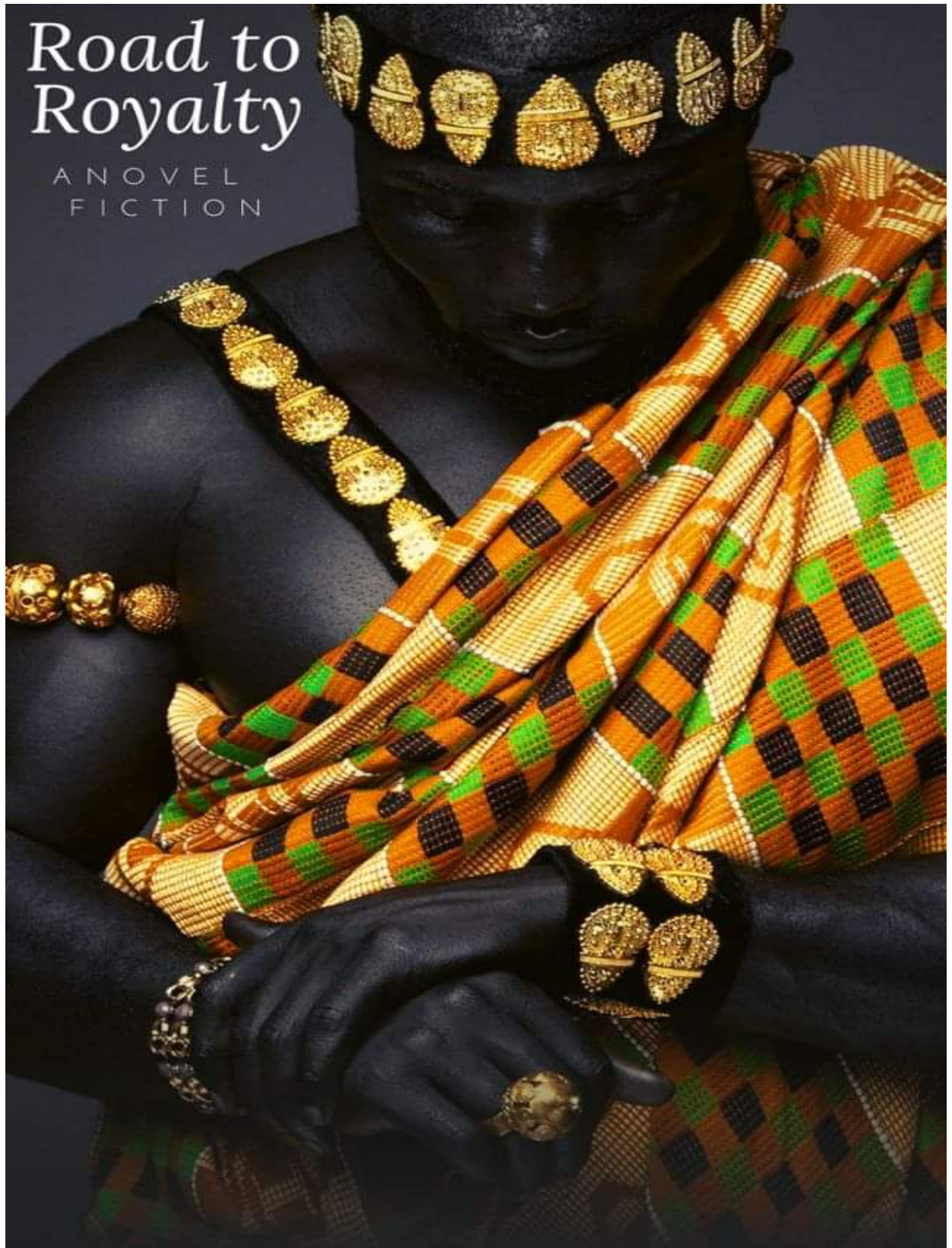


Road to Royalty

A NOVEL
FICTION



ROAD TO ROYALTY

One-

Her heart jolts at the sound of a door knob turning, she knows it's him. As crazy as this may sound, her spirit senses his presence even before he shows himself. She has been with him for so long that she is familiar with the sound of his footsteps, she can recognise his snuffles, his sneeze and the sound of his cough. Her soul is so familiar with everything he is that if she were blind, she is most certain that she would point him out in the midst of a crowd.

Just as the door opens, Amara sits on the bed where her clothes are scattered and a suitcase in the midst. Their eyes meet for a brief second and he's greeted by an accusatory glare rather than a usual smile from his darling wife. His eyebrows knit for a moment, questions fly around his head like paper planes before he lets one slip out of his mouth.

“What’s going on?” Funny how his words never falter, no matter how nervous or terrified he may be. The couple had a fight before Amara jolted to their bedroom to pack her bags, she had come home upset and in tears. When he asked what the matter was, she threw insults at him and how she has been a devoted wife to a man who has taken advantage of her love. Randall has been confused since.

Amara does not provide an answer, she opts to look away from him. She can see from her outlying vision that he is staring directly, at her.

“What is this Amara? Why are you packing your bags?” Randall is not one to raise his voice, but he is compelled to right now. His wife is angry for a reason he does not know, she’s packing her clothes and it is a bloody big suitcase.

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m leaving.”

“Why?” This is the calm before the storm, whatever that phrase means.

Still not wanting to explain much to him, Amara

reaches for her phone that's charging on the bedside table, scrolls through the pictures she received while on her way home from work and gently hands him the phone.

Confusion is like a slap in the face... His eyes widen as shock envelops the entirety of his face, it's as if he can't believe what he's looking at.

Randall probingly stares at the pictures of him in bed with another woman who is clearly not his wife. He searches his memory of what he observed that day, nothing much comes to him. Some visuals are vague, he can familiarise with a few things in that hotel room.

Like the bed covers, the lamp on the bedside table and the grey carpet on the floor. But the naked woman in his arms is a stranger, he doesn't know her. He cannot remember having any sort of conversation with her, neither can he recall taking her to bed. The memory of her savaging every part of him is there while he lay on the bed unable to

move and high on ecstasy.

Nausea tugs at him, he wants to throw up at the memory of him moaning and groaning with pleasure. Him being unable to get his hands off of the strange woman who was straddling him and making him feel good, although it was against his will. The pictures make him angry, he wants to smash the phone against the wall. But who took these pictures? And why did they send them to his wife? His heart is pounding so fast it could stop at any time.

“Amara!” His eyes become shifty and for the life of her, Amara cannot make out what the look means.

The Mrs stands to meet her husband’s height, he’s way taller than her, too tall that she has to stand inches away so not to strain her neck while looking up at him.

“Tell me it’s not true Randall, tell me this is all a lie.

Tell me it is photo shop, that there is someone out there who wants to destroy us. Tell me these pictures of you in bed with another woman are fake and I swear to our kids, I will believe you. Even if it's a lie, I will believe you."

Randall is silent, why is he not saying anything?

Amara's heart jerks at the silence, her insides churn robustly. The thought of her husband with another woman is disgusting. She can't stomach it even if it were presented to her in a form of chocolate cake.

Randall's furrowed brow pulls with a question. What is going on? She can almost mentally hear it. His lips part, readily, his voice standing at attention.

"Say something dammit." She screams in frustration, pulling his black shirt. Randall stares blankly at his livid wife, he has answers for her, but he is not sure if she will be able to take them.

"Amara, I'm sorry. Don't go please, you can't leave

me.” He is pleading for mercy.

“I’m leaving and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.” Amara sizzles, and continues with her packing.

“What about the throne?” Randall’s enquiry snaps her head back to him.

“What about it?”

“You’re my queen, everyone knows you as my queen. You are to sit on the throne beside me, Amara. How will I go back to Ghana without you? What will I tell the elders? What will I tell granduncle?”

“How about you fucked another woman, while your queen was waiting at home for you?” Hell hath no fury... listen to the words spoken by the fuming wife.

Amara has no control over her words anymore, anger has dominated her. She believes the pain eluding from Randall’s eyes is not on her, he is to blame for this. At this point she regrets taking his surname, maybe she should have stayed a Buthelezi

even after marriage.

“Amara.” He calls with concern etched on his face.

“It’s me... your husband. Are you really going to speak to me like that? Do I not deserve respect from you, at least?”

Not with that resentment enveloping her heart. She denies him an answer... and the packing continues, awkward silence has filled the room.

“Me hemma! (My queen.)” He calls.

His voice is soft and soothing. “Don’t leave like this please, we can fix this.”

“I doubt it Randall.” Yep, she has made up her mind. “I’m taking the kids with me.” Amara finishes.

Liyana their daughter goes with her everywhere and Randall knows that. Amara raised her from when she was nine years old, she only knows Amara as her mother.

He kneels in front of her, his hands on her knees.

The touch has Amara shuddering, but only with disgust. These hands were meant for her, thinking they touched another woman makes her cringe.

“Don’t touch me,” she whisper snaps and it hits him like a ton of bricks, hurt flashes in his eyes. It is brief, making her think she is seeing things that are not there.

“You can’t stand my touch now?” It doesn’t matter how tough he can be, pain has no favourites.

