

# **THE DEATHLY OPULENCE**

Thumbi tugged at the massive iron gates. They flew open with a soft hiss. He retreated as his father's BMW X6 reversed out of the parking bay, onto the driveway and towards the gate.

His father rolled down the window, cast him a scornful glare, then, ramming a foot into the brakes, said,

“Go get ready for tomorrow. I want you to go to the village early morning.”

There was the unmistakable nonchalance in his father's voice and the scowl on his face did little to conceal his hatred for his only son.

The boy had not forgotten what his father had told him after Thumbi had failed his polytechnic entrance exam.

“You good for nothing nincompoop. You are a shame to the family, a bug in this household. You keep on failing. So, in a month's time, I'm taking you over to your grandmother's place. Perhaps you could do some farm work and get some brain.”

Indeed! Thumbi had never been a beloved kid. In his formative years, he had made no efforts to change this perception. He was a nosy boy, cheeky and constantly engrossed in antics that his teachers and parents loathed. He had failed his exams, all the time, and his affluent father had been his strongest critic. At some point, he had opted to change for the better. Yet the harder Thumbi tried, the more bleak it looked. Difficult. Undoable. He, miraculously, completed his high school education and scored a paltry D-.

He had begged his father to lend him capital so he could start a business. Open a butchery. Be a newspaper vendor. Operate a taxi. Anything. His father had scoffed at him, telling him that treasures were not just dished out to undeserving idiots like him. But Thumbi loved his father, and in spite of the mockery and a barrage of insults, he held on. His mother helped him plead. Thumbi's father did not budge.

The BMW X6's wheels hit the tarmac and the posh vehicle whooshed away gracefully. Thumbi watched it for a moment and smiled. The soft wind whipped against his face, and a feeling of relief swept through him. He grabbed the two gates, and his biceps flexed as he pushed them shut.

*Some chances only come once. This one time.*

Majengo is an expansive sprawl of shanties that spreads all the way from Nyeri town CBD to Chania River, a stretch of almost three kilometres. Infamous for all kinds of evil and christened by some ‘The Devil's Village’, Majengo has produced some of the most diehard criminals Nyeri

has ever known. Gituathi, Otis, Ndirangu, Wainaina, Bross. Even in broad daylight, unsuspecting pedestrians get mugged, and only the luckiest come out alive.

That Sunday afternoon, it was quiet. A rare, solemn serenity engulfed the entire Majengo. Seated inside a ramshackle building somewhere in the slum neighbourhood, Wako and Temu dialed the Master. The phone rang twice, and the Master's scruffy voice came booming through the earpiece.

"It is ready."

"Seventy five hundred, we agreed?"

There was hesitation. "Make it ten K."

Temu glanced at Wako and, after they had exchanged conspiratorial smiles, he said, "Deal!" Ten thousand shillings was a meagre return as compared to the profits they expected to rake in today.

"The car will be at the junction in five minutes," the Master said, and then hang up.

Just then, the phone beeped loudly with an incoming call. It was Derrick.

"Derrick?" Temu answered the call, excitedly.

"He is driving towards his office," a soft whisper announced. "He is in his BMW X6. Remember you have the directions and keys to his private office. You also have the code to his briefcase. Don't hurt him. I repeat- don't hurt him. Clear?"

"Clear, monsieur."

"One last thing," Derrick sounded a bit nervous. "The man doesn't look like he is in his best mood. So, handle him with care."

"Clear."

The line went dead with a click.

Jared Onsarigo was a very wealthy man. Among the town's most prominent tycoons, he was a real estate mogul. He had a hand in a myriad of businesses, and was famous across the county. Jared was an experienced shylock, semi-trained counsellor and a part-time actuary. He owned a fleet of taxis alongside a number of buildings in town, and in spite of his lack of charisma, he was revered by all, and many sought to make acquaintances with him.

