are my sins.

"So this isn't about the money?" I blurt out, excruciating pain and all.

Mithunzi and Siba look at each other. Mashiya is looking at me squirming. He's enjoying this, I know, but it's Mashiya, and his face is incapable of displaying joy. And he looks offended by my question.

"Do you know who found my brother's body along the highway?"

I'd know if I cared ...

"Some vagabond, a crazy man who tried to wake him up from the dead before his sanity returned for two minutes and told him to flag down a car. He told them to stop and see his great discovery. He was laughing, excited.

"Zwakele died with his eyes open, Skhova. Mqhele was looking him in the eye when he shot him. Do you understand that? Your brother took something away from us, and today we are going to take something away from him."

I'm dead. That something he is talking about taking is definitely me.

"I wasn't there, Mashiya. I tried to stop them."

He laughs, but it isn't really a laugh, just a slight sound of satisfaction lasting on his face for one second. "A mere threat of death, some little blood on the carpet, and you are ready to sell your brothers out? I thought you all would die for each other," he says.

That's not what I'm doing. I was just trying to explain that—

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"Anyway, it's not you we want. You are fucked up, always trying to kill yourself, running to small towns and shit. What I want is what you can never replace."

"Is it money? You can have it all."

He clicks his tongue and looks at both his brothers. They look equally angry. I've stopped listening to the pain in my thighs; I can't feel them any more.

"The problem with you, you and your brothers, is that you thought money was going to do something for you. That's why you double-crossed us. But look at you now. You are worse off."

These snide remarks that he keeps making are starting to piss me off. "What do you want?"

That brief smile again. He's laughing at me. They all are!

"Who is that?" he asks.

There's a car outside. We hear the engine going off and a door closing.

"Open for them. Let whoever it is come in, and then shoot them," he says to Siba.

I'd get up and run to the door if I could.

Siba leaves the room with a gun in his hand. It's my gun.

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THERE ARE A lot of things that are not human about a man, things biology has never bothered to explain, things thousands of years of men walking this planet have never been able to fix. So we stay who we are and do what we do.

But a man who isn't moved by a woman's tears? A woman on her knees, scared, begging for her life, speaking of a child, vowing to do whatever is asked of her as long as she gets to see her child again? That man is a man who isn't a man any more.

I'm sitting here, bleeding and helpless, almost glad that I know what they really want and that it isn't one of us in this room.

The moment they leave I will call my brothers. I will tell them everything and immediately get in the car and speed back home. They will not touch Niya as long as I live, as long as all of us live, and if we die trying to stop them, our sons will continue to fight to the finish. They are us, our sons. We've been in denial about it all this time, but we all know.

This war has only just begun.

"I came here to talk to Mqoqi. That's it. I don't know who you are and why all of this is happening, but please, just let me go. I have a daughter, she's only six."

She's been explaining this since she got down on her knees.

Siba walked in here with her, a gun to her head. She was the last person I expected to see. She looked at me sitting here on this couch with bleeding thighs, and I looked down because I knew I couldn't do anything for her. She had walked right into a slaughterhouse.

They pushed her to this couch and she sat right next to me, the three men seated on the coffee table facing us.

I had a few seconds of wondering what she'd come here to talk to me about, and I got a little bit excited because she wouldn't come all the way here unless she'd figured it was all a mistake, that I hadn't touched Zothile. But then again, I remembered, this is Lale. She is confrontational, a wild cat. She probably came here to beat and claw the life out of me.

And these psychopaths, they already know who she is, otherwise they would have shot her the moment she stepped into this house.

It took Mthunzi calling her by name and asking where Zothile is for her to slide down off the couch to her knees on the floor, hands clasped together like she was praying. "Don't touch my child," she said with a trembling voice, before she started wailing.

I would have told her to stay composed if I could. The more desperate she seems, the more fun these men will have

with us. They won't kill us, though. They will break us even more than we are already broken.