“Yes Randall, I can’t stand your touch.” His jaw clenches and unclenches at the sound of his wife’s bitter words, it is enough to have him pull away from her and stand to his feet. She stands with him.

“We have never been apart, let’s not start now. Please, we can get through this like we’ve gotten through everything else.” Randall pleads.

The feeling of defeat is overwhelming, it’s frustrating how he can’t snub it away. How can he make her see that he loves her? That his love is deeper than what she is seeing?

“Not this time Randall, you have hurt me in ways I never thought you would.” Amara is clearly blinded by anger, she is convinced in her heart that Randall is just like all men, not the prince charming she thought he was. This is the first time that Randall is caught in such a predicament and the feeling of losing his wife is scarier than anything he’s ever known. He can lose it all but not Amara.

“I didn’t do anything, please.” Desperate and his brain befuddled, Randall steps closer to his wife. You’d think she would move, but he’s giving her that look that renders her weak.

Wrapping his arms around her, he holds her close. Her heart jerks at the feel of his breath on the crook of her neck, the sensation of the mild kisses rush to her knees to weaken them. Amara knows she will fall the second Randall lets go. After so many years, she still trembles at his touch. “You know me better than this Amara.” This is how a desperate husband pleads.

“I- I thought... I did.” She succeeds in responding without losing her breath and as hard as it is, Amara slowly slips out of her husband’s arms and lest she falls, she sits back on the bed. “I guess I was wrong.”

“Dammit Amara,” he shouts. “Why are you so stubborn? Why won’t you listen to me?”

The anger is expected, he is human after all. What Amara does not expect is Randall slamming a fist against the dry wall. She flinches and stifles a low scream, eyes wide with shock and disbelief.

He realises that he’s upsetting her and feels a need to apologise, but she doesn’t give him a chance to do so. A terrible thought has forced its way into her head, it brings about her insecurities.

Playing with her fingers, her lips part hesitating to release words. Randall sees the question in her eyes, he would ask, but opts for her to speak whatever is

stuck on the tip of her tongue.

“Is...” the start is good, at least she managed a word. She cages her hips on the bed as she presses her hands on the mattress, her teary eyes leering up at the man she will never stop loving even if she were given the whole world. Their eyes lock, nothing is said within the next few seconds until impatience pulls Randall, causing his furrowed brows to elevate.

“Is that the reason you don’t touch me anymore?” she finally asks.

Randall’s heart sinks and cracks, this is not what he wanted. He didn't mean to pull away from her, it hurts him as much as it hurts her.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Two-

Randall is taken back to the day after he came home from a business trip. He wasn't himself, Amara could sense it as well. For the first in his life, he became sensitive to a whole lot of things, Amara especially. He spent more time in the shower, an hour was too little a time. Baths were no longer an option till today, which was a surprise to Amara considering the man loved taking baths with her. He avoided looking at her naked body, passionate kisses and would jolt up when she would start seducing him. Randall would run to take a shower and spend hours in there.

It was sleepless nights after another, he would groan, cry and mumble words that didn't make sense in his sleep... This took a toll on their marriage, the only thing Amara could think of was that her husband did not love her anymore, that he was disgusted by her.

The couple would argue for hours until they wore themselves out, as much as they hurt each other, nobody wanted out of the marriage.

“I love you.” Randall says, standing a bit far from his wife now. He doesn’t want to hurt her and he might if they continue arguing like this.

“That means nothing to me right now Randall.” Amara snaps, she’s exhausted.

“So, you’re going to give up on us just like that? Like we never meant anything?” Randall shouts, he cannot understand how this is possible.

“You gave up on us when you cheated Randall, you tossed our love away when you lain in bed with another woman.” Her voice is louder than his.

“I told you, I didn’t do anything.” Surely there has to be a way to make her understand, this yelling must be giving them a headache.

“Then, how do you explain these pictures Randall?” Might as well stand on the rooftop so everyone can

hear that the Okolies are waging war against each other.

Amara snatches the phone from the bed and throws it at her husband, he sees it coming and ducks, but still manages to catch the mobile. Randall is a trembling mess, his sensitive side is emerging. He doesn't want that, he doesn't want to break down in front of his wife. What will he say to her? How will he explain his tears?

"Maybe Kenneth would have loved me better..."
Okaaay! That came out too fast and too loud.

Randall's eyes spasm with something unsettling, it sends cold shivers down her spine. He frantically grabs her arm and pins her against him, a gasp jumps out of her mouth as her chest collides with his upper torso. Eyes widened and heart racing, Amara glares up at her husband. Randall does not act like this, he's never acted like this. Yes he can be possessive, but to hurt her is new.

“Don’t fucking say that to me,” he seethes between gritted teeth, an inscrutable expression painted on his face. “Don’t you talk to me like that Amara, I am still your husband.”

“Oh really?” She yells.

He lets her when she slips out of his tight grip and steps back, her face creases while she rubs away the pain on her arm.

“Did you remember that while you were on top of another woman?” The wife is going to great lengths to have him hurt as much as she is hurting.

“Amara!” He shouts, stepping closer with a threatening glare.

“I am done Randall,” Amara yells back.

What Amara does next has Randall’s eyes widening in shock, his blood runs cold. Never in his life did he think he would see his wife remove her wedding ring. He is still shockingly scrutinizing her left hand when she grabs the suitcase and starts lugging it towards

the door.

Arms wrap around her waist from behind as she touches the door knob, stopping her on her tracks. His warm breath tickles her neck, shivers ripple through her and like a fool, she trembles at the warmth of his body pressed against hers.

“Let me go Randall.”

“Don’t leave please.” His voice is a desperate whisper, an undertone that stabs her cold heart a little. “I’ll go, this is your house. It’s R.J and Liyana’s home, I will stay in the guest room for tonight. Just... don’t let my son leave his father’s house, please Amara.”

Amara hesitates a bit, before shifting from his arms and turns to face him. To assure him that she is not leaving, she gives him a nod.

Sighing in relief, Randall slides past her to get to the door. His feet falter, as if he doesn’t want to leave the room. Her heart jumps to her throat when he turns to her, studying her with unforgiving judgement.

“One more thing Amara,” his voice relapsing into a grating rasp. “Don’t, you ever mention Kenneth Mkhize to me again. You know I can be ruthless... me hemma (my queen) and I don’t want to tread that path.”

Randall slowly turns and walks out, leaving Amara in shock. Bringing up Kenneth, a man who once pursued her while she belonged to Randall was a bad idea, although she knew what she was doing. The plan was to hurt him, not make him angry enough to go on a killing spree.

ZITHA-

“I understand your concerns Zitha, however, keeping your mother here will only be a loss on our side. There is nothing we can do for her anymore, you need to take her home.”

“No please Melikhaya, you’re my only hope right now.

My mother can't be crowded in that house, you of all people should know how small it is and my aunt will..."

"Zitha please, do not make this my problem. I already did my part, the only reason I was able to extend her stay here is because of our friendship. I risked my job for you, you can't possibly ask me to further your mother's stay at this hospital."

"I'm desperate, please. Don't you think you owe us this much? Remember what my mother did for your parents a long time ago? If it were not for her, your father wouldn't be this big shot he is today."

Melikhaya's face tightens in disbelief, maybe I should not have said this.

Okay, I know I sound like a selfish prick, then again who wouldn't when their mother is involved? She's all I have, taking her out of the hospital means death for her. If my mother had a voice, she would complain about going in and out of the hospital. This place is basically her second home, sounds terrible I

know. I don't mean to nag Melikhaya, she has been of great help over the past months and I can never thank her enough.

"I'm sorry Khaya, you know I have a big mouth and I can't control it."

I can be annoying when given a chance and here I am annoying the poor woman, she huffs as she plunges her hands in the pockets of her doctor's white coat and judges me with a single glare.

"I'm done Zitha, you're on your own now." I watch her walk away, I would call her back and demand that she helps me. It seems she has forgotten that seventeen years ago, my mother helped her father get a job at a big company and that's why they were able to pay for her studies. I'm not as mean as I sound, I'm desperate and out of options.

"Sorry sisi," someone taps my shoulder from behind, I turn to a nurse wearing the most arrogant face I've seen so far. She holds me a paper and pen.

“Please sign and take your mother home, we have a patient who needs the bed.” I should record her arrogant voice and send the complaint to her bosses, but I’m a nobody. Reluctantly, I sign the damn thing, she snatches it back, and catwalks down the hallway.

“Just wait there, someone will bring your old lady to you.” She arrogantly tells me while walking away.

May she trip and break a tooth or two. I should have pulled that ugly wig off her head and ran with it, nonsense...

“Hey, hey careful.” I shout at the male nurse pushing my mother’s wheelchair towards me, why the clumsiness though? He gives me a funny look, if he wasn’t cute, I would return it ten times. Beautiful men intimidate me, I dribble on my words if not on my legs to fall underneath them.

“This is not a trolley from Shoprite, she’s human man.” I tell him.

Thank God I got those out, usually I bite my tongue and ask for their numbers. The nurse does not seem

to care about my dramatics, he lets go of the wheelchair and stands with hands folded across his chest. God come see this thing you created, it wants to seduce me without actually doing anything.

“Don’t take the wheelchair home with you, we don’t run a charity here.” Eww!!! Major turn off, how dare he think I will steal a bloody wheelchair.

