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"IT'S US, BABA."

I must be dreaming.

"You're bleeding on the duvet."

His eyes are on the cream duvet cover where there is a large blood spot, still wet. They are not on the gun on in my hand.

"Lwandle?"

How are they here?

I shove the gun back under the pillow quickly and reach for the bottle of water and container of painkillers on the night stand.

I took three of the pills last night right after I dragged myself to this bed and realised the only way I could sleep was on my back. The pills must have knocked me out completely, which is why I slept through these boys coming into my house and all the way to my bedside.

I try to sit up but the pain I'm feeling forces me back down.

“What happened to you?” Sbani asks.

He looks good, far better than he looked the last time I saw him, leaving Mbuba with suitcases to go to KwaSizabantu, a rehab in a church in KwaMaphumulo. Lwandle drove him there, like he has driven him to every rehab he has ever been to.

I knew Nkosana wanted to do it himself this time, probably because he believed things were going to change, but Lwandle insisted, and they took Mvelo with them.

“It’s nothing, bafana, nothing. What are you doing here? How did you come in?”

The two of them sitting here next to my bed, on my kitchen chairs, remind me so much of me and Mpande: identical yet so different.

I’m trying to act normal, suppressing the need to moan out loud because of the pain I’m feeling. I don’t want them to see me like this.

Lwandle looks different, like he’s a grown man. He’s wearing pants and a shirt, not those bucket hats he used to wear all the time.

“You’re bleeding.” Sbani again.

I can feel where the pain is coming from: one of the stitches must have come loose. I’ll need to dress and bandage it, but I don’t want them to see that.

“What are you boys doing here? How did you find this place?”

That’s what’s important.

“What happened to you baba? Did someone—”

“I fell off a bike,” I lie, and I can see they believe me.

Of all people, the boys are the last thing I expected to wake up to. Asking them how they gained access to my house is stupid of me: Mpande and I taught them how to when they were kids, and we made them promise not to tell Hlomu.

I have plans for today. I asked Faizel, since he is the only thing I have in this dead town, to drive me to the Karoo to see Gabby. I need to get her out of this province.

“Don’t!”

He’s already pulled the duvet off me. The horror that are my thighs is staring back at them.

“Are you sure falling from a bike is all that happened?” Sbani asks. I’d expect this question, and the fierceness with which it is being asked, from Lwandle. Sbani never wants to know, because he’s known too much since he was a kid. He came to me for a lot of things, and when I wasn’t there he went to Qhawe. We share a lot in common, me and him, mostly things about Nkosana and that he has never understood us.

“Help me up.”

Strange as it is that they are here, a part of me is happy to see them, to see anything that reminds me I have a family.

What I need now is to pee, and a shower, and to throw these bloody sweatpants and duvet cover in the washing basket.

“I’ll make you coffee,” Lwandle says. He is the only person in this family who shares a love for coffee with me, and the one who makes my clothes disappear, until he posts pictures on social media wearing my sneakers and hoodies.

“You should be in a wheelchair,” Sbani says as he wraps the bandage around my thigh. It isn’t bad. Just one stitch has

come loose. The others are already healing and the painkillers have settled in.

This house feels nothing like it did ten days ago. I miss Zothile and I miss the fallacy that was me and her mother. All I wanted was to have something of my own, and they gave that to me for a while.

"There were only eight eggs left, baba," Lwandle says, placing a plate on the kitchen table. Eight eggs and one loaf of bread between these two boys is nothing. There are also tomatoes and cheese on the plate.

I don't know anything about those. Lale was the one who made sure we had all that stuff in this house. She's the one who left the house.

"So, boys, why are you here?"

They look at each other. I expect Lwandle to speak and Sbani to chip in when there's something that needs to be emphasised. They've always been like that.

"When are you coming home?" Sbani asks.

Again, it isn't like him to even care. And I don't have an answer, so I focus on the plate in front of me. It's not that I don't want to go back home, it's that I can't, and that maybe I will never be able to go back because the way things are going, my next home could be a prison cell.

"So you came here to ask me that? Did Nkosana send you here?"

Sbani shakes his head. It's good to see his face not changing at the mention of his father's name. Maybe they are at a good place now, I don't know. I don't know anything about my own family any more.

