

BLACK PANTHER SERIES

1. MASKED MURDERERS



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MASKED MURDERERS

by

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SUMMARY

Leon had to learn early to throw a bag of mealies over his shoulder and walk away with it. He was barely fourteen years old when he so skillfully handled a bow and arrow that any Bushman's mouth would have watered. Because he was the only son and child of his parents, he found his amusement in the field, where he hunted jackals and stuck leopards under the arrow. His hands learned early to twist a young ox's horns so that the animal fell powerless to the ground.

Leon's mother died early, just before the First War of Freedom, when the Basothos attacked a few remote farms. From then on, Leon's father became an adventurer. Together, they moved into the unknown, always deeper into the unknown Transvaal. And Lettie? Leon and she grew up together. Both her parents were killed by the Basothos and Leon's father then took care of her. Lettie with her soft, wavy, blonde hair and blue eyes, blue as the cloudless sky of the Lowveld. And now she is already a sixteen-year-old boer girl.

One night, a couple of cattle thieves steal all of Leon's cattle, kill his father and kidnap Lettie in the process. Leon swears revenge on the murderers and cattle thieves. With a leopard, he had to kill for survival, he then made a mask out of it, and thus the legend of the Black Panther was born. The appearance of the Panther man scares anyone who sees it, and Leon uses it very skillfully to instill fear and authority among the thieves. But it was by no means easy, and Leon had to endure certain hardships to ensure that justice was done.

EXTRACT

Leon's horse rears up on its hind legs. He lashes out again with his long whip. Bart yells with rage and charges at the "Black Panther man" with his steed. His whip also whistles through the air. It curls mercilessly around Leon's horse's neck. The horse whinnies sharply in pain and shock. One can hear it above the noise of the galloping hooves. Another blow is aimed at Leon and it hits home. It cuts into the flesh of his upper arm.

The whips crack like gunshots. Leon aims at his opponent's neck and face. Bart charges at him with his chopping horse. Their faces are almost against each other. Bart waits for his chance, and the thick side of the whip stock suddenly lands heavily on Leon's shoulder. For a moment, it feels as if his shoulder is paralyzed, but before Bart can hit him again, a fist hits the cattle thief and nearly knocks him off his horse. The two horses face each other again and the whips whistle. Leon's whip hits Bart on his cheek. He quickly grabs the spot and screams with uncontrollable pain and rage. Blood streams down his cheek instantly. He resolutely spurs his horse forward again, but Leon's whip cracks once more. This time, the foreshot wraps around the thief's wrist. It burns like fire around his wrists and knuckles.

1. MASKED MURDERERS

Chapter 1

THE LEOPARD STORMS

The young man climbs over the boulder. The muscles in his upper arm bulge. He is sunburned, and his worn-out hat is pulled almost over his eyes, with his ears sticking out from under the field hat. He lets out a single groan that can be heard above the roar of the waterfall, just ten paces behind him.

Now, he stands atop the steep rock wall. He brings his dirty hands to his forehead and gazes intently at the waterfall, where it crashes against the rocks, slick with frog slime. Somewhere there, the bush dove fell. He had seen it tumble down, its feathers fluttering in the air.

“My word, this slingshot is a marvel,” the boy thinks, examining the weapon carefully. Two sturdy, well-built legs stick out from beneath his rolled-up khaki shorts. His muscles are well-defined. Observing his posture on the high boulder, you’d never guess that he had just turned eighteen.

His blue eyes continue to search among the green rocks below the water. Come hell or high water, he must get that dove, so he can notch another mark on his stick. He bends down and quickly rolls down his khaki shorts. They now hang almost to his knees. He’ll need to act quickly. For a moment, his gaze nervously shifts to the western horizon. The sun is setting fast, and his father will soon start calling for him.

Leon begins to clamber from rock to rock towards the waterfall. At times, he must make dangerous leaps from one rock to another, but he progresses faster and faster. Fine droplets of water splash against him, misting over his face like a damp fog. A short-distance away, on a flat stone close to the falling water, he sees the blue, bloodied bush dove. His heart rejoices. That was a perfect shot, despite the wind catching the rock.