“I know because this is your uncle’s hospital, right?” The bastard frowns at my remark, I’m turned off by his arrogance, so my mouth is on fire right now.

“You’re too forward for a pretty lady.” Come on now... did Mr. Nurse just call me pretty? Wait, don’t get too excited Zitha, he said pretty, not beautiful. Pretty is ‘you have a big nose but your eyes are to die for.’ Pretty is ‘you have long legs but they look like chicken drumsticks.’ Basically, pretty sounds like an insult. I should write a letter to whoever composed the English vocabulary to rid of that word.

My mind takes me back to my mother who is

sleeping on the wheelchair. How am I going to get this woman home? It's late at night and the only option I have is to request an Uber.

"Listen..." I move close to the cute nurse, a frown is his response. I don't care, I need this wheelchair more than he does. He'll probably be riding it down the hall through the entire nightshift.

"Say... I borrow the wheelchair and..." his eyes chase my hand that's drawing circles on his chest.

Oh Shembe! A hairy chest? Send help now... I choose to look into his eyes than the bit of hair peeking through his shirt, they are rather dreamy. The man does not look pleased, is he gay or what? Here's a whole woman trying so hard to seduce this boy, can't he at least pretend to be turned on. I'm bloody trying here.

"No!" he says and gently pushes me before I lay down my offer, we might as well close the country. Men are not seduce(able) anymore.

"Hey, you didn't even hear what I had to say." I'm

extremely offended.

“I don’t care sisi, please leave the wheelchair outside.”

“Argh!” I draw back and fold my arms across my chest. “Is this your father’s wheelchair?”

He laughs mockingly. For that stupid, cute laugh. I will steal this wheelchair, they will never see me again.

“Whatever, go to hell.” I snarl at him.

I’m annoyed and stranded. Although my mother lost a lot of weight over the years, she’s still heavy. To top it off, she is tall. How will I carry her into the house? That’s if I have enough money to pay for an Uber.

I curl my hands on the wheelchair, turn my back to the nurse and make sure my flat ass pops out enough for him to see what he’s missing. Not that I would’ve given him any. Dammit, I should’ve worn tight jeans. Who said loose pants are always cute?

The idiot chuckles as I shake my hips from left to right while pushing the government wheelchair. I'm taking it home, he can't tell me nothing.

I would say the evening breeze is bliss, but not today. Today it reminds me how broke and miserable I am. Just as I thought, my wallet is empty. I'm standing outside in the cold, the jersey my mother has on barely keeps her warm. Melikhaya should have prepared me for this, I would have brought warm clothes for her.

There's a car coming, it's an Uno. The driver stops right in front of us, he jumps out before I could check who he really is.

"Are you Zitha?" Oh Lord! Who is this creepy looking man? I cling on to my mother's wheelchair and my bag. The man frowns when I start pushing the wheelchair backwards.

"I don't have money bhuti, please..."

“Ulwazi sent me here, she said you’ll need transport.”
The man says and I am flabbergasted. “I’m her brother.”

He hands me a phone, I hesitate, but the look he gives me chastises me.

"She wants to talk to you," he sounds scarier with each word he speaks. If he really is Ulwazi's brother, I will never forgive her for sending me a man who looks like he walked out of serial killer documentaries.

With shaky hands, I take the phone and the first thing my friend does is explain the scary looking man standing in front of me.

“You do know he has an eye patch and a big scar across his face? How do you expect me to travel with him?” I complain to Ulwazi over the phone. I need to check the list I wrote God when I asked for friends. I don’t remember crazy being on the list. The man heard me, he scoffs and stabs me with his one eye.

“Just get in the car, he’s a marshmallow that one.”
Ulwazi insists, she’s laughing.

I don’t see a marshmallow, I see Papa-Action from
Yizo Yizo. Beggars really can’t be choosers, it’s
either we go with this scary man or sleep here.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Three-

“Call me when you’re done, I’ll come and pick you up, okay?”

“Okay papa.” She unbuckles the belt, enthusiasm filling her up.

“Hey wait, I’m not done.” She stops at the sound of his reprimanding tone, her father is strict, so strict that he wants to know where she is and what she’s doing at that time. “No boys, princess.” His words have her wanting to shy away, she is not about to discuss boys with her father. Not him... Never.

“Eww papa,” The girl sings.

Her father would believe the sour face taking over her facial features, but he is too woke not to know what girls her age get up to.

Liyana grew up so fast, turning nineteen in a few months. If Randall could turn back time so she can

be that innocent little girl who followed him everywhere, he would.

“Okay, be careful princess. Love you.”

“Love you too papa.” A kiss on his cheek and she flies out of the car, the wind blows her away before he could remind her again to be careful. Being a father is not easy, maybe when Liyana was a little girl. But now she is growing, she wants to be everywhere at the same time. She follows the latest trends, wants the latest gadgets. And who knows? His little girl might be having a crush on some boy with hormones that of a dog.

If only Randall knew where his daughter is headed, he would drag her back to the car, lock her in her room and throw away the damn key.

Liyana Okolie has grown up to be a strong-willed young woman, her parents Randall and Amara are beyond overprotective of her and that alone aggravates Liyana to the core. It stops her from

living her best life, experiencing new things and living on the edge.

Lying to her parents has become a norm, sometimes it bothers her that they might find her out. She wishes that she could be free and gallivant around town, showing off her love. Yes, her love. The man in bed next to her captured her heart after months of trying.

Her father thought Liyana was meeting up with friends at a mall, but the girl had a date with her boyfriend. Zwelethu Mkhize, a man who spent months courting the girl. This is the fellow Liyana is with most of the time, when her parents assume she is with her friends. He is the reason behind her lying tongue.

She is at his house, on his bed, ready to have sex with him.

He's a twenty nine year old experienced man and Linaya is so sure that she's ready to give herself to

him. It's the only way she can prove her love. Giving him her innocence.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" His voice is exotic and sensual, she is new to this. The feelings rushing through her veins, the hot flashes and today her heart thumps in an extra ordinary way.

"I love you." she replies to his question with these three simply words, that pull a smile to his face.

"I love you too." His response makes her smile, but it doesn't reach her ears. It's a nervous one, she is about to let a man inside her. Two years they dated without anyone knowing, secretly meeting. Liyana loves everything about Zwelethu, his mature nature, the way he holds her in his arms. The spark in his eyes when he looks at her.

His touch is gentle, soft and promising. It's filled with love, his hands burn with desire. His kisses wet

with dew drops of love, a type of worship that leaves her awed.

Zwelethu takes his time to undress her, his gaze kept on her to make sure she is okay. He's been waiting for this moment, for this woman to give herself to him completely.

"I love you," he says, slowly tattooing her face with placid kisses. Her body is trembling under his touch that she has to clench her teeth to stop the quavering. Her top goes first, revealing her breasts. He's already hard from having her close to him and can't imagine how it will be like to finally taste her. His erection throbs with excitement, he's experienced and if it were with any other woman, he would be on the joy ride.

But this one is delicate, this is her first time and he has to be gentle.

Liyana is nervous, the drips of sweat forming on her forehead are evidence. Her body is trembling, she's not sure if it's from fear or the cold breeze smashing

against her naked skin.

She gulps nervously, he hears it and almost chuckles.

He leans in to place a kiss that'll help her calm down, it's slow... gentle... barely there but passionate in all ways. In such a way that it brings about tears in her eyes.

Zwelethu grazes her collarbone with wet kisses, her body whimpers under him. He's pushing against her until she's lying flat on her back, she's afraid to touch him, she doesn't know what to do; this is a first. How does she even do it? What if she does it wrong? What if she freezes?

"Relax, sthandwa sami, I've got you." He whispers against her mouth, and she releases a long breath, a whimpering mess she has become. His mouth, hands and skin worship her, this way the kisses will distract her and she won't be as terrified.

Now that she's naked, he moves back, kneeling on

the bed as if kneeling before a queen. His red-rimmed eyes adoring every inch of her uncovered body, Liyana has never exposed herself to a man before.

Naturally, her arms rush to cover her nudes and shies away from his perverted gaze.

“Don’t,” a gentle whisper leaves his mouth, while he removes her hands from her breast and vag!na. “I want to see you, I want to cherish this moment. So I will relive it when I miss you and one day when we’re old.” The thought of growing old with Zwelethu puts a smile on her face. “You’re beautiful.” The man is a master at uttering sweet nothings, he is Zulu after all and rumour has it, they have a way with words.

Leaning in, Zwelethu kisses Liyana like it’s the first time. After he's satisfied with his kisses, he jumps off the bed and casts his clothes away leaving him as the way he came into the world the day he was born, he wants her to see him as well.

There's a condom where his phone is, the man prepared for this day. He wears it while looking at the young woman on the bed, she smiles at the sight. He returns it but his is too short and barely visible to be considered a smile.

Zwelethu climbs back on the bed, hovers over Liyana and gradually lowers his naked body on top of hers, making sure he doesn't squash the poor human with his big built. A few more kisses to calm her down, arouse her and get her to a comfortable position. Liyana winces when he slowly pushes his erection inside her nether regions, she pulls back and that puts Zwelethu back to square one.