"No, we found you ourselves. They don't know we are here. But you have to come home, baba." Lwandle. He looks distressed.

I'd tell them everything. I'd tell them I'm currently walking around with the label of child rapist. They'd probably believe I didn't do it but I know the first thing they'd do is call home and make my brothers come here to sort it out.

"Give me a few months," I say.

This thing will eventually come out, that I know for sure, but I'll try to keep it under wraps for as long as I can.

"You have to come back," Sbani says.

I'm lost.

"Mami kicked baba out. He's living with Bab'Nqoba now and he doesn't want to move back home. He's losing his mind but that's not why we are here. It's not for him." Lwandle.

Lwandle and Mqhele's relationship has always been rocky. Since the day he walked into his bedroom and found him with a gun to his head, he's never looked at him the same. But that isn't a big thing because we weren't going to sit him down and tell Mqhele to apologise to him for what he almost made him see. We expected him to get over it, to be a man about it.

"Mqhele will go back home. They are just going through some things. They'll be fine. Did you speak to Nkosana about this?"

Lwandle puts his fork down and takes a deep breath. "No. He doesn't care. They moved back to Mbuba with mom. They're there planting cabbages and buying goats every week. We are lucky if they even answer our phone calls."

We all knew Nkosana would get to this point one day, where he lives his life the way he wants and leaves all of us to solve our own problems. But I hate that it's now, where we all need him the most.

"Mqhele will not hurt Hlomu," I half-lie.

"He beat her once, didn't he?" Lwandle.

"Who told you that?" They were never supposed to know about that; we made sure.

"We know." Sbani.

This is not how things were supposed to be going forward, not after all that shit we went through trying to fix ourselves.

"And I think mami is going to divorce him. He'll hurt her if she does."

Hlomu wouldn't do that, not now, not ever. They will sort things out, they always do.

"You must come home and handle this, because if you don't, we will handle it ourselves," says Lwandle.

Whatever that means... These boys have never known what handling something is; they have never had to work for anything in their lives.

Under normal circumstances I'd be on my way to Joburg right now, but I have my own problems and they are bigger than Mqhele and Hlomu.

"Do you have a lighter, baba?" Lwandle asks.

What is this now?

He stands up and pulls a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. "Why do you look shocked? We grew up jumping over guns and dead bodies, me smoking isn't a catastrophe," he says, grabbing a lighter he's just spotted in a vase on top

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of the coffee table, and going out through the sliding door.
It's Sam and Faizel has just parked outside.
How I'm going to explain him to these boys, I have no
idea.

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EACH TIME I have entered this gate, which has been twice in the past five years, I have been hopeful. On each occasion, I came here for love and solutions, to be listened to and to be told I can go back and fix and live and survive, maybe even to be loved.

I never announce that I'm coming, but the door is always opened for me. But not today. Today even the little fluffy dogs are barking at me, like they don't know me. I'm not sure why they are outside because they are allowed to roam around the house.

There is no fence and no gate. She says this place is safer than anywhere in South Africa, unlike her old house in Joburg where a 14-year-old boy broke in three times before she even knew he was there.

I've knocked four times.

Faizel says we must peep through the windows to check if there is anybody home. The boys are just standing there with their arms folded.

I didn't really brief them about why we were coming here and that's because we spent the whole trip with Faizel complaining about me making him drive five hours when he could be in court doing work that pays his bills. It's funny because I know he is overcharging me. I know he will be sending me an invoice for this, and whatever hours we will be spending together today.

I have put my trust and life in the hands of a fat stranger with a long beard and an overwhelming personality. I don't know anything about him except that he got me out of jail and that he isn't exactly a top lawyer by my standards, and that he is here only because he knows I can pay him. The fact that he has no conscience is not surprising. He is a lawyer: it's that trait that makes them good at their job.

I would have driven myself, but I have to take painkillers every three hours or so because I'm a man walking around with stab wounds. Or I would have asked the boys to drive me, but Faizel was already in my house and I had to explain him.

He introduced himself as my lawyer before I did. And then he told the boys why I need a lawyer before I could stop him.

Lwandle said there was no way I did that. Sbani didn't say anything.

"Did you see that?" Faizel asks. He looks startled.