He pauses as if to enjoy the refreshment of the fine droplets spraying against him. It had been a hot day, as only the Bushveld here in the Northern Transvaal can be. His blue eyes marvel at the falling, roaring mass of water. It falls easily twelve feet high, in a broad stream. Unconsciously, Leon wishes his father would linger here for a long

time, that they could stay here forever. They could even build a house nearby.

Leon prepares himself for the final jump. On the other side, he'll need to plant his feet firmly, for the greenish slime on part of the rock could send him tumbling into the swirling depths of the water below. He bends his back and takes a step backward.

Like a cowhide, he flies through the air and lands on all fours on the rock slab where the bush dove lies. Barely has he touched down when he jerks upright. He could swear he heard a soft growl, like that of some predator, but the water nearby is deafening. Slowly, he stands up with the dead bush dove in his hand. He looks at it. It's a chest shot.

A musty smell suddenly pricks his nostrils. Before him stand sharp-pointed, green rocks. Between them, the clear water rushes. Adventure and curiosity compel him to try and navigate those dangerous rocks. He'll have to slide closer on his backside. He sits down and scoots past the waterfall. Just a short distance, and then he draws a sharp breath in surprise. Bats flutter away from him, past the waterfall and into the daylight. Now, the musty smell hits his nose sharply again. Right behind the waterfall, the mouth of a dark cave yawns open. Just a jump of about four steps, and he's on a rock ledge, right in front of the cave's entrance. Leon's imagination goes into overdrive. All over the cave walls are paintings, at least he thinks, of Bushmen.

Suddenly, he feels afraid. What if there are Bushmen here? In this wilderness, there must still be all sorts of things. His father had told him about the days of the Colony when the Yellow Devils spread terror. And here in the northern parts of Transvaal, where lions and leopards are plentiful? You never know.

The farms here are far apart, easily thirty to forty miles, and it's an ideal hiding place for the Yellows. His heart pounds faster. Suddenly, there's movement at the mouth of the cave, a yellowish figure. Like lightning, Leon loads his slingshot with a rock, but the next moment, he lowers it and laughs at himself. Dad always said that when a person imagines things, they sometimes see things that aren't there, but now there really is a little yellowish figure at the cave's entrance. He sees a hyrax.

Such a pesky, audacious, cheeky hyrax! He quickly swings and releases his slingshot. The rock hits the hyrax's belly with a heavy thud. The

little creature stumbles at first but then, with a squeaking sound, turns and disappears into the darkness of the cave.

Leon becomes bolder. If there were Bushmen in the cave, they would surely have heard him by now, for they supposedly have sharp ears. Leon measures the distance he must jump. Without a firm foothold, it's a hopeless task. He'll never make it.

With a smile on his face, he launches a rock into the cave's mouth with the slingshot. If there's anything inside, maybe it will flush it out, like bush doves that might nest there. If that's the case, he can come back later and catch the young ones to raise them. Leon's heart is now pounding even harder. He digs his hand deep into his pocket again and pulls out a few nice, round pebbles. He bites his lower lip, loads one into his weapon, and swings it high above his head. The next moment, fluttering bush dove wings whizz past him, followed by squeaking bats. Leon nearly shouts in excitement.

Quickly, he shoots a few more rocks inside, and yes, a whole blue swarm of doves flaps their wings past his head, rushing out into the open. He watches them fly away. They circle above the high cliffs and camel thorn trees along the riverbank and then gracefully settle on the rocks in the river.

Now Leon can't wait to investigate further. The twilight is closing in fast. He can tell his father that he was looking for that black bull calf. Father will believe him. The boy doesn't hesitate. He aims again to cross the four-foot gap, but realizes once more that it's impossible. Suddenly, his eye catches the long tree root hanging at an angle above him. He'll have to jump high and far to grab hold of it. If he can just grab the root, he can swing across to the other side. He glances down with a pounding heart. He'll fall hard if he misses, maybe breaking a leg, a head, or an arm, but there's no other choice.

Without further hesitation or considering whether the tree root will hold his weight, he bends his back, takes a step back, and then, with a grunt of effort, jumps. He grabs the tree root with both hands. His heart races, as the next moment it feels like the root might give way under his weight, but it only drops about a foot or so, and there hangs Leon between heaven and earth. His legs thrash like pieces of living machinery. He begins to swing back and forth over the swirling water,

higher and faster, and then suddenly let's go. Like a dead weight, he lands right in front of the cave entrance on a rock ledge.