“Hold on to me Liya, I will never let you go and relax your body, it will hurt if you're tense.” He says kissing the corner of her mouth before linking his eyes with hers.

Liyana believes him, he's never lied to her before. Another try and slowly he pushes in, it hurts like hell.

She winces and clenches her arms around him.

This sex thing is strange, her friend told her it wasn't bad. If Liyana remembers correctly; her friend said sex is like a rollercoaster ride. It's scary for the first few seconds until you're up high, that's when everything fades away and all you can think about is reaching your happy ending. For her eighteenth birthday, the same friend bought her a dildo just for practice. She went as far as to demonstrate it for her, Liyana wouldn't try it. The box is hidden away in her room somewhere, where her mother would never find it.

"Is it supposed to be as painful as this?" She can't take the pain anymore, he doesn't answer. Typical horny man has lost focus, he wants to get in. He has to penetrate her or he will lose his mind. Her nails dig into his shoulders as he continues to push in. Zwelethu almost jumps from the pain, but that might scare her.

“Are you okay?” He's back, it must be the scratch that snapped him out of his lustful ride. His own question puts him on the hot seat, she has to be okay.

“Yes.” She replies.

Her eyes suddenly widen, her body freezes and hands fall to her sides.

“Shit, shit.” Zwelethu rumbles, smashing a fisted hand on the mattress. He knows what's happening to her, the incident occurred before. About a month ago, they were making out on his couch when suddenly she froze. He didn't know what to do, so he sat there praying to God and his ancestors to help Liyana. It took almost a lifetime for her to snap back to reality, but this time it could be different. It's surprising that her ancestors let it go this far, question is, will she ever get up?

A thought suddenly comes to mind as he pulls his member out and slowly covers her naked body.

“Zitha.” The name escapes his mind and pools out of

his mouth.

Zitha is Liyana's closest friend, more like a sister and she is the only one who knows about their love affair. Zwelethu finds his phone on the bedside table, he scrolls a few names down till the name pops up on the screen.

"If you're Tshepo, drop the call now before your mother curses the day you were born after I have insulted you. If not, then you have the wrong person, no, I am not on Tinder and no that's not me on that picture, I don't do nudes. If you're a billionaire, then darling you're not lost." Zitha speaks without greeting.

He rolls his eyes at the lady blabbering on the receiving end.

"Should I accept the fact that you will never save my number?" Zwelethu asks, preparing to deliver the bad news. He hears an exasperated sigh from her.

“Oh it’s you, you’re not dead... yet?” Zitha spits back, her tone carries nothing but boredom. One can tell she is not a fan of the man she’s talking to.

“Can we put our differences aside? Liyana needs help.” Yep! He said Liyana, the one Zitha tends to be overly protective of.

“What have you done to my friend this time? Need I remind you, I know how to get away with murder.”

“I didn’t do anything, we were making out and she suddenly froze.” Zwelethu feels embarrassed having to explain his private life to his girlfriend’s best friend.

“Oh great, I should have known. Tell me, Zwelizwe or whatever your father named you. How high is your sex drive? Because from where I’m standing, you’re a porn star who can’t get enough of...”

“Insulting me will not help Liyana.”

“Oh relax, it’s not like you care about her anyway. You wouldn’t have risked her life if you did. When are you going to stop trying to smash my friend? Do you

know who she is?" Zitha knows that the Okolie ancestors are possessive of their daughter, no man will ever touch that girl if they have anything to do with it and if Liyana continues to deny them she will never have her happy ending.

"Listen" Zwelethu snaps, annoyance in his tone. There is no time to entertain Zitha's insults. "I'm looking at a frozen Liyana as we speak." He's panicking, although he's been faced with this situation before. Zitha finds humour in his words, the young lady can't help but laugh at the circumstances.

"Oh my poor friend, now I will have to teach her how to masturbate, or she will never know what an orgasm feels like, not that you were going to give her one. Do you think her ancestors will freeze her hand if she starts touching herself?" Zitha asks and quickly gives an answer before Zwelethu could say anything. "I don't think so too, although I'm starting to think they have a problem with sex"

“Zitha please, this is an emergency.” Zwelethu is clearly exasperated.

She giggles, she is having fun at her friend’s expense.

“You don’t play with the underground gang Zwelisha, then again you’re an Mkhize. You lot think you know better.” She gets the name wrong again.

“Are you going to help me or not?” Aggravated, Zwelethu barks at her. Zitha hates it, but she doesn’t voice it out. Liyana needs help, she will deal with the angry Zulu man later.

“Do this, take her outside and make her stand on soil barefooted. Take a handful of it from where she was standing, make sure her shadow is there when you scoop the soil. Place it in a bowl, add water and let it boil for about two minutes then help her steam her body, she should be okay after that.” Zitha knows this well, there is nothing about Liyana that she doesn’t know. Zwelethu though, has been told to solve for X, why does life have to be so difficult?

When will he catch a break?

“I don’t know how you’re going to do all that, just don’t bend my friend, she is not a blow up doll.” Zitha finishes, just to piss Zwelethu off. He knows Liyana’s situation, yet he still provokes her ancestors.

“Thank you?” He sends his gratitude, he doesn’t give Zitha a chance to reply.

He tosses the phone on the bed, throws his clothes on. He'll dispose of the condom later, it's not important right now. He has to help Liyana into her clothes, he finds a morning gown in the wardrobe and drapes her with it. The task won't be easy and he's not sure if it will work, but keeps his fingers crossed.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Four-

AMARA-

People think being a wife is easy... sigh! He is still around, he didn't keep to his word of leaving and I haven't mustered up the courage to oust him out. He told me a bunch of mumble jumbo about how R.J will be affected by our separation.

I can't think straight with him around, I need space, I need time alone. I need to be away from him, surely I am not asking for too much. His presence has me confused about a whole lot of things, like when I see him play with the kids. Randall the cheater is wiped away from my eyes and I start to adore Randall the family man.

"Mom, I can't find my soccer boots." He doesn't

knock when he enters my room nor does he greet.

“Hey, what did I say about knocking?” He’s standing in the doorway smiling up at me, why am I falling for his charms? R.J is his father’s child.

“Sorry, mom.” He murmurs below a whisper and tramples in barefooted, he throws himself on my bed which is something I have warned him about.

“What is it R.J?” I have to abandon my things just to accommodate him.

The little boy sits up Indian style and pats the empty space beside him. I can’t entertain him, I’m late for work. So I scold him with a single glare that has him puckering his lips.

“I can’t find my soccer boots mom,” this child is forever losing his things, what am I going to do with him? Sighing in frustration, I decide to give him my full attention. It’s a good thing I’m ready for work, R.J can be a very big distraction.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Lord, this child. What he’s wearing drains all the strength in me, and he has the audacity to shrug his shoulders as if he’s oblivious to what I’m observing. “R.J you’re not even dressed for practice yet?”

“I can’t find my boots,” he’s lying, we go through the same thing every Friday afternoon where R.J hides his soccer boots and I spend an hour looking for them. I don’t know why Randall had him take up soccer, the boy clearly hates it.

“Why don’t you quit?” I have suggested this before and he plainly declined, I don’t know what he wants.

“I don’t want to,” this is what I’m talking about. He won’t quit, yet he hides his shoes.

“R.J, mom needs to be at work before 5pm. Please work with me, baby. Get your shoes, so I can drop you off.”

“My tummy hurts, can I skip practise today?” His hand suddenly finds a possible pain on his stomach, honestly I do not have time for this.

“Fine, I have work. Chioma will take care of you.” The boy regards me with cartoon eyes, a desperate look of some sort.

“Please stay with me, mommy.” He pleads, flapping his eyelashes. Mommy? This child is nine, the only time he calls me mommy is when he wants something.

“You know I can’t miss work,” I tell him, grab my handbag and get ready to head out, but R.J scampers off the bed and blocks my path. He is looking up at me with his Bambi eyes.

“Please,” he sings and for the life of me, I am tempted to stay.

“I’ll be home before dinner, I promise.” This should make him smile, and he grins like a Cheshire cat.

“Yes!” The boy rejoices, throwing a fist in the air. “I’ll tell Liya, you’re joining us for dinner.”

With this announcement, he pounces out of the room in excitement. I thought he wasn’t feeling well,

Randall has to talk to him regarding this soccer thing. I don't want my son doing things he doesn't like.

Now I have to go to work and pretend to be sick so they send me home.

RANDALL-

Randall faintly smiles at his son running to him, he almost bumps into the coffee table but manages to dodge it and jumps on the couch with his feet. He would chastise him, but he's too eager to find out what Amara said. The smile on the boy's face could only mean one thing... mission accomplished.

"And?" A curious Randall asks the young prince who jumps on his lap and suffocates him with a hug, he can't help but chuckle at R.J's cuteness.

“It worked dad, it worked. Mom will be home for dinner.” R.J happily announces, he pulls back from the hug and looks up at his father. Worry splashes in his eyes, his small hands start drawing circles around his father’s eyes. The sudden contact is random, hence the inquisitive look on Randall’s face.

“What is it Kwame?” Of course dad has grown curious.