I didn't see anything.

"Someone peeped through the curtain," he says.

Well, then ...

We hear the key turning and the door is pulled open. It's

MESS

her. She's alive. That's all I came here for.

"Don't worry about him," I says when she looks at Faizel with fear. Big and scruffy as he is, he is harmless.

The boys, she smiles at them.

I know something is wrong when I walk in. All her windows and curtains are closed and the dogs that she treats like her children have been exiled to the yard. She also doesn't look like herself. Her eyes are all over the place and she's in her pyjamas and a robe. It's just after 1pm. We left Concordia at 8.30am, much to Faizel's disapproval.

I might as well get right to it. "I got arrested, Gabby."

"I know. They came here. They took Muffin."

That explains why he wasn't barking at me outside, but to be honest, I'm not concerned about one of her dogs being taken, I want to know what they did to her.

"This is Faizel, my lawyer."

She looks at him from head to toe. Faizel is one of those people you have to explain, but there's no time for that now. Besides, she is not that interested in him. It's the boys. She is asking if they want something to eat.

"Your father keeps coming back over and over," she says, looking at the boys.

Yes, we know, but we aren't here for that. We need to talk in private, just the two of us. She knows, so she leads me to the back door and out into the back yard.

Faizel is having wine – strange because it's Friday and he whined all the way here about having to go pray at 1pm because he's Muslim.

Her plants and flowers don't look like they usually do,

which means she hasn't been out here in a while.

"Why did you bring those two?" she asks as we stroll among the plants in what used to be her place of peace.

"Who? The boys? They came to beg me to go home. Things are falling apart over there and—"

"They aren't boys. Those are grown men," she says.

"I know but they are my children. They will always be boys to me." Besides, I didn't come here for her to be fascinated by Sbani and Lwandle, and how much they look like Sbopho and all of us. I thought her obsession with my family ended the day she met me. I want to know what happened here while I was in jail.

"I recognised them the moment I opened my eyes, those freckles and ginger hair. They did the same thing you did: stand over my bed and stare at me. What did you do to them, Mkhokhi? Why would they come here?"

Now I know exactly who she is talking about. The part I still don't understand, though, is why they are coming for me. They know where to find all my brothers. Mhlaba did say I was a sitting duck out here.

"Did they do anything to you?" I ask, because if they touched her ...

"I'm 71 years old. They didn't rape or beat me. They just wanted you to know that they got to me."

Who the fuck holds a grudge for this long? And besides, it's not me who fucked them up, it's Mqhele.

I always thought Mahlubi would go for Hlomu to get back at him, now why the hell are they here?

If ever there was a time where I needed to call my brothers,

it is now. The Bhunganes aren't like us. They weren't intelligent enough to rise from the taxi rank and cash heists to corner offices. They are everywhere, in jail cells, at the bottom of the barrel, in places where they don't have to worry about reputation and children.

"They cut Muffin's throat, and they wouldn't even give me his corpse afterwards."

She looks like she's about to cry, so clearly she doesn't understand that at this point a dead dog is nothing compared to what these guys are capable of.

"It's them. I don't know how they found me and I don't know what they want." I'm lying. I know exactly what they want. It's revenge. We've always known that one day they'll come back for us.

Of all my brothers, I'm the one they shouldn't care less about. But then again, I'm the weakest link: everyone has used me to get to my family. Everyone. Lerato, Amanda, and now these weird-looking fuckers Ngcobo got us entangled with. And I shouldn't even be blaming Ngcobo because they were good for us. Everyone needs stupid people in their corner.

"I didn't touch the child, Gabby." That's what I'm worried about. Mahlubi and Mthunzi and Mashiya and Siba are coming for me but I need to clear this up with her first.

Unlike us, they aren't all from one woman's womb, but they are from one testicle and they all look the same. Half of them are dead anyway, and besides, yes, I shot Lesedi's husband dead, but it's not like they didn't know that things like stealing millions had the possibility of ending up with

some people dead. It's just that none of us ever thought Qhawe would come to this desert province and meet the love of his life. It was that, Qhawe's love for that woman, that gave them leverage over us.