He stands still for a moment, wiping the sweat from his forehead and black hair. His dirty toes cling like an eagle to the rough rock. Now that he's in front of the cave entrance, he hesitates to go inside. He takes the slingshot, which he had hung over his shoulder, off again and loads a rock into it. He slings the rock into the dark depths, and when it lands far back in the cave, there's a muffled growl. Leon is so startled that he almost falls off the rock ledge. The roar of the waterfall sounds more muffled here. The boy stands in a listening posture. He instinctively aims again for the tree root.

But suddenly, the dust kicks up no more than ten steps in front of him. A massive leopard blocks the mouth of the cave. The predator pulls its head back, growling angrily, then quickly retreats. It hadn't expected any two-legged creatures here, but it seems the animal realizes it's trapped. It must get out, for there's no escape further inside.

Still paralyzed by the initial shock, Leon stares wide-eyed at the predator, as if he's glued to his spot. Today, he's surely going to be eaten here. Suddenly, the leopard charges at him with long strides. Leon utters a single cry of fear and then flies through the air like a bird. His hands grasp the tree root. His momentum swings the root high to the other side, and at the same moment, the spotted figure leaps beneath him.

The leopard hadn't expected it, and neither had Leon. When the predator lands on the other side, its front paws slip, and it plunges into the swirling water far below. As if Leon has completely forgotten that he's hanging between heaven and earth, he stares at the struggling leopard. The animal snaps at the foaming waterfall as if it's the cause of its trouble. Time and again, the spotted head with its open mouth disappears beneath the water, only to reappear further down the stream. It's a fight for life and death. The animal claws its front paws, with long exposed nails, against a rock on the side, but it doesn't help, and the leopard desperately plunges back into the swirling water.

The animal swims from shore to shore. Leon's mouth hangs open because it could just as well have been him. His arms go numb from holding on, and suddenly, it strikes him that he is somewhere in the air.

He kicks his feet again and turns his body, but the whole time, he keeps watching the unfortunate animal.

Suddenly, Leon wishes he could help it. With this thought, he swings high once more and lands neatly on all fours on the rocky ledge where the dead dove lies. He quickly looks around, with only one thought in his mind now: he must help the leopard. It's his fault, and if she drowns, what will happen to her cubs? There must be cubs in the cave.

He sees, a short-distance away, a piece of tree branch that must have been washed against the rocks by previous floods. He looks at the animal. She is still struggling, and her head disappears under the water repeatedly. Leon jumps from rock to rock until he reaches the branch. He struggles to pry it loose from the rock crevice, but finally succeeds. He jumps again from rock to rock until he is close to the hole where the leopard is thrashing about. The animal won't last much longer; he can see that. When he reaches the shore, the animal growls and bares her teeth, but it is a weak attempt.

"Don't worry, Old Girl!" the boy says, stubbornly defiant. "I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to help you."

At the lower end of the foaming whirlpool where the animal is struggling, the water flows through a narrow rock crevice. With all his strength, Leon pushes the thicker end of the branch into the crevice. He picks up a large rock and hammers the branch securely in place. It would take a strong man to pull the branch out now. The smaller branches spread fairly wide over the water.

So, now the predator will at least have a foothold, Leon thinks, and he jumps back with his slingshot. The stones fly from one side of the leopard to the other. Leon now drives the leopard like a foolish goat towards the branch. Near the branch, the leopard apparently realizes that it is her only chance of escape. In a final burst of strength, she swims with long strokes to the branch. Leon quickly wriggles out of the animal's reach as she claws her way up the branch. From a high rock, twenty paces away from the leopard, Leon closely watches the scene, dove and slingshot in hand, with his hat pulled tighter over his head.

"Hooray! She's out," the boy exclaims triumphantly when the animal finally reaches solid ground.

The leopard swings her head towards the shouting boy and lies down

wearily on a rock slab, too tired to flee into the bushes. She lies stretched out as if dead. After a while, she lifts her graceful head again and stares at Leon as if to say, “Go on now! Your presence bothers me! You’re just like a pesky fly.”