“Liya told me what these circles mean dad, you haven’t been sleeping. Are you and mom still fighting? I heard you guys arguing the other day.”

“The last time I checked you were nine, not sixteen.” It bothers Randall that his kids are growing up, given a chance to make a wish, he would freeze time for an eternity. That night he fought with Amara, he went to his son’s room. Watching him sleep, Randall decided that he would fight for his family even if it meant not respecting Amara’s wishes. Leaving the house is the same as giving up on his marriage and kids and that’s something he’d never do.

“Liya teaches me a lot of things, she’s also been teaching me self-defence.” He jumps off his father’s lap and starts practicing random kicks, careful not to knock off objects in the lounge. “Look how high I can kick dad.”

Randall chortles at the sight, he grabs his son by the waist and sits him back on his lap.

“Why is your sister teaching you self-defence? Is everything okay Kwame?” R.J drops his head and falls into a series of thoughts, it’s not a secret that the child has something in his mind.

“Nothing is wrong dad,” his answer has his father furrowing his already puckered brow, he senses something and there’s an urge to push the conversation further. He decides otherwise, knowing R.J will tell him when he’s ready.

“Hey!” At this, Randall cups Kwame’s face. The little boy timidly looks up at him, his innocent eyes make Randall’s heart clip. He can’t imagine anyone hurting

his baby. "Who is there for you?"

"You, dad."

"Who will always protect you?"

"You."

"Who loves you more than anything in this world?"

"You."

"Good." Randall finishes and pastes a soft kiss on his forehead, the little boy's nose crumples up and he falls into giggles as he sends a hand to wipe the wetness away.

"Eww dad," he whines, shying away from his father's loving gaze.

"I thought you'd be used to this by now." Randall kisses him again and envelops him in his arms. The hug is tight, R.J is not complaining, moreover, he loves it when his father babies him.

"I love you, Kwame." Randall proclaims, tightening the hug and loving the giggles emanating from the

little boy.

“I love you too Uze.” R.J adds a tease, and earns himself a scolding stare from his father. “I mean dad, I love you more dad.”

The boy’s wide grin melts his father’s heart.

ZITHA-

“So, what does this mean? Is my girl still a virgin or Mkhize broke the glass?”

“I don’t know, we didn’t go that far. Or maybe we should ask the ancestors since they know everything.” Liyana snorts.

When I called her, she wasn’t in the mood to talk. She expressed how she feels embarrassed and has been avoiding that fool she calls a boyfriend for three days now.

“What were you thinking Liyana? I thought you said

you'll wait till you've figured out what they want from you."

"Well...I thought since Zweli loves me, they won't interfere." Yeah, right.

"Like they didn't interfere the number of times you two were making out? You should know better than to risk your life, you're lucky they haven't put you in a comma." Me and my big mouth, I have probably given them an idea. "Oh no, do you think they are listening? Liyana someone in the underground is taking notes."

"Come on Zitha," she's laughing, hopefully not at my stupidity. "I doubt that is possible, I think they do those things because they want attention."

"They want you to accept your gift, babe." I retort.

Isn't that the reason why the dead decide to invade our lives?

"I'm not ready, they'll want me to wear beads and

ancestral clothes. I will have to live for other people, I'm not ready to give up my life just yet. I'm still young, can't they wait till I'm like fifty or something?" I almost laugh at Liyana's words.

"What life are you talking about virgin Mary? Is it not you waiting for Saint Gabriel to come and tell you that you are with child."

"But Zweli and I have tried to do it many times and they interrupted us. I would be experienced if it were not for them." This girl is not getting me, geez innocent girls can be a pain in the anal.

"That's boring Liya, one man is not enough. But forget about that, don't be me. I can do whatever I want, you have a crazy father who will castrate any man who tries to stab your cake." I tell her the truth and nothing but...

"Papa is better, grandpa is the problem. It's bad enough that he can see everything from wherever he is. Ancestors do not care about privacy, they watch us like hawks." She grumbles.

“True babe, they do as they please. When they roar, you better listen. The calling does not go away, it only gets louder. Maybe you should do some kind of ritual to appease them.” I’m a genius, I know. I hear Liyana sigh in defeat upon my suggestion.

“They won’t accept it, this whole charade started when I was R.J’s age. They have waited for too long, but it’s my life. I will live it as I please.” She sounds like a spoiled brat, I should call her out on it.

“Yeah right, you know that’s not how it works. You’re black babe, don’t give them that model C attitude. They don’t understand that, am I allowed to pity my friend? If it’s not your ancestors, it’s your father acting like Chuck Norris. That man is a different kind of ancestor, he’s got surveillance cameras on you.”

Mr. Okolie scares me, sometimes I think he knows about Liyana’s relationship with Zwelethu. The last time I was at Liyana’s house, he was glaring at me like I grew a pair of horns. I swear I almost told on

Liyana, I was ready to give him Zwelethu's address, cell number... his father's name and where his grandparents are buried. And probably help him pick the murder weapon, boy when Mr. Okolie finds out about that relationship, all hell will break loose.

"I can take care of papa, don't worry about him."
Liyana.

My cousin charges into my room just before I could deliver a hefty comeback. Her nostrils flare as she eyes me like I'm covered in shit.

"Who is going to watch your mother when you're busy gossiping on the phone?" Yoh, this girl's words are sour. She probably sucked lemons from her mother's breast as a baby. I nod and gesture that she leaves. She walks out with a tongue click, swaying her uneven hips.

"I have to go, my mother needs me," we have been talking on the phone for too long.

"Okay, I'll call you in the morning." I'm not happy about Liyana's proposal.

“You and your morning calls, don’t you need time to recharge after waking up, maybe until 12pm?” I tell her, to have her laugh at my question.

“I’ll text you then,” sounds better, that way I will take my time to respond. “Kiss your mother for me.”

“I am not doing that,” I dispute, maybe they do it in Ghana, not here. We shake our parent’s hands or greet while standing five feet away from them.

My mother is sick, no one knows what’s wrong with her, not even doctors. It was a sudden sickness, it began with her crying of painful joints. One day she woke up and couldn’t move, her body gave up on her. Doctors gave up on her, two years later she is still bedridden. I have to feed her and clean her. We live with my aunt and her daughter Sizakele in Orange Farm.

Aunt is a nurse, she works night shifts most of the time. Sizakele is two years younger than me, we are not really best of friends, we butt heads a lot, like my mom and aunt used to before she fell ill. I’d like to

think they are still at daggers drawn because despite being a qualified nurse, aunt refuses to touch my mother. She claims that she's forever tired, even on her off days.

I bid my friend goodbye after she reminds me about her parent's anniversary party, Liyana is throwing the don of all parties for her parents. Her words, not mine. She says it's going to be the biggest party ever thrown amongst the elites. Where there are beverages, I am there and nope I am not talking about Oros.

I met Liyana during the second semester in Varsity, we've been friends ever since. When I was in primary school, I was accelerated for two years. The joys of skipping two grades because you're too smart for your peers... I have lived hey...

Seriously, I have to slaughter a goat for my ancestors, just to thank them for giving me brains. Maybe go to church for two Sundays, to thank God

as well. Christmas and Easter will do. What more will they want from me, I would've completed my task in life.

I graduated with a degree in Marketing, although I wanted to further my studies, money became an issue but mostly, my mother needed me. I'm a nineteen year old, unemployed young South African.

I head to my mother's bedroom, the house has four bedrooms. It's an RDP house, belongs to my aunt. She renovated it four years ago, we've been living with her for as long as I can remember. I have hated it here my whole life, Varsity was my sweet escape.

My mother's eyes meet mine as I walk into her bedroom, she would smile at me if she were not a vegetable.

"Mama." I kiss her cheek, to realise that her skin is cold. There's an extra blanket in the wardrobe, I use it to drape her body. My mother can't speak, she can only hum. It pains me to see her in this state, if only

my father didn't decide to die, maybe things would be different. The man chose the wrong time to die, before I was born. Maybe the thought of meeting me killed him... what other conclusion should I come up with? No one wants to tell me how the man left this earth and I've never seen pictures of him.

My mother would have gotten proper medical help if he were alive. When you're not privileged, society turns its back on you.

My dream is to work hard, make something of myself and help this woman. When she is better, I will give her everything she wants. I will spoil her... Isn't that what everyone wants for their parents? To live lavishly without any worries.

As I lay down beside my mother, Sizakele walks in. The look on her face says she is here to complain.

"I'm hungry," she spits as if I keep food in my room.

"So?" She should not try me tonight, I might just bark

and bite her.

“You haven’t cooked Zitha, what am I supposed to eat?” This girl is tickling me in all the wrong places.

“If you’re lazy to cook, drink water and go to bed.”

This is what I have to live with since my mother’s predicament. “Or should we call Gordon Ramsey? He’ll cook for you while serving you with a bunch of curse words, isn’t that what you like, Kele?” She frowns at my remark, I am just about ready to punch her flat nose. I would have told her shit, but my mother can hear everything. Out of respect for this once Shembe freak, I have to act like a lady. But my thoughts are a childish boy’s thoughts.

