TRACES IN THE SHADOW

By Rose Nyagambi
A series of high profile cyber crimes rock the city of Nairobi. Threatening to bring it to its knees. A detective must get whoever is behind the hacks and decode the strange pattern formed by the heists before the city grinds to a halt.
It’s already past midnight, but I’m still in my office. Thinking about this strange case that has been assigned to me. A series of cybernetic thefts has been carried out in recent days.

Banks, state offices, the accounts of wealthy people, companies … large sums of money have been stolen, but nobody has a clue about who could be behind the theft.

On my computer. All I see are press releases regarding the robberies. Whoever is behind these hacks had to be extremely good, they had not left even the slightest trace in any of hacks. Not even a whiff. The city of Nairobi had grown tremendously since the regime fell. And while the world was still ruled by large corporations, Kenya had managed to break that trend and was now governed by a democratic government that has been able to change the face of the city. But crime was still a problem, as is poverty, despite the considerable efforts that had been made to reduce it. The one good thing to talk about is there’s equality. Fewer people suffering, fewer illnesses, and more opportunities for all…the case. I have to get back to the case…Nothing.
It’s now am. But the city never sleeps. I decide to go visit my local for a drink. I also need information. I hope to meet a regular customer at the local, a small-time hacker, who hopefully will give me a clue about how to track down the hacker or hackers...I don’t know. My mind drifting off again. I curse under my breath.

I finally get to the bar. I don’t know why I keep coming back here. The place is terrible, maybe I’m drawn to people who have lost their way. Trying to have a good time and forget about their problems under an intense cloud of smoke and sweating in the heat of a barely functioning air conditioning system. I sit at the bar and ask for a double. “A double what?” “The usual Jack, the usual” At the end of the bar, I see the guy I’m looking. He’s a shady looking human being. Maybe more mongoose than a human being. I approach him. He knows I’m a cop. We’ve both been coming to this hell hole for a long time.

“It’s extra hot today, don’t you think?” I say to him. He looks at me, sneers and looks away. He doesn’t answer. I continue talking “Imagine someone who was good enough to hack anything he wants to. Hack totally protected systems and find all that information. Or even collapse entire systems and disappear” He looks up. This is his world. He can’t resist. “Without a trace? Not many of those left nowadays”, he replies, “and you’d have to know how to move on your own. It is not easy”.

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“I suppose that kind of skill allows you to do what you want. Steal whatever you want without anyone knowing that you exist.” He starts slightly alarmed.

“No, Not you. Someone with that kind of ability would not be in a seedy place like this. Nevertheless…”

“You can’t figure it out on your own can you?” He says mockingly “you need me to tell you who is behind the robberies, right?” He signals to Jack for a drink “Well. Not your lucky day. Neither I nor anyone in the hacker community knows who he is.

I take a swig of my drink and prepare to leave. His beady eyes look into mine, maybe he’s trying to wink. I can’t tell. “You know his style is not unique. He uses the same techniques we all use. Only his code is super clean. Almost like it’s not done by a human”.

“Tell me more,” I tell him. He signals Jack for another drink but this time nods in my direction for the tab.
This man or men have found a way to perfect these techniques; but” He’s slurring a bit now. He downed his drink too quickly. “every cybernetic attack always leaves a mark, no matter how small it may be. It always leaves a mark”.


“It is easier than you think. Just look at the details. There are no perfect cyber attacks. It’ll take time, but it’s there”. It’s am in the morning. I decide to walk home in the crisp morning air, a luxury that, fortunately, is now possible in the city. As I walk, I light a cigarette, damn I need to stop smoking these things. I stub it out. Bloody coffin nails killed my mom and dad. Can’t let them get me too. I think about what the hacker told me. See the details. But what details. As a detective, I am trained precisely for this, to see even the smallest details. But I’m no coder.

I change my mind and take the train to the centre of the city. There, in the bright lights of the holographic screens lighting up the buildings of Nairobi, I continue to turn over the info I have collected so far. The computer systems, the questions…Nothing!... Nothing at all. I curse again. This time a bit louder. I decide to take the train back. I find it soothing. I get to my house and head straight to the computer. I analyse all the clues. Looking for any information that might enlighten me about it ... Again nothing. Damn. Sleep.
No wonder my phone won’t stop ringing. I have a splitting headache. I can’t talk. An even more significant amount was stolen from the account of one of the most exclusive social clubs in the city. I finish my breakfast and head there.

I interview the club owners; I analyse their security systems, their financial data, their latest movements ... Nothing. I spend the afternoon talking to other hackers. One by one, they all tell me the same thing. Towards the end of the afternoon, I return to the bar. I’m supposed to be working, but I can’t think. I’m craving a cigarette too. Jack brings over my usual.

“The shift dude from yesterday, he keeps on talking about you and asking if you had checked the source code” Jack shrugs he’s old school and doesn’t do computers. “Oh yeah and something about checking how it was before and after the hack.”
“I try to brush it off, but it keeps gnawing at me. It’s the one area I hadn’t looked at keenly. I down my drink and take off. Back home, I check all the code from the very first robbery started. As I put it all together, I see it! Right there clear as day. How could I have missed it? The pattern didn’t look like something placed by the hacker. It looked like something that had already been there, but on closer inspection revealed a map and an address, almost as if the thief wanted to be found. Every transaction had left an additional part of the puzzle with the hack completing the map. I know where this is.
I arrive at the place. It is a small neighbourhood, with old buildings. The map even had details of the floor. This could be a trap. I think about calling back up. But it would take too long, and they would be seen for miles. I can’t risk it.

Inside the building, I reach the corridor and see that the numbers on the doors correspond to the first digits of the stolen amounts. The last blow was 422 million. The number of the apartment that I am looking for. Coincidentally? I pull out my gun and slowly turn the doorknob. The door is not locked.

I enter quietly into a room full broken furniture and garbage. Right in the middle of the room sits a giant computer with cables streaming out of it. Sitting in front of the computer facing me is a young man.

“I’ve been waiting for you. I knew you would find me sooner or later”, He says.

“Who are you?” I ask. “You can lower the gun”, he says, as he gets up and approaches me.

“This place is a disaster. Anyone would think you were enjoying a great life with all the stolen money”, I say, looking around the place.

“I didn’t do it for the money”, he answers. “Nor for fame. I just wanted to give a message to this nation, while at the same time help the people who need it the most”. 
His words baffle me. He seems very relaxed and speaks as if he has nothing to lose. All that money and he lives in this dump? Not me.

“This country is still full of injustices. There are many influential people with money to spare, while the poor go hungry and die of diseases that should be eradicated. That money I stole I donated it all to charities, and you cannot trace it”.

“I want to help people, and the best way is by using my talent to take little from those rich people’s scandalously bulging bank accounts. They will not starve to death just because I steal ten per cent of their money. And, that’s all it takes to help a whole population emerge”.

“I understand, but still, it’s a crime”.

“I know, that’s why I want to give myself up”.

Those last words surprise me. I did not expect to give up so easily. I sympathise with him, but I have a job to do. I curse. Long and loud. Maybe this once I don’t have to do my job? Perhaps if I let him go, he would continue to help people. But I have a job to do. Damn! Maybe this once? I curse again.
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