As the wind rapidly gushed into his BMW X6 through the open windows, Jared let his mind roll back to the events of the Sunday morning. *Today has been a very busy day. But busy means money, and money is my business.* Having sent one of his field agents to a client who had

defaulted in repayment of a loan of a hundred thousand shillings, the agent had woken Jared with good news.

“Master, I have the money.”

Jared had sighed, with relief.

“How much did you seize from him?”

“Five hundred thousand, Master. Some good profit for you.” He had read excitement in the agent’s voice. Himself, it was the best news he was receiving in a couple of days.

“And how much do you expect me to pay you?”

“It was risky, Master, so you could give me seventy five thousand?”

“I hope you did not hurt them,” he quipped.

“No, Master. It was a peaceful exchange.”

“You said you expect a wage of...”

“I would be glad with seventy five, Master,” the agent had stammered.

He didn’t know why the agent seemed to hesitate. Seventy five thousand was good wage for him, actually less than Jared had anticipated the man would ask for.

“That is a deal!”

The agent had giggled excitedly, and Jared smiled as he hang up. *Simpletons. Errand boys.*

The agent dreaded that the news would soon be in the public domain. He had killed the woman he had been sent to collect the money from and had seized one million shillings from the house. He had alerted Derrick about the deal, stating that Jared had pocketed some five hundred thousand out of an unscrupulous piece of business dealing, and Derrick had quickly called his network of ground men.

But Jared had received a second call from the agent minutes after the agent had left Jared’s grand chateau to hand in the loot.

“Master,” the agent’s voice had cackled through the earpiece. “Could I borrow one of your Toyota NZEs for the evening? I will take good care...”

“Of course, my trusted agent,” Jared had bellowed, beaming. “I am asking someone to deliver it to you in a moment.”

“Chieni Supermarket junction, Master, if you don’t mind it...”

Jared made one more call and the order was activated. With legs crossed and his chin dug into his arms, Derrick watched as an array of text messages came pinging into his phone. The plan was working, and it was easier than he had anticipated. He felt almost as if he was in a control room, mixing videos with enviable prowess.

The person whom Jared called his agent was a meticulous, ubiquitous dealer who went by many names. He called Jared The Master. Today, however, Temu and Wako called the man ‘The Master’.

Stumbling out of his bedroom in a sleepy stupor, Thumbi had been bamboozled by the sight of his father tucking away unending stacks of money into a suitcase, more money than he had ever seen in the house.

“This, I have accumulated in a week,” Jared had been saying to his wife, grinning sheepishly. She sat across, eyes fixed on the wads of cash, also reeling with disbelief.

“Looks like a good week, huh?” She nodded, leaning in further. Thumbi stood a full one minute before his father suddenly looked up, sent him a chilling glare and barked,

“The King is up, already, huh? Why don’t you go swathe that body in your comfy duvets and wait till momma wakes you up tomorrow morning for the voyage to your granny’s?” Thumbi saw the empathetic look on his mother’s face. Jared stared emotionlessly at his son who sleepily lingered by the doorway.

“Get out. We have some business underway and you aren’t privy to this.”

As Thumbi retreated, he knew his father’s scoffing was short-lived. He knew the accurate panacea to all this mockery, and he had set the wheels into motion.

He took the stairs, one at a time, until he was at his bedroom door. Then, scanning his surroundings, he clambered up the wall surreptitiously, rolled through an opening he had made where a hard board cover had been loosely fitted years ago, and landed with a soft thud in the next room. He was now directly above the living room. Discreetly, Thumbi pushed aside a tile and a slab to leave a small opening through which he could see the living room below.

The crisp new bank notes were strewn all over the table, and he thought he heard his father say,

“Six million in cash. I have to take this to the office today. To the bank maybe tomorrow.”

*Sublime.* That was an invitation.

As Jared whisked his briefcase out of his BMW X6's rear seat and flung the door shut, a Toyota NZE belonging to him sat idling in a downtown petrol station. Temu kept glancing at his phone, anxiously, waiting for the final instructions. The sun was overhead and the town was quiet, with churchgoers lazily trudging back home for lunch. The petrol attendant who had just served them sat outside the fuelling bay, deeply engrossed in a game of candy crush on his phone.