You'd think Naledi was just some woman one of my brothers came to love but whoa! That woman changed everything! Gugu and her mother issues and Nqobile's ghost not wanting to leave us alone was hectic but Naledi – she brought the Bhunganes back to our turf.

The funny thing is that none of these women know this.

"I know you didn't touch the child, because I know you, Mkhokhi." Gabby says, interrupting my thoughts.

At least she believes me, which is more than I can say about Faizel, my own lawyer.

"Call your brothers. They can sort all of this out," she says.

I'm not calling them. I've come this far on my own.

"They are not going to help me, Gabby, not with this ... this thing I'm accused of."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about these men coming to my house and killing my dog. What do you think they will do when they come back again?"

She's right. I can't take them on, not by myself. I'd tell her that my being stabbed wasn't just prisoners having fun with the new meat – they were sent to me, and I know exactly who sent them – but I don't want to scare her even more.

"They won't come back. I'll protect you." I don't even have a plan but in times like these the only choice you have is to give assurance.

They will torture and kill her, I know they will, because

that's how they operate. You know how we, the mighty Zulus, walk around like we aren't scared of anyone in this world? That's a lie. The Bhunganes are the ones that have had us looking over our shoulders for years. It's not the taxi industry or the enemies we have created along the way we are so hell-bent on protecting our kids and wives from, it's the knowledge that Mahlubi and his freckles could appear at any time, and they are people with nothing to lose.

"What do you think about coming to Concordia with me? To live with me for a few days?"

She frowns, the frown I definitely know means no. "Call your brothers, Mkhokhi," she says, and I know she's done.

How do I even explain her to my brothers? That I went and looked for a mother in a woman I once robbed? They know her as the white woman who took me in when I was living on the streets. They don't know that she's been in my life ever since. So I can't go back and tell them that she knows everything about me and about them and all the things we've done, that she told me numerous times to get over what I think I have for Hlomu, and that she insists it's not love, it's just me wanting to be Mqhele, because, of all my brothers, he is the one closest to my heart.

She says I mirror him, and that it's because he is the only person who has ever made me believe I was important. But I think she's crazy to think that. All I've ever wanted was to be my own person, have my own things, and make my own decisions.

Lale was supposed to be that for me, but now she's gone. She took whatever she could from me and left, and this time

it's my freedom, my power and the little good that was left in me.

... (S) ...

We have to go, Faizel says. We have to leave because he left his father alone in his house, and he has dementia, so if he doesn't take his medication, he could end up dead on the street.

But... "Where are they?" I ask.

He points outside at the wendy house. Gabby turned it into a dark room when she moved here, and made it look exactly like the one she had at her old house. The door is open and I know they are in here.

The pictures of Nomafu and Sbopho are still on the wall. I don't have to explain to Lwandle and Sbani who the man is. "That's your grandmother," I say, because I know they will ask.

They have never seen a picture of her before.

I want to explain why these pictures are here and how Gabby got to have them but Sbani is already pulling one down from the wall. Lwandle joins him, pulling each and every one of them down.

I'd do something if I wasn't on crutches.

Gabby is standing on the doorstep, watching. The boys walk past her without saying a word, framed pictures under their arms.

We dug up bones and let the rondavel burn. These boys shouldn't be behaving like this, not after all that.

... ☺ ...

I offer to drive because he is definitely drunk from that wine, but he says better a drunk man than a man with wobbly legs behind the wheel.

The boys are sitting in the back, silent, and I'm not about to ask one of them to drive.

I accept the risk and sit with my forehead pressed against the passenger-seat window. My heart and mind are with Gabby. She is a defenceless old woman and I'm a selfish man. I am here, in this car, leaving her to die when I have all the means to save her.

"I think we should ask Gabby to come and testify for you in mitigation of sentence. She seems like she'd do anything for you." Faizel.

Mitigation? "Why are you talking about mitigation? And sentence? I'm paying you to make sure we don't get to that part."

He clears his throat and looks ahead at the quiet road. "I'm thinking ahead here, Zulu. We have to be ready for anything."

This man is going to lead me straight to jail. It's clear now.

"We can have the charge reduced from molestation to grooming. There's no evidence of any sexual thing, you know ..."

Grooming? What the hell is he talking about? "I did not do anything to her, Faizel!" What the hell is this shit?