“She’ll surely tame down! I hope she doesn’t die,” mutters Leon, and then a brilliant thought strikes him. The cubs in the cave! If his father stays here, he can watch the cave until the cubs start playing outside, and then he can sneakily catch one. His heart swells with anticipation. But now another problem arises. How will he get to the other side? It doesn’t seem like the leopard plans to leave, and the animal lies between him and the resting place. Tonight, the ox whip will whistle if he doesn’t hurry. But what to do? He must go to the other side of the riverbank and walk along the river. Downstream, he can jump across the stream on the rocks. That’s the only way out. He stands up.

With a thin strap, one of his shoelaces, he ties the feet of the dead dove to his belt. The slingshot is held in his left hand.

He is finally on the opposite bank of the river. Close to the river is a narrow cattle path. Leon is startled. Cattle paths? Yes, there are the tracks of the cattle and their dung. Strange, he hadn’t seen cattle grazing here during the day, and they couldn’t be their cattle because their herd doesn’t come to this side of the river.

Leon frowns deeply, but walks on. He constantly expects something to happen, maybe another leopard, he thinks as he walks under a large rock.

Suddenly, something whips through the air like a startled dove fleeing with flapping wings. A rope flies toward him, and before he can react, it falls around his body and arms, and he is yanked hard to the ground.

Chapter 2

THE CAVEMEN

Leon gasped as he fell to the ground. He landed on a rock with his back and simultaneously heard someone burst out laughing, as if it were a big joke. The boy looked up from the ground. Under an overhanging rock, about three feet above him, a man was sitting on a horse. Leon was startled. The man's face was covered with a black mask. He had a long beard that was slightly yellowish around his mouth. His mustache lay on either side under a large nose, and he wore a wide-brimmed hat on his head.

Suddenly, Leon was no longer afraid. This man surely wouldn't harm him... it was probably just a joke. He wanted to start laughing with them and got up from the ground. He then quickly tried to untangle himself from the rope.

"Oh no, wait, young man," and the rope was pulled tighter around him. "It won't be that easy. First, explain where you came from."

Then, as if something occurred to him, he said, "Never mind, don't try to explain now, just come with me first." Without ceremony, Leon was pulled up with the rope.

The rope cut painfully into his body and hands, but he endured it. With one last tug, he was seated in the saddle in front of the masked man.

The reins were slightly jerked in the horse's mouth, and then the animal turned and trotted past the rocks, into the denser bushes. They continually climbed a steep mountain path, but the bushes grew so thick and lush against each other that they had to bend low repeatedly.

Leon's heart pounded heavily in his throat. He wanted to speak several times, but he was speechless with amazement. He never thought there were white people in the area. The people along the road had told his father that he was entering an inhospitable region. Here in the dense thickets along the Limpopo, where the underbrush, mopane, camel thorn, and other forest giants grow luxuriantly, there were few white people. He, his father, and Lettie had been camping here for almost two weeks now, and they hadn't seen any other white people in three weeks. And now...? Leon could hardly believe his own eyes.

"Where are you taking me, sir?" Leon finally asked, after they had

ridden in silence for a long time. The twilight was already descending cold and gray around them, among the bushes through which they wound, and the nocturnal animals had already begun to raise their voices.

The large figure behind him did not answer. They were now approaching a high rock formation. The horse climbed one last steep incline and went through the opening of a cave or a natural tunnel. Leon saw light on the other side, but in the middle of the tunnel, the horse shuffled around. The man lifted him neatly out of the saddle. Leon quickly looked at the man again. He was surely six feet tall. He wore a khaki shirt, gaiters, and riding pants, and his black eyes, it seemed to Leon, gleamed menacingly behind his mask. It looked like there was now a smile resting on his calm face.

“Get off, boy!” the man barked at him sharply.

Leon hesitated for a moment, but then jumped nimbly off the horse.

“But where the devil are we going, sir?” he asked kindly but bewilderedly, with signs of fear in his voice.

“You are going to tell us first where you come from. There have never been any white people in this area. We don’t want them here!”

The bulky man with the walrus mustache leaned over the rock in front of him and shouted inside.

“Sarel! Open up, old chap! Open up!”

A hollow voice immediately answered. It almost gave Leon the shivers, but he was more surprised than anything else.