“I will tell mama about this, we’ll see if you’ll still have that big mouth of yours. Ugly bitch.” Sizakele throws insults, I can take them. I mean, she can do better. I want to tell her that the ugly bitch is her mother, I’ll keep that for later. Right now I need to think of a way to make her pay for her dirty mouth.

Forgive me, Lord for I am about to sin.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Five-

AMARA-

Here I am, keeping the promise I made to my son. I didn't think my husband would be joining us at the dinner table, he knows I don't want him anywhere near me. This must be a game to him, Randall is not taking me seriously. He's been throwing glances at me, eyes filled with nothing but adoration. Pity I'm not that naïve Amara anymore who melts just from mere sweet nothings.

"May I please be excused?" Liyana asks with a strained voice. She looks a bit pale and wacked.

"Are you okay baby?" She nods at my question and drops her fork in her plate, emanating a sigh that displays fatigue. Her eyes are on the barely touched food before her.

“I’m just tired,” her response gets Randall’s full attention.

“How are you tired? You’re a child who spends most of her time on the phone, surely that cannot tire you Liya. When do you get time to study?” Lord, this man... I was hoping he wouldn’t say anything upsetting.

“Randall,” I quietly reprimand him, he cannot be doing this now. His eyes briefly run to me, he doesn’t care really, he’s so bent on chiding the child.

“You failed your first year Liyana, plus two semesters this year. I’m basically throwing money down the drain.” His voice doesn’t rise, it never does when addressing the kids. But the soft tone he uses is enough to scare them. Liyana’s eyes snap to me, there’s an emotional expression laid on her face and her brows are knitted together. She wants me to intervene, however, disputing with Randall over this in front of the kids would be wrong.

“That wasn’t on me, papa, you know how hard I

studied.”

“Clearly you didn’t work hard enough, I’ve been lenient with you, let you do whatever you want. It’s enough, you need to take your work seriously Liyana. How will you have a future without an education? Your mother and I are not always going to be here.”

“You’re not listening to me,” her voice crashes as she blinks away tears pooling into her red eyes. I’ve noticed how she hasn’t been herself lately, but I’ve been too caught up in my own troubles to give her any attention.

“Liya, are you sure you’re okay?” I ask her again and she gives me two assuring nods.

“May I please be excused?” Her voice is stern this time, reminding me whose child she is.

“Go ahead baby.” I excuse her and Randall shoots daggers at me. I’m over it... Liyana grabs her plate and heads out of the dining room.

“You didn’t have to say that to her, you of all people know how hard she’s been working.” This is me letting him know how bothered I am by his careless words.

“I also know how she’s been failing,” he pauses as his eyes find his son across the table. R.J is only bothered with the food on his plate. “If she fails again this year, I won’t sponsor her studies. I will cut off her allowance, she will have to get a job.”

That is something I will not allow, he’s crazy this one and I am not going to justify his absurdity with an answer.

He is busy conversing with R.J when his phone beside me lights up, displaying a text message from a certain Caroline. My eyes run to him to find that he is oblivious to the text, curiosity knocks and my insecurities let it in. I quickly read the text while it’s still on home screen display.

WE HAVE TO TALK...

My heart violently thumps as pain tides through my veins. Who the hell is Caroline and what is this message about?

I see in my outer view that Randall saw me reading his texts, his clearing of a throat startles me a bit, but I compose myself and act like I did nothing. He snatches his phone as I start playing with my food and replies to the text before placing the phone on the other side where I can't reach.

Could that be his side chick? My mind is not at rest, I can't afford to stress again. It will affect my work, my personal health as well and that is something that means a lot to me.

For years I thought Randall was different from other men, Lord knows I was convinced he was my Romeo. All men are the same; women have sang this song for decades and I guess it is true.

From a prince to a troll, that's what he has become in my eyes. It is stupid of me to let him stay, however

he is right about R.J.

My baby would crumble if his parents were to break up, Liyana is a big girl now. I believe she can handle anything, if I decide that we go our separate ways, then maybe she will understand.

“Amara!” I hear a whisper that pulls me out of my muddled mind, I turn to see Randall worriedly staring at me. His face is too close that it has me wanting to pull back, but R.J is watching. “Are you okay?”

Hell, I am not okay, the nerve to ask me this after what just happened. I know most of Randall’s friends, his circle of friends is not big at all and one thing I know about my husband is that he doesn’t befriend women. How he fell into this one’s trap is a mystery.

I push my chair back and stand, “are you done?” I ask while grabbing his half empty plate and toddle to the kitchen without waiting for a response. I leave the plates in the sink and head to my room, my body

is numb. I'm insensate to any feelings, for days I have been walking around with a heavy heart. There is no way that I will ever forgive Randall for what he did to me.

A shower should help me calm down, it usually does. There is a knock on my door just upon my departure from the bathroom, thinking it is Randall, I ignore it. He is the last person I want to see right now.

"Mom open the door," R.J demands from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming baby," I cover myself up with a gown, R.J's innocent face puts a subtle smile on my face the second I open the door.

"Why did you lock?" Listen to this unemployed nine year old tenant.

"Who are you? My husband?" He grins at my question.

"I am your son who is way more important than your husband," with this declaration, R.J reveals a plate of

cheesecake and holds it to me. "Dad's idea," he grins. "I am not hungry, baby." Randall is trying to soften me up with desert, that man is a lost cause.

"You know he won't like it when I go back with this?" R.J flaps his eyes, pleading that I accept the food. "Don't finish the cake Kwame, save some for your mother. You know that's her favourite." He mimics his father's voice, throwing me into a fit of laughter.

"Fine, I'll take it. Thank you." My appetite depleted when I saw that text message, either way, I take the plate.

"Do you want milk with that?" My son and I turn at the sound of Randall's voice to find him standing with a glass of milk in his hand. "You like your cake with milk, remember?"

"Go find Chioma and ask her to prepare your bath." I excuse R.J not wanting him to witness the coldness I feel towards his father. With a pout on his lips, he

marches away and the moment he's out of sight, I turn back into the room and shut the door.

"Amara!" Randall painfully calls. "At least talk to me, let me explain."

He wants to explain? This better be good, I want to hear his explanation, so I open the door. He's standing right at the doorstep, looking down at me. Damn him for that unreadable expression on his face, can't he let me in just this once?

"Are you going to tell me who Caroline is and what that text was about?" He's biting his bottom lip, while I wait for an answer.

"Is it her?" A question leaves my mouth when I feel like I have waited a lifetime, his answer is taking too long to come and I am losing my patience.

"I love you, Amara. I don't want to lose you please."
What the hell?

"Is that all you're going to say to me, Randall?" I'm snappy yes, he's getting on my bloody nerves.

“I’m trying to protect you.”

“Protect me from what? I don’t need a hero Randall, I’m not that girl you rescued anymore. I can take care of myself.” I’m so angry, he lies to me and cries hero.

“So many things have happened Amara, I wish I could explain it all to you but...”

“But you’re protecting me, right?” This man must think I’m a fool, gosh searching his eyes is giving me a terrible headache. He intends to hide it all from me.

“I love you.” his hand touches mine, I snatch it back before he could intertwine our fingers together. I shake my head and take two steps back.

“Stop saying that, stop telling me, you love me.”

“It’s all I know Amara,” He gets into my personal space. “It’s the only truth I know.” His large hands cup my face as he declares his love, he leans down and presses his forehead on mine. I know he loves

me, I believe he does. But love is not always enough. What about trust? What about loyalty? This is the same man who has told me time and time again that he hates lies, yet here he stands before me unable to tell me the truth.

There is an urge to pull away from his touch, pain flashes in his eyes when I do, he doesn't want to let go. But I can't do this anymore, being in his presence aggravates me.

"Give me time, I promise I will fix this." He sounds and looks desperate, I'm done with his empty promises. As if he can sense my stream of thoughts, Randall frowns at me and for a moment his eyes are glued on mine. He puts his hand out gesturing I take it, I'm too upset to let him touch me again.

"Remember when I told you that if you cheat on me, I will leave you? I wasn't kidding Randall, when the time is right I will tell the kids everything. We're not going to leave this house, but you will."

The proclamation comes as a shock to him, I turn back inside the bedroom and close the door on his face.

Honestly, I feel nothing. I can't make out if he is genuine or not, if his words are true or not. The worry in his eyes, the concern in his voice and how he effortlessly takes care of me as it's a norm for him. Having him close to me will only make me more, angry. I can't stand the sight of him right now and it saddens me that I can't get away from him.

RANDALL-

Randall pushes back a flinch when Amara shuts the door on his face. If he could tell her what is really going on, he would. He had promised to be a good husband, he didn't promise her perfection. Perhaps Amara expected too much from him that she is

failing to look past his flaws. He thinks of knocking, but that will only aggravate her more. Going to bed and sleeping it off would be best. As he turns, his eyes find his son standing in the corridor. Shoulders slumped, head slightly dropped and tears streaming down his face.

“Kwame!” The name is covered in shock, he’s praying he didn’t hear anything that was said between him and Amara.

“Are you two getting...” he struggles to finish the question. It can’t be true that his parents are separating, what will become of him and his sister if that ever happens?

“No,” Randall catches on and interjects him straightaway, he can’t have his son think that. He marches to him and quickly scoops him in his arms. R.J does not hold him back when he embraces him, instead he stiffens his body. The boy shuts down when upset or hurt and this is what’s happening. “Your mother and I will never be apart, I promise.”