"I hear you. It's just that we are talking about a child here,

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and once something like this is attached to your name, you are fucked.”

Yesses!

“The old woman said there’s no way you could have done this. What’s the deal with her anyway? Who is she?” he asks.

They must have spoken when I went to the kitchen to take my pills.

“Nobody,” I say. She’s hardly nobody.

“Are you telling me that we drove four hours to see a nobody? And four hours back ...?”

“I just came here to make sure she’s okay, that’s all. I used to work for her,” I lie.

Lying to your lawyer is never a good idea but, I mean ... it’s Faizel.

“What’s up with your father?” I ask. I need for us to leave Gabby alone.

“He’s sick man. He’s been sick for a while. I have to watch him all the time, make sure he takes his pills, otherwise he strips naked sometimes, and runs into the street, talking to himself. I’d take him to an institution but my mother would never forgive me for that.”

“Where is your mother?”

“Dead. She drank thirty pills seven years ago. I found her. I’m the one who found her,” he says and narrows his eyes.

“My father went into complete denial. He refused to accept that the woman he loved and treated so well throughout their marriage would have a reason to kill herself. I think that’s what drove him crazy. She was his world.”

Nobody can be anybody’s world. That’s what people fail

to understand.

"I'm an only child, and everybody thinks that's a great thing because you get all the attention and you get whatever you want, and, honestly, it's cool when you're still a child but once you grow up and your parents become a responsibility, you wish there was someone to share that responsibility with. Right now I'm stuck with my father. As long as he is the way he is, I can't do anything for myself. I'm 31 and I have no life whatsoever."

What? 31? He is freaking 31?

He notices my shock, and he laughs. "Don't let the beard fool you. And I wasn't always fat. Depression made me eat. But I'm good now. I'm on pills."

I have, time and time again, refused to take antidepressants. I don't understand why anyone would want to do that to themselves.

"Did your mother leave a note? At least to say why she chose to die?" I have never thought about leaving a note.

"No. And that was selfish of her. Because if she had, then my father would not have thought it was his fault. She had a bad childhood, my father knew that, that's why he over-loved her. He wanted her to forget, but you know, the shit we go through as children shapes who we become as adults. I guess it was always there with her, always coming back to torment her, until she got tired and wanted it to go away forever. It took her along with it. I'm telling you now, Zulu, you can't love a broken person. They don't believe they deserve it. So tell me about the child's mother. How did you end up with a shit woman like her?"

Lale isn't a shit woman. I'm a shit man. "It's a long story," I say.
"It's going to be an even longer story in court, Zulu."
Why does Faizel have to be so blunt, though?
"Do you trust her to come to your defence – that's if we even find her?"
Do I? I'm not sure any more. My thighs are aching again. I need to take painkillers.

It's 8pm when we drive through the gate.
I woke up ten minutes ago when the car hit a speed hump. I'm hungry, thirsty, and in pain.
Faizel's car is in the yard, right where we left it. On its windscreen there are three leaves, obviously picked from this tree in the yard.

Faizel must go! Now! "You don't have to put the car in the garage. Just park it here," I say.

He looks confused.

"Leave the car here, Faizel. I'll walk in." I don't have time to explain things to him.

He's still hesitant, but he listens and jumps in his red BMW 5 Series, which I know he will pay off with my money.

"Sbani, Lwandle, get in your car and drive. Call Nqoba and Mqhele, tell them Mahlubi found me."

"Who is Mahlubi, baba?"

"Get in the car and go, Sbani!"

The lights in the house are off, but I know as I approach the door that it is either me or Gabby, and that if I turn around and run, it will be Gabby.

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The three leaves were left there for me. It was always our thing, to park the car close to a tree because nobody would suspect leaves falling and landing on a windscreen meant anything. But three, just three: that's a message.

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I KNOW THIS house like the back of my hand, so I won't switch the lights on. What I don't know for sure is how many of them are here. But I know it isn't just one. I can feel their presence.

I drag myself across the kitchen and a memory of Lale sitting on that table and Zothile running up and down the passage flashes across my mind. I have never been this glad that they aren't here.

I sit down on the couch, stretching my legs to ease the pain. And I wait.

The light doesn't come on, but a torch shines in my face. I can't see the person shining it, but they can see me.

