THE THIRD FORCE

When fiction becomes the Truth

Christian Fourie

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PROLOGUE

The Kesseri Road, the Sahel. Nine years earlier.

Danie Swart was halfway through a sentence about his daughter's school fees when the windscreen came apart.

Brandt did not hear the shot. He heard the glass, a flat crack like a plate dropped on stone, and then the other sound, the one he would spend nine years failing to forget. The Land Cruiser lurched towards the verge at sixty kilometres an hour. Danie's hands were still on the wheel, and Danie was no longer behind them. Brandt got his right hand on the wheel and his right boot over Danie's on the brake, and brought the vehicle down into the lee of a ruined culvert while the second round came through the roof and the third took the radio out of the dash.

"Contact front," he said into a handset that no longer worked. His voice sounded like somebody else's, calm, a voice for a training film. "Ridge on the left. All vehicles stop."

Nobody answered. Behind him the second Land Cruiser had slewed sideways across the road, and the flatbed carrying the mine's generator parts was burning, a thick black column of smoke that stood straight up in the still air. He counted. He always counted. A heavy machine gun, somewhere above the road at about four hundred metres, firing in disciplined bursts of five. Small arms from two positions further along. Someone was making a good job of it.

He got the door open and dragged Danie out by the harness, down into the culvert, and laid him on the gravel and knew. Danie's eyes were open and looking mildly at

something past Brandt's shoulder, as if the rest of the sentence were up there.

"Danie," he said anyway. Then, because it was the language they had always used when the English ran out: "*Ek is hier, ou maat. Ek is hier.*"

Above them the bullets went on. A mine technician named Ousmane, who had begged a lift that morning because his motorbike had broken down, was sitting in the open road holding his own arm and screaming. Danie had said yes to him before Brandt could say no. Danie always said yes. Brandt went up out of the culvert, took the boy by the collar and hauled him back down, and a round tore the dirt where he had been sitting. He was furious with the boy for being alive, and ashamed of it in the same breath, and had no time for either.

Four minutes. He counted those too. Then the shooting stopped. It did not taper off the way a fight does when men run short of ammunition. It just stopped.

The silence rang in his ears.

He tried to close Danie's eyes. They would not stay closed. He tried three times, with his thumb, the way you were meant to, and the third time he left them, because the alternative was to keep pressing on a dead friend's face with a hand that would not stop shaking.

Eleven years. A broken leg in the Kasai that Danie had carried him out on, two kilometres, complaining the whole way and bringing it up at every braai since. A daughter named Lize who called Brandt Oom Jack and drew him giraffes with the wrong number of legs. Four hours ago they had shared a flask of rooibos on the tailgate and argued about rugby. Now there was a weight in Brandt's lap and nobody in it.

He lay beside the body with the rifle across his forearms and waited for what always came next, because in eleven years of guarding convoys in this country it had always come next: the pickups down the track, the men shouting, the stripping of everything that could be carried. Weapons first, then fuel, then tyres, then the dead men's boots.

Nobody came.

He waited forty minutes with his hand flat on Danie's chest. The flatbed burned itself down to a frame. Ousmane stopped screaming and started to pray. The smoke thinned and the light went long and amber across the stony ground, and still nobody came down from the ridge.

Somewhere in the second half hour the grief had turned into something with a direction. He did not notice when. Grief was a country he knew how to stand still in. This was something else, and it wanted to look.

At last Brandt got up and walked towards the ridge. He did not hurry, and he did not take the track.

It was a low spine of red rock and thorn scrub, and the first thing he found was the line.

Eleven firing positions, spread along the crest at neat intervals, and at each one the brass. Not scattered. Lined up. Casings lay side by side on the flat rock, nose to tail, a hand's width apart, laid out for a photograph. Brandt crouched over the nearest and did not touch it. In eleven years he had cleared a dozen ambush sites, and the brass was always everywhere: thrown clear by the ejector, kicked by boots, lost in the grass. Somebody had spent time tidying.

Three metres further on, on a flat slab of rock, lay two mobile phones. They lay side by side, screens up, like place settings.

At the highest point, tied to a thorn tree at head height, was a strip of black cloth. He looked at the knot. It was a reef knot, flat and symmetrical, the kind taught in a classroom.

He had come up the slope ready to hate the men who had done this. He had been carrying it in his chest like a coal. Now he stood among the brass with the hatred and nowhere to put it. What he felt instead was the unease of walking into a room and knowing, before he could say how, that someone had arranged it for him.

The helicopter came in low from the south just before sunset, white, with no markings he could see, and put down on the road a hundred metres from the burned flatbed. Four men climbed out. Two wore the pressed uniforms of the ministry's liaison office. Two wore clean desert boots and quiet shirts and carried no weapons that Brandt could see. They spoke English with accents he could not place, and they moved around the wrecked vehicles with an easy competence that suggested they had seen such places before.

The senior liaison officer, a courteous man with a ministry lanyard, took Brandt's hand in both of his. "We are very sorry for your loss, Mr Brandt. The Front has already claimed responsibility."