Suddenly, Temu's phone's screen blinked. It was a message from Derrick.

*It's time. Remember the office---403--- and the keys. And the CODE. DON'T hurt him.*

Wako did not need a second invitation. He started the engine and the car lurched forward, dangerously skimming one of the pillars that supported the roof of the petrol station, leaving the attendant teetering in fright. It connected with Kanisa Road, swerved to avoid hitting a motorcycle, then gunned ahead, uptown, towards Charlatan house.

Jared flew up the flight of stairs, feeling almost as if he was doing lower body exercise at the gym. He jogged the length of the corridor to his office door. The other offices were closed and only a cleaner, who wore a bizarre facemask, was passing a dirty rug on the walls. When Jared was safely inside the office, the cleaner whipped a mobile phone from his pocket and typed a rapid message.

*He is in. Jus entered. Hurry up.*

With that, he picked his pail of water and splashed it across the floor, and then he scrubbed with more enthusiasm than he had ever done.

Jared opened the window and let the wind sweep across his face. The feeling was rejuvenating. He surveyed the visible part of town- the imposing skyscrapers that had recently come up, the interlocking avenues deserted this Sunday afternoon, the pine trees immaculately lining the town streets, the Cathedral's scintillating façade, the tiny obelisk in the middle of town, and, and a familiar Toyota NZE cruising uptown at full speed. When he saw it, he panicked. It was the same car he had ordered to be delivered to his agent a few moments ago, and it was now approaching his office at full speed.

*He has some emergency, maybe?*

He leaned onto the window sill to have a clearer view of the car as it approached the building's parking area. It came to a halt, and two men jumped out, one laboriously zipping up his leather jacket. They banged the doors shut and then raced towards the building's entrance. Something told Jared all was not well. In a state of panic, he ran to his desk, dialed Central Police on his office line and, miraculously, the line went through.

"Hello, it's Jared, there's a serious problem here at Charlatan..."

A gunshot roared in the corridor and his door's lock exploded. The man he had seen cleaning stormed into the room, pointing a pistol at Jared. Hands trembling, Jared replaced the phone.

“You shouldn’t have called anyone,” the masked cleaner said in a familiar, husky voice. Jared could not place the voice accurately, though. His brain refused to scan through possible options, and he just stood staring at the assailant. “But I am glad you didn’t have time to say anything to whoever that was.”

Jared was still trembling when the two men he had seen alight the car came running down the corridor and dashed in.

“Hand over that briefcase!” one of the two men ordered, also pointing a pistol at Jared’s temple. Jared stared blankly at them, barely moving a muscle.

“I said hand that damned briefcase over,” the man repeated, calmly, yet his voice had a threatening growl. Jared felt his hands push the briefcase towards the three men.

The man who was yet to speak stepped forward and unlocked the briefcase, feeding in its lock code perfectly. Jared was dumbfounded. *How on earth did he know that?* The man then opened the briefcase, and the neatly arranged notes invitingly stared up at them.

The other two men cautiously walked about the office, studying every drawer in pursuit of more fortune. They were in no particular hurry. The masked cleaner stood nearest the door, inspecting a huge box that contained numerous files, most of them old papers and letters Jared chose to dump in the box in case he needed some quick reference.

They were too busy they did not notice the four police officers swing into view at the extreme end of the corridors, guns cocked. A bullet whizzed in the air, and when the thunderous roar of the gunshot ricocheted, it was too late. The masked bandit groaned and fell clumsily, his weapon spinning away under the table.

“Dammit! He called police,” one of the thieves shouted, and aimed at Jared. With a sudden rush of adrenaline, Jared jumped towards the door and the gunshot came late. A bullet shattered his thigh, and he fell at the doorstep, just as the officers stepped over him.