Mthunzi gets up from the coffee table and stands in front of her. He was always the nice one, the one who insisted we did everything we did without hurting the people, but that was after he beat that Chinese man half-blind. He was smart; the one I was closest to. Of the four wives his father had, his mother was the third, and she had him, only him, and she smothered him into a soft boy. But he told me once those years ago that his mother was the real love of his father's life, that his father was soft on her. He never hit her like the other wives and he let him stay in school longer than his other brothers.

But after his father died, under some mysterious food-eating circumstances, he, Mthunzi, didn't run back to his paternal home with his mother. He stuck with his brothers when they had no choice but to become the men of the house. He could have gone with his mother but that's not how it works. A man has to prove himself. He has to carry his father's name forward, respect his surname, and he can't do that hiding under his mother's skirt.

I watch him unzip his jeans and feel every bone in my body shivering.

"Mthunzi." I speak.

He looks at me, and I don't know that look in his eyes. It isn't him. It isn't the look of the boy who was just like me once, supposedly different from and better than the people around us. Us two, the boys who spoke about how this life wasn't the life for us. The book boys. The boys who spoke

more about our mothers than we did of our fathers. The weak and soft boys who spoke about running away when we were alone together.

He moves closer to Lale's face, dick out and face hard.

I want to stand up and fight. I want to shoot him, all of them! And I want to die!

He rubs it on her forehead a couple of times and grabs her by the neck when she doesn't raise her face.

"Fyi wena sfebe," he says, pressing her face onto him.

This is not who we are. It has never been who we are. Yes, we've stolen and killed most of our lives but this ... I attempt to stand but Mashiya is already standing behind me again, arm around my neck.

Mthunzi's hand is clasped on Lale's afro, his dick pressing on her mouth.

I close my eyes. Mashiya slaps me into opening them.

I can't watch this! But I can hear it, Lale crying and saying no, speaking of her daughter, Mthunzi slapping her and calling her sfebe, threatening to kill her and that "bloody child". Telling her to suck his dick or die.

I want to escape this, take my mind to another place, but my mind won't leave her here, not when I can hear her giving up and adhering.

My eyes are open and watching in horror as Mthunzi tightens his hand in her hair and pushes himself in and out of her mouth.

Something inside of me dies when he pulls her up and throws her on the coffee table, on her stomach, and forces her legs open.

... (v) ...

They leave my gun on top of her. She's still lying on the coffee table on her stomach.

We don't speak. Her lying on her stomach on the coffee table with my gun on her back, tears just streaming, no sound. And me still sitting, blood all over me. We don't say a word for what seems like forever.

I've seen a lot of things in my life. I've done a lot of things in my life. And tonight, I did this.

She gets up after what feels like hours. I think maybe she is going to call the police. But I don't know what that is: where I come from we don't call the police, we are smarter than them.

She leaves the room without saying a word. Seconds later I hear the shower running.

I wait. Because I can't stand up, and even if could and I went to her, what would I say?

... (v) ...

I didn't think she'd come back, but she does. She doesn't speak, just grabs my arms and drags me out of the sitting room to my office.

She smells nice, of that shower gel that smells like grass and cherries. I want to tell her I'm sorry, that I would have protected her with my life, if I could only have got up and

fought.

She places me on the chair in front of my computer.

"Where is that gun?" I ask.

She tells me it's in the second drawer of this desk I'm sitting at. "We will talk tomorrow," she says.

It's already tomorrow. The clock says so.

"I know you didn't do anything to Zothile. I went to that old white woman. They slit her throat. The dogs too. They were all lying on her chest, dead. Faizel was dead before he reached the highway. I came here because I thought you could protect me."

I want to tell her that my brothers will find them and that they will make them suffer. That it won't just be them, that it will be everyone, their children, their everything will die ... But I don't say any of that ...

"Can you brew me some coffee? Please? Use the beans in the dark brown packet. Sprinkle cinnamon on top."

I expect her to be shocked. She isn't. She goes and makes the coffee.

My computer password is MAHLOMU, and yes, it's in capital letters because that's how loud she has been in my mind since the first time I saw her.

The Microsoft Word document pops up on the screen.

Chapter 30.

I delete everything I had typed under the heading.

I type, "In the end I was a coward. Just a boy ..."