He had said Mr Brandt. He had not once said Danie.

"Already," Brandt said.

"Their statement has just gone out." The man turned his phone so that Brandt could see the screen, and looked almost pleased. The timestamp read 17:40.

Danie's wristwatch, on the wrist Brandt had held in the culvert, had cracked at 14:40. He noticed it, the way you notice anything at a funeral, and set it aside.

"They didn't take anything," Brandt said. "No weapons. No fuel. Nothing off the vehicles."

“They were interrupted.”

“By what?”

The man smiled kindly and did not answer. Behind him, one of the quiet men in clean boots had walked straight up the ridge to the flat slab of rock, without searching, and was bagging the two phones.

They carried Danie to the helicopter on a stretcher. Brandt walked beside it and laid Danie’s hat on his chest, the battered bush hat he never went anywhere without. At the door, one of the quiet men took it off again, politely, and put it in a clear plastic bag.

Then they asked Brandt to sign a short statement in English that he had not written, and he signed it with a hand that was still not steady, because there was a woman in Pretoria he had to telephone and he wanted this over.

Hettie answered on the second ring. The wives of men on the Kesseri Road waited for that call every evening, and some evenings it came.

“Was it quick?” she said, before he had said anything.

“Yes.”

It was the one thing he was sure was true.

“Did he say anything?”

“He was telling me about Lize’s school fees.” His voice broke on the name and he let it. “He didn’t get to the end.”

Hettie made a sound that was half a laugh and half something else. Then she said, “Who did this, Jack?”

He looked across the road at the helicopter, at the ministry lanyard, at a man in clean boots carrying a bag with a hat in it. “They tell me it was the Front,” he said.

It was true in every detail and the wrong shape, and he would carry the difference around for years.

Before the light went, he climbed the ridge once more, alone, and knelt at the nearest firing position. He did not

know what he was looking for. He only knew that somebody had taken the worst afternoon of his life and arranged it like a stage, and that he wanted to find the hand that had done the arranging.

He looked at the rock, the brass and the thorn, and then at the ground between them, and understood what had been bothering him since he first stood there.

The dust.

Men who had lain here waiting since morning and then fired four hundred rounds would have left the ground in ruins: elbow prints, knee prints, the scuff of boots shifting for a better angle, scorch marks from the muzzle blast. Instead the fine grey dust lay over everything the way it lies on a shelf in a room nobody uses, smooth and even and undisturbed.

Nobody had fired from here.

He turned and looked across the valley to the far escarpment, nearly a kilometre away, dark against the last of the light. The sound had come from the left, flat and hard, and this ridge had thrown it back at him. He had put the guns here because that was where his ears had told him to look, and because that was where someone had made sure he would look.

Someone had built him a stage, and he had walked straight onto it.

1

Noordhaven Refinery, the North Sea coast. Day 1.

Priya Nair knew what kind of day it would be by the flare.

On a good morning the stack at Noordhaven burned a small, steady flame, a pilot light for a city. On a bad one it roared, and the smoke leaned out over the dunes towards the sea like something trying to get away. At twenty-five past six, coming along the dyke road with the heater on against the October damp, she saw it roaring.

She took it as an omen and then, being an engineer, took it back. Flares did not predict anything. They only reported.

The radio was reporting too. European governments would begin releasing emergency diesel from their strategic stocks today, a presenter said, in a voice that tried to sound like good news. Pump prices had more than doubled since the war began. Half the Gulf's export capacity was damaged or idle, Russian refineries were being hit by drones every other week, and a continent that had spent a decade closing its own plants now stood at the pump with a shaking hand.

Priya switched it off.

She was the production planner at Noordhaven. She did not run anything. She told the people who ran things what to run, in what order and for how long, and for eight months the answer had been the same: more, and faster, and don't break anything. It was a job of numbers and tact, and she was better at the numbers. Her mother in Kochi described it to her friends as 'something with petrol', and sent fish-curry recipes by voice note that assumed a kitchen twice the size of Priya's.

* * *

The control room was a glass box in the middle of the plant, lit like an aquarium, with forty screens and a smell of coffee and warm electronics. The night shift was still there when it should have been going home. Nobody was talking. That was how she knew.

Joost Haverkamp, the night supervisor, stood at the back with his arms folded, a big grey man who had run this room for nineteen years and had a reputation for never raising his voice. He did not raise it now.

“Priya. Four-C went down at twenty to six.”

She stopped with her bag still on her shoulder. “Went down how?”

“Controlled shutdown. The sequence ran clean. Nothing broke and nobody’s hurt.” He said it fast, like a doctor saying it isn’t cancer before he says what it is. “The unit’s cold and the contractors have been called out.”

“Contractors for what?”

“The turnaround.”

“The turnaround isn’t for nineteen days.”

Joost turned his screen towards her. “It was brought forward.”