I hear footsteps approaching. There are two of them.

"A whole week and you still look like this? The suits and corner offices have turned you into weak men," he says.

It's Mthuzi. I'd recognise his voice anywhere, any time.

The light switches on and I see two of them in front of me. Siba still has that big gash on his cheek, patterning all

the way down to the side of his chin. They said he fell from a tree when he was a child, but he never went to hospital for it; his father refused, forced him to bear the pain until it healed, like a man. I've always believed that it had everything to do with how he turned out: too quiet, with a short fuse.

He is a perfect example of what makes a man, because a boy can only make it to being a real man by overcoming. Some go to the mountains to cut the foreskin and bleed the wound out; others, like me and these two here, had to learn not to fear blood. Were we ever really just boys? I don't know.

They've both grown. We were young when I last saw them and I can't say we parted on happy terms, and now here we are, meeting again on deadly terms.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, behind me. It's the third one, and judging by how I couldn't feel him behind me, it is definitely Mahlubi.

The hand is pressed hard on my shoulder, like maybe he is trying very hard to contain himself. I won't turn my head to look at him because if our eyes meet, he will see Mqhele, and I don't know if he'll be able to restrain himself at that moment.

"You look scared, Skhova," he says, still standing behind me.

I haven't been called that in a long time. Skhova. It's a name they used to call us to tease us because of our eyes. There have been many names. When we moved to Eshowe kids at school called us omagqamuza. That didn't last long, though: we laid down the rules soon enough.

And Mthunzi is right, I'm shit-scared. I have no plans

of fighting them: they'd end me in seconds. I have a gun in this house but it's hidden in a place I won't be able to reach now. Before last night, I had packed it and locked it away because I never thought I'd ever need it again, definitely not in Concordia.

I have so many questions, but I'm quiet because I don't know which one will set them off.

"So you left your mansion for this?" Siba.

My house back in Joburg is hardly a mansion. I hate big houses, I always have. I've never understood why my brothers live in those humongous houses.

The hand leaves my shoulder. He joins his brothers in front of me. It's not Mahlubi, it's Mashiya. He's gotten fat. He has a wedding band on. That's interesting because he was always the one that didn't give a shit about women. We all thought he was is'shimane, but no, he was all about money. He almost got all of us killed, twice, because of his greed.

I feel like he is the angriest here. He's looking at me like he's been waiting for this moment all his life.

He pulls the coffee table forward and sits on top of it, legs open, both his knees pressed on the couch, both my legs locked inside the space between them.

If they kill me, they know what will happen.

I'd say they wouldn't test Nkosana like that but I don't know them any more. I don't know where they have been and what they have become. Clearly, though, seeing as they came after me knowing I'm alone, they still know who we are - that's if we are still who we were before we dug up bones and had the top of our heads cut with razors.

Mashiya pulls my sweatpants to my knees very quickly. What man pulls another man's pants down like this?

I've only ever looked at the stitches in my thighs twice. Five lines: those men in prison stabbed me five times. I clench my teeth to stop myself from screaming, and the more I squirm, the harder he presses his fists on the stitches. He isn't talking, he's just watching me endure the pain.

I let out a groan when he pulls out a pocket-knife and starts picking out the stitches. I'm bleeding. He's looking at my face, not at the blood already dripping to the floor, landing on the beige carpet Amanda bought on one of her happy days. "Do you remember the night Mqhele pumped bullets into Zwakele's head?" he hisses, pulling another stitch out with the knife.

I don't. I wasn't there. It all happened at Nkosana's house, in the chair. Earlier that day I'd begged Mqhele not to do it, but Qhawe instructed me to leave him alone. He said the Bhunganes had to be taught a lesson.

I had not seen any of the Bhunganes since the day Mahlubi beat Mthunzi and I with a hosepipe for trying to rob those Chinese.

My brothers didn't bury Zwakele's body. They drove with it in Nqoba's car and dumped it along the M1 highway. It was out of respect, really: they wanted the Bhunganes to find it and take him home to be buried next to their father.

I wasn't there. I played no part in it – not physically, that is. But I guess they are here because never did they think we'd go that far.

I want to speak, to plead my case and to exclude myself