As the searing pain tore through his body, he heard the heaviest exchange of fire he had ever encountered. When the last shot came, a body collapsed over him. Jared struggled to roll it away, and a couple of hands eased him from underneath the body.

The three assailants all lay lifeless, in pools of blood. One of the officers had also been killed, and his hands still clutched his chest as if he was trying to keep his soul from escaping. The office looked a bloody mess, with bodies sprawled across the ground and three officers, one injured, lurking over them. It looked eerie, like a warfront. The smell of death hung thick in the air.

“Jared, we have just brought down two of the most wanted criminals in town,” one of the officers said to Jared, wincing. “You don’t know how much these people have terrorized the town...”

The throbbing pain coursed through Jared’s system as he tried to sit up. His briefcase was still open atop the table, the bank notes baying for attention.

“The third,” one of the other officers said, tugging the mask off the assailant’s head, “might be a stranger...”

When the mask finally eased off, Jared gasped. *Oh My God!* The officers turned sharply towards him. “You know him?”

Jared stared at the lifeless face in disbelief. The cleaner was his agent, the man Temu and Wako called The Master.

Minutes later, the corridors were teeming with tens of curious passersby, and a battery of journalists hoisted their cameras between craned necks and above raised heads to capture what was happening.

“We have managed to kill all three, men who have been the embodiment of crime in this town,” the Chief Officer was saying. “We are yet to, however, trace who the organizer is, a man going by many names, specifically Derrick. We have retrieved all the texts exchanged here and I am waiting for the Criminal Investigative Department to trace down the real identity of this culprit. That is all for now, and we will keep you updated.”

The media tried to ask questions, but the Chief Officer ignored them, patting on his wrist to indicate time. *There is no time for that.*

The Chief Officer had just finished talking when his phone beeped. He typed a rapid password and the screen flashed as it unlocked. A message popped up. The Chief Officer wheeled around and sprinted down the corridor to the office room where Jared was being offered first aid before he could be carted down to a waiting ambulance.

“Mr. Jared,” he shouted as he braked in front of the two medical officers. “Do you know this name?”

When Jared saw it, he shuddered. His eyes dilated wildly and he felt his heart almost stop. After a few seconds, his pulse accelerated and he felt all his muscles go taut. *What? It can’t be true. It will never be, in a million years!*

Jared reread the message.

*Sir, we have liaised with the registering authority and the service provider, and they both easily identify the so called Derrick as Patrick Thumbi Onsarigo, ID. 435678990. He has been operating from somewhere in Mwanzo Estate, and this number was first registered under Jared Onsarigo, ID. 234156785.*

Patrick Thumbi, his son. Mwanzo Estate, his home.

Jared’s world was spinning. He felt a pain he had never felt before. *Why, Thumbi? Why?* Then the regrets started hitting him, all at supersonic speed. *I should have bought him a house. I should have listened to him when he wanted capital. I should have talked to him. I should have made him a manager in one of my companies. I should have been kinder. He is my only son.*

*From those texts he told the thugs not to hurt me. He just wanted money. Why, what have I done to myself?*

The wave of regret hit him like a tornado, and his world became blurry. He struggled to keep his eyes open, but his world spun into a blob that was swirling menacingly in front of him. Then, it collapsed into pitch blackness.

Thumbi tucked the note under his bedside lamp. He checked his writing again.

*Dad, I loved you. I am sorry for what I made you go through all my life for being a thickhead. Always being last in school. Perhaps I wasn't the best son, and that got rubberstamped today. I have intel of how things have gone down, and I am not part of this anymore. All I wanted was some money, a little money, dad, and you denied me. Dad, I am sorry, but I am glad it will be a happier moment for you without me.*

*And, mum, don't cry. You have always been my support, but I'm always a mess. Bye.*

*LOVE, Patrick T. ONSARIGO.*

He stepped at the edge of his bed, clasped his hands tightly around the rope and swung his body out and away from his bed. The rope went taut, the trusses creaked and his neck snapped.