Four-C was the diesel hydrotreater. It took the plant’s dirtiest diesel and made it into the cleanest, and clean was the only kind Europe was allowed to sell. Without it, Noordhaven lost nearly a fifth of its diesel. On any other day that was a bad week. On the day the continent opened its reserves to cover a shortfall, it was a hole in the middle of the plan.

She sat down at the nearest terminal and opened the planning system. She read the entry once, and then again as the words stopped meaning anything.

TURNAROUND 4-C: ADVANCED 19 DAYS. Entered by: P. NAIR. Time: 04:12. Approval: STANDING (PLANNED WORK).

It was the kind of entry she made a hundred times a year. It looked like hers.

“I didn’t do this.”

“It’s got your name on it, Priya.”

“I know what it’s got.”

“People do things at midnight.”

“At four in the morning.”

“Then at four in the morning.” He was not accusing her, and that was what made it hard. “The system pushes approved planned work straight to the sequencer. Standing approval. You know how it works.”

She did. She had argued for it herself two years ago, in a meeting, with a slide, because the double-signature process had cost the plant three days a year in idle time. It had been a good idea. She could still see the slide.

* * *

Marit van der Ven came in at seven with her coat still wet, took one look at the room, and listened to Joost without sitting down. The plant manager was small and brisk and had come up through the engineering side, and she distrusted anything that could not be measured.

“Is it safe?”

“Yes.”

“Is anyone hurt?”

“No.”

“Then it’s a scheduling matter.”

“The entry isn’t mine,” Priya said. “I wasn’t even...”

“Priya.” Marit said it gently, which was worse. “I believe that you believe that. I would like you to rebuild the

run plan for the next nineteen days without Four-C, and I would like it by noon. What happened at four o'clock this morning is a question for the weekend."

"It should go in the incident system."

"It isn't an incident. It's planned maintenance, brought forward. That is true, isn't it? The turnaround was always coming." She held Priya's eye. "If I log an incident, inspectors come. If inspectors come, we get a stop-work order on the whole plant while they look. Today of all days. Do you want to be the reason the continent's diesel gets shorter?"

Priya did not. That was the trouble with Marit. She never asked for anything unreasonable.

"No."

"Then log it as routine maintenance."

* * *

Her office looked down on the road to the loading gantry. By ten the tankers were backed up from the gate to the dyke, a kilometre and a half of them, engines off to save fuel they could not buy. Drivers stood in the cold with thermoses. On the windscreen of one truck near the front someone had taped a sheet of paper with a single word in marker: HOSPITAL.

She looked at it. Then she went back to the numbers.

The numbers were not kind. She could juggle the crude slate, bring a smaller unit up early, stretch another's run, and by noon she had a plan that lost eleven percent instead of eighteen. She sent it to Marit with a note that said what it cost. Marit replied with one word: *Thanks.* It was the nicest thing anyone said to her all day.

* * *

She left at seven, late and drained, and sat in the car park with the engine off and the rain beginning on the roof. She did what she had been putting off since morning. She checked herself.

She had left her laptop shut in her bag the night before. She remembered locking it, remembered the click. She had eaten half a dinner and drunk one glass of wine and gone to bed at ten past eleven. The plant did not allow remote access from phones. She checked the VPN log anyway, through the one dashboard she was still permitted to see, and found nothing under her credentials from twenty to ten the previous evening until she badged in at 06:41.

Nothing, except the entry. It had come through the planning system's service gateway, the pipe that fed it overnight market prices and weather. There was nothing odd in that. Everything came through the gateway.

Then she looked at her wrist. The watch her sister had given her for her birthday recorded her sleep with the cheerful earnestness of a thing that had no idea what it was recording. Asleep from 23:12 to 06:05. At 04:12 her heart rate had been fifty-two beats a minute. She had been in the deepest part of the night, dreaming about nothing.

Of course there were explanations. A clock fault. A draft queued so long ago that she had forgotten it, released by some glitch in the batch scheduler. Fatigue: her own, eight months of it. None of them was impossible. That was the trouble. She had spent her career learning that the explanation which required nothing unusual was nearly always the right one, and she believed it still. She believed it in the car park with the rain coming down. She believed it the way you believe the ice will hold.

She took the paper notebook from the glove box, the cheap spiral kind she kept for things she did not trust to a screen, and wrote:

04:12, PN, asleep.

Paper, at least, had no login.

Through the windscreen she could see the stack. Sometime in the afternoon the flare had settled to a small steady flame, a pilot light for a city. She watched it for a long time, calm and ordinary, as one watches a face that has just told a lie.

She would remember it afterward as the last evening on which anything at Noordhaven had been exactly as it seemed. In eleven days the hydrocracker would stop, at four in the morning, in her name. In twenty-five she would be kneeling in a Belgian pump house with a cable in her hand, and a great many people would be dead who were alive tonight, and every one of them would have been arranged, in plain English, under a standing approval, by nobody.

The only thing in the world with her name on it that she had actually written was a line in a spiral notebook. *Asleep.*