This he knows for sure and no one can tell him otherwise.

“Let me take you to bed.” He says and trolls to his room, R.J has not said much. He doesn’t plan to say anything, his heart is broken beyond and his parents are the culprits.

ZITHA-

“Mama, come home please.” Cries a seventeen year old over the phone, her half naked body is soaked in sweat and curled like a ball on the tiled floor. These are the effects of eating food that is not prepared by you, I decided to play the maid she wanted me to be and prepared a very special meal for my dear cousin. For the past thirty minutes, she was camped in the toilet, having a meeting with mother-nature. She should be glad I didn’t put rat poison.

“I don’t know mama, my stomach hurts.” Sizakele continues to cry while I’m laid back on the couch, catching up on the River. I should stop watching this show, I’m starting to think like Lindiwe.

Sizakele must have run out of airtime, the phone is slightly tossed to the side. If she were rich, she would’ve smashed it against the wall... you know, soft life.

She is rolling on the floor now, too dramatic if you ask me, girl is so stupid she hasn’t put the puzzles together as to why she has a runny stomach.

“Please keep it down, I’m watching TV.” I’m enjoying this, next time she pisses me off, I will make her kiss my ass.

“Shut up!” She screams.

I think I didn’t add enough, how is she able to yell? To piss her off any further, I open the windows and door as late as it is. She gives me a foreign look.

“Don’t look at me like that, I can’t breathe lethal

gasses.” I tell her as I cover my mouth and nose. Sizakele is one angry girl right now. Wait till I tell Liyana about this, let me take a video for evidence.

“What are you doing?” She questions my reason for aiming a phone at her.

“Smile cuzzy, you’re on camera.” I have to clench my teeth to stop myself from laughing, this is funnier than I had imagined. Tomorrow I won’t be laughing though. My aunt is going to deal with me, but heck, I only live once.

“Zitha stop, you did this to me.” Oops! “What did you put in my food?”

“Don’t be stupid Kele, we ate the same food. I was sitting right next to you, it must be something you ate earlier.” Listen to me, I can convince Jacob Zuma into giving me his Nkandla homestead.

“I’m going to bed, please close the windows and lock the door when you’re done. Enjoy your time with

mother nature.” She groans at the sound of my announcement.

Mess with me again and I will do this once more and block the toilet.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Six-

AMARA-

What normal person calls at this time of the night? I should know better than to sleep with my phone not on silent mode. I stir on the bed a couple of times in hopes whoever is calling would stop. Seconds go by and I have counted two missed calls, it rings again, I want to scream.

I'm so used to having Randall sleep beside me that I pat his side of the bed with my eyes closed, so I can ask him to answer the phone. The emptiness instantly reminds me that he hasn't slept in our room in days. I flick my eyes open and blink away the murkiness blinding my vision to meet a darkened space, the blaring phone is right on top of his pillow and the caller ID just puts me in a gloomy mood.

What does Uncle Jonas want now? He usually calls when something has gone wrong or there's a family meeting.

"Hello," my salutation is glazed with boredom. Why call me at this time?

"Give the phone to your husband," no greeting whatsoever.

Randall is sleeping in the guestroom, but of course, I can't tell him that.

"He's sleeping malume," I tell him.

"Wake him up," I don't think I like the tone of his voice. Something is up.

"What happened malume? Is everything okay?" I wasted my breath, this uncle won't tell me anything. Jonas is too old school, patriarchy becomes him.

"Amara, you know I don't mind driving over there at this time." He says in a chastising tone. I believe this is a threat, either way, I have to run to the guestroom.

I tell him to hold, my feet are slightly wobbly as I

scurry to Randall's current room, I knock twice and the door slides open. His eyes widen a little when he sees me and fall back to normality in seconds, my presence is shocking to him.

"It's uncle-Jonas." Hesitantly, he takes the phone as I hold it to him. His eyes are filled with questions, I don't have answers to. So I shrug my shoulders and cross my arms.

Randall hardly has the phone on his ear a jiffy before he gradually hands it back to me, this dark skinned man, ladies and gentleman has suddenly become pale. He is staring at me as if an alien stands before him, I'm waiting here stunned as to why he didn't say a word to my uncle.

"Did he drop the call on you?" I might as well ask or we'll stand here till morning.

"He wants us at the house first thing in the morning," is his chest heaving? Trust my uncle to terrify the likes of Randall, I'm not okay with this. He's still my husband and sure the sight does not sit well with me.

“You hardly held the phone against your ear, how...”

“Your uncle can be a dictator when he wants to, his exact words were ‘I WANT YOU IN EVERTON FIRST THING IN THE MORNING’ and hung up.” Randall says.

Ordering people around is uncle Jonas’ favourite thing to do.

“Did he say anything else?” I need to know so I can sleep like a baby.

He shakes his head, crosses his arms on his chest. The eye contact is too intense, almost intimate that my body yearns to be in his arms. A voice at the back of my head urges me to ask him to come to bed with me, it is what I want. Him, close to me and never far. What good will come out of that though? I will wake up in the morning with no answers and a broken confused heart.

“I’m going to bed,” my eyes blink to avoid his sensual stare. “Good night.” My last words to him as I take a step back and tiptoe my way back to my bedroom.

'You're not Amara when you come to our home, but Mashenge. So I expect you to dress accordingly, not tight dresses or those pants you're fond of. Wear a head wrap and cover your scrawny shoulders. You're a wife, act like one. Don't shame the Buthelezi clan, please.'

That's the message I woke up to this morning and that time she's a Buthelezi by marriage. Aunt Petunia knows how to ruin one's day. It's the scrawny shoulders that got to me, and the implication that I'm a skimpy dresser. Okay, it's not undisclosed that I prefer pants over dresses. However the anger infested in that text message was redundant.

"You know why we are here, right?" I might have an idea, he looks as nervous as I am. We're parked

outside the gate in Everton, this is where I grew up, where my childhood was taken from me. I've been here a couple of times over the years to visit my aunt and uncle, it doesn't scare me as much as it did before.

"Maybe," I answer, browsing the outside. However, I can feel his eyes on me... heavy, probing and lingering.

"Amara..." His hand is on mine and that has me turning to him. There's a look of desperation glazed in them, he wants to grovel again. This is not the time, uncle Jonas has most likely sensed that we are here and is on his way out. I hear the gate open and quickly claim my hand back. Thank God I did, my aunt would call this an atrocity. Her daughter and son in-law holding hands is something that should be done in the bedroom.

She smiles and waves as our eyes meet, I hear Randall release a sigh, undoubtedly aggravated. He hates being summoned by my family, he says uncle

Jonas is too nosy. I know my aunt to be forward and her opening my door proves it.

“Mashenge.” I was always Amara to her until Randall put a ring on it, she takes my marriage too seriously.

It could be that I’m married to royalty, aunt is as rural as they come. She and uncle Mhambi lived in Pongola all their lives until nine years ago when my kidnapping saga began.

I’m greeted with a reprimanding glare while Randall gets a handshake, mixed with a smile. All thirty two teeth out, I try to converse with her as she ushers us towards the house. My efforts are tossed away when she acts like I’m not here.

There is absolutely no need to use the front door, we could have entered through the kitchen. It would have given us time to breathe before meeting these six eyes stabbing us. The two brothers Jonas and Mhambi are seated on a two seater and I am dazed by Maphikelela’s attendance. He’s their cousin, from their father’s side. Looks more like uncle Jonas,

skeletal and naturally rude.

No one can ever take him seriously with that bright yellow Skhothane two piece that's plastered with Sponge Bob's face. He's complimented the outfit with orange Carvela shoes and an orange cap. In point of fact, this is his life. Spends money he doesn't work for on expensive clothing. Has someone told him how he looks like a clown in that outfit?

Randall sends his greetings as he settles down on a couch, Jonas and Maphikelela nod in return. Only uncle Mhambi is human enough to ask about his wellbeing. The two engage in a short conversation about work and life, nothing serious.

I'm perched up next to Randall, waiting for whatever this is to begin, so we can go home. This is not how my Saturday should be going, as I listen to Randall and Mhambi's miniscule conversation, I feel heavy eyes on me. They force me to lift my gaze and turn to my left, my heart twitches when I meet my aunt's

judgemental stare. Why is she sitting next to me? There are enough seats in here.

“Are you going to sit and not serve your husband something to drink?” Am I not a guest as well? She’s burning holes into my forehead, looking at me the way she looks at a live chicken before she slaughters it.

Turning to Randall, I clash with his furrowed brows, eyes mysterious. His forehead is boiling, forming dribbles of sweat. Good, I’m not the only nervous one here.

“Mashenge,” she pinches my thigh and that gets me on my feet. I scuttle to the kitchen without giving Randall a once over. Jonas and Maphikelela look ready to chow him, I hope they grill some sense into that big head of his... grill him until his cagey eyes give out every little secret he’s holding in.

“Is this what has become of you mntaka Vusamazulu?” I pivot on my heel with a wet cloth in

hand to find her standing in the doorway, looking blankly inscrutable. Searching her eyes is pointless because there is nothing except the raised brows that paint me with displeasure.