There was a crack from behind the rock, and slowly the heavy stone rolled aside. Leon could see the tip of a stink wood pole sticking out. He realized that the person behind the rock was using the pole as a lever to move the massive stone. Gradually, an opening to a cave appeared in front of him, large enough for a man to enter without having to stoop very low.

Once again, Leon looked into the face of a man with a mask over his eyes. He was of a smaller build. In this warm, tropical air and the oppressive atmosphere that crept through the trees, the man stood wearing a long raincoat. He had a bushy, unkempt beard. He laughed, and Leon saw a row of yellowed teeth. Likewise, he spoke in a raspy voice, hoarse, like that of a macaw. He also spoke with a strange,

foreign accent. Even to the eighteen-year-old, this was clear.

Then the coarse laughter came again from the cave opening.

“Aha, Bart, so you’ve caught the young hunter! Bring him inside. Bring him inside!” cackled the voice, and he made a bow and gestured with his large, calloused hands.

Leon instinctively took a step back. This strange man with the long, dirty, tangled beard frightened him. He aimed for the opening through which they had just ridden. The next moment, he ducked under the horse’s legs and dashed away. He was at the entrance. It was already so dark that he could not properly see the path in front of him. He swerved left and right. Behind him, he heard the cackling laugh of the cave man with the raincoat. Something whipped through the air behind him, and the next moment he was lying flat on his back again, with the rope around his body.

“Come back, young lad! My rope is very long.”

The rope was pulled, and pains shot through the boy’s body as he was dragged back over the ground. At the cave entrance, he was roughly pulled upright.

The other man, half inside the cave, was now standing with a torch in his hand. The flickering light clearly revealed the boy’s features. There were now unmistakable signs of fear on his face.

“Let me go! What do you want to do with me?”

“We’re not letting you go, young man! Unfortunately, you’ve already seen too much.”

Quick hoofbeats echoed through the same opening where Leon had just tried to escape, and three riders came to a halt in front of them with foam-flecked horses.

The black, muscular animals snorted and blew as if they had been driven here in the greatest hurry.

The man in the lead dismounted from the saddle. Again, Leon looked up at yet another masked face. The man looked plump. His hair grew low over his forehead, and his long, bushy hair hadn’t seen scissors for months. His sleeves were rolled up, and his hairy arms were nearly deformed with all the muscles. Leon gaped at him.

“Sarel!” the muscular man shouted unnecessarily loudly at the person who had caught Leon with the rope. But he suddenly fell silent and

looked suspiciously at the barefoot boy with his half-mast trousers.

“And this one, Sarel? What is he doing here, and who is he?”

His eyes flickered suspiciously behind the mask, and the question came out rough and abrupt. The man addressed as Sarel hesitated at first and then respectfully answered.

“Sulg, this young man has been wandering around here for a few days and...”

The muscular giant immediately interrupted him.

“And what the devil do you have to do with him?” he asked, pointing with his whip at Leon. “Did he discover our hideout?”

The bulky hand gripped the whip tighter, and with the butt-end of the stick, he pressed Leon fearfully on his chest. Leon took a step back.

“No, Sulg, it’s not like that. I brought him here,” replied the man who had caught Leon.

Sulg grew angrier, which Leon could clearly see. He didn’t give Sarel a chance to finish speaking.

“You brought him here? And why did you do that? Are you insane? What are we going to do with him now?”

“Slow down, Master,” came the hesitant response from the other. “I will explain everything. The boy was walking on this side of the river. I was watching him the whole time. He discovered the cattle path and then walked along it.”

The person addressed as Sulg took a step forward, and his round cheeks turned red.

“What are you saying! Did he find the path...?” The man ground his teeth helplessly.

“Yes, Sulg, and I thought he might go and tell others about the path, and who knows, maybe he would have ended up here himself!”

Furiously, the masked figure approached. He also had a beard, but it was trimmed and neatly groomed. Unlike the others, he had no mustache. The other two, who had rushed in with Sulg, were clean-shaven.

The heavy figure was now right in front of Leon.

“So!” and the eyes behind the mask scrutinized Leon. “So, huh,” and then he turned to the others. “Let’s go inside, people. There’s a lot of work to be done tonight. A big haul like you’ve never seen before. What