“Aunty?” I’m confused honestly, maybe I’m not. I might have a clue as to what she’s on about, somebody snitched on me and Randall. Not that I wasn’t going to tell them, I needed time and the story would have sounded better coming from me. I was going to paint Randall with all shades of gold and not taint his image in their eyes. He’s still the father of their grandson.

“Nywanti, nywanti.” She sputters.

No one prepared me for the ambush that’s coming, her lips curl in disgust while sneering at me.

“Tell me, Amara. How does it feel to walk around without your wedding ring on?” Ah! There it is... She’s spitting fire, making me feel like I’m the evil queen of the housewives of Johannesburg. Her eyes should pierce my left hand right about now... she’s still

staring, sweeping my figure with her fiery glare. I hide my hand with the dish cloth, why am I feeling shameful? Randall is at fault not me. I don't have a riposte for her, so I stand ground leaning against the kitchen counter and wait for her to hit me with her best shot.

"Finish up here and come to the lounge," her voice is sharp, she's gone before I can answer. Jerrr... it's too early to be snappy.

I should be able to hear the conversation from here, but all that's brushing through my ears are mumbles and laughter. Randall is laughing as well, way to go uncle Jonas... However, I'm most certain it's as fake as Maphikelela's gold tooth.

Randall doesn't drink tea, a glass of water should be good, but Petunia will definitely slit my throat. She is back minded that aunt, believes in treating a husband like a god.

Too many eyes are looking at me when I enter the

lounge, did they think I'd cook a feast? This tea will do just fine, it has milk and that's better than nothing.

"All I'm saying is, my sister should not have married outside the country. Living in Joburg was a bad idea to begin with, it's infested with foreigners. There was nothing wrong with Pongola." Oh it seems the meeting began while I was in the kitchen. Firstly, I am not his sister. He thinks he can call me that because we are two years apart, him being older. As for that toothpick sticking between the seams of his lips. Argh! Maphikelela is a joke and a half.

"I don't understand why you're here Maphikelela," I twitter positioning myself next to my aunt, my life has nothing to do with him. The same man he's looking down on is the one who helped him when he was down and out... you help a stranded lion and it eats you once you have set it free.

"Why are you here, Mashenge? Your husband is the only one that was summoned, this matter should be discussed amongst men, not women." He says,

using his tongue to twist the disgusting toothpick in his mouth.

“Oh please, you’re a boy not a man.” I will not let this kid stand on my head, the bastard doesn’t know anything except stocking boxes of Ultra Mel.

“You see uncle, this is what I’m talking about. OMashenge are not this disrespectful, we don’t nurture impudence in this family. This arrogance comes from somewhere,” an unfilled smile and it’s directed towards Randall. And Randall... well, he’s lofty. He hasn’t said much and that’s out of respect for these men. He’s acting normal when in all fact, this is an ambush. He should have been warned that there would be three men against one and let him bring his plus one. Wait till his brother hears about this...

“Maphikelela...” I almost jump to my feet, his name sizzling out of my mouth. A hand pulls me back down. It’s my aunt, her eyes are narrowed,

reproaching me as if I am a child. This fool they call a cousin is practising his xenophobic shit on Randall, I won't allow that.

“Shut up Amara,” she hisses beneath her garlic breath. “This all your fault, why is your husband the only one wearing his wedding ring?”

Great! Might as well call Moja Love and put me on one of their shows.

“That is beside the point Petunia,” uncle Jonas chirps in, his voice lifting a little. “Amara is a child, what does she know? She was by a hair's breadth into the outside world, and this man tied her down before the wind could touch her. I was against her getting married young, I knew what I was talking about. Now look at the results.”

“I agree with Jonas,” Maphikelela does a two-step into the conversation. “I support this divorce,” he says.

Irritation drapes every edge of my skin, making me want to lash out on him. Randall is calm, too calm for a person who hates being trampled on.

“What divorce?” That’s Randall, my aunt clears her throat and joins her hands together. The motion shows reverence which is so typical of her. A husband is a deity, you don’t question nor argue with him. This is the mantra she lives by, meditates on it like bible verses.

“Kwame called me last night, the boy could not speak due to tears.” My aunt introduces, Randall and I exchange dazed glances. This was not meant to be out there yet, especially here. My family is crazy, if that is even the right word to use.

“I don’t know what Kwame told you, but my wife and I are not getting a divorce.” Randall again, there is sincerity in his voice. He’s looking right at me and his eyes tell me he means what he’s saying.

“That is not what we heard.” Uncle Jonas, a twinge of arrogance in his voice.

I know Mhambi will not be budding in unless needed to. He’s the angel of the family, the quiet one who

prefers to raise the flag than wage war.

“With all due respect gentlemen,” Randall starts and I am afraid of what might come out of his mouth. He shifts on the chair, eyes roaming about, between Jonas and Maphikelela. He gives the yellow two piece- wearing guy a warning look and looks at my uncle again. “My squabbles with my wife have nothing to do with you, will I be summoned each time we engage in conflict? I do not run a circus but a customary household like most of you here.”
Randall.

“Are you saying the boy lied?” Jonas questions, voice unpleasant.

“That is exactly what I am saying sir, Kwame is a child. He probably eavesdropped on a misinterpretation between his mother and me and came to his own conclusions.” Wow! He sounds convincing.

“Okay,” Jonas nods, doubtfully. “Tell us then, why your bride is not wearing her wedding ring?”

One more question... How did I forget to put my wedding ring on knowing we were coming here? Everyone looks at Randall for an answer and get nothing, only I can answer that.

“I took it for cleaning malume,” my tongue does not even falter when I spew lies. I get an endearing look from Randall, he’s a jerk. However he is still the man I have always loved and I will not kick him while he’s down. The couple, Petunia and Mhambi are persuaded, it’s Mordecai and Rigby who need further convincing. While Maphikelela is giving my husband dirty looks, Jonas shakes his head in disapproval before he stands to leave the room. His doppelganger follows him, bouncing with each step he takes.

“I think we are done here,” uncle Mhambi says.

Why did his brother feel a need to meddle in to begin with? Aunt Petunia could have come to me privately and I would have dished her with a bunch of lies, I

bet my bed in hell is getting bigger with how I have just lied to my late father's brothers.

"My son," she's referring to Randall by the way.

"Forgive us for wasting your time, we know you are a busy man."

"It's okay aunt, I understand your concerns. Amara is your daughter and it's normal for you to want the best for her, I assure you that our marriage is not on the rocks." He looks me in the eye from across the coffee table and continues, "Till death do us part, right Amara?"

The tone of his voice says he's not asking, but telling me. A confirmation that he will never let me go and I have no say in it.

"Ah! That's good, that's the way it should be."

Petunia adds.

Why is she giggling?

"If there is nothing more aunty, we will take our leave." I'm in a hurry to get out of here, I know she

has a speech for me. Her smile fades when she looks at me.

“Go ahead and please, behave Mashenge.” Hehehe! This woman does not know anything. “This marriage is not only about you but your children as well, respect your husband.”

I have done nothing but respect him. I’m exhausted, hence I settle for a head nod. We are excused, we send our goodbyes and head out of the house.

My... I don’t if he’s a cousin-uncle or uncle-cousin... whatever he is, is standing at the gate. He smiles upon seeing us, looking way different from the arrogant bastard who had a smart mouth inside the house.

“My in law, how about a hundred rand there?”

Maphikelela extends an open hand towards Randall. Seriously? I am not staying for this, I leave them conversing, he’ll find me in the car.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seven-

AMARA-

Nothing out of the ordinary has happened this morning, it's the usual silent daybreak. Randall is the first one up, he's currently in the shower. Yes, I said first one up because he moved back into our bedroom the day we were ambushed by my family and the ring is back where it belongs.

We haven't been talking much to begin with lately, so the silence is nothing to be stressed about. Randall is a man of very few words, but our mornings were usually filled with light conversations.

Now we barely maintain a lengthy one, I know he has things to say to me, I see it when he looks at me. It's as if the tip of his tongue falls numb the second his mind conveys something to his mouth.

“How sure are you, that those pictures are legit?” I didn’t expect a call from my friend so early in the morning. She claims she called to wish me a happy anniversary, that’s when I told her what had happened.

“Are you taking his side Ayize?” I know her like the back of my hand, Ayize has been cheering for Randall from the day she set her eyes on him. In her eyes, Randall can do no wrong, she might catch him in bed with another woman and I bet you a million bucks she would claim that it is not him but his mirror image.

“I’m not taking sides Amara, but I know you sis. Jumping into conclusion is what you do best besides being a wife.” The sound of her soft laughter tickles my ears from the other side of the line. “See what I did there?”

She’s still laughing.

“You’re a good wife Amara, the best wife any bastard

could ask for.” In this case, Randall is the bastard. “If Randy baby married me as well, none of this would be happening.” She concludes.

“Don’t let Neo hear you say that,” I give her a friendly warning.

Neo is her crazy husband, the man freaks out about almost everything.

“Seriously Amara, don’t let eighty years go down the drain. Talk to Randall and sort this out.”

“Eighty years?”

“Well, that’s how I plan for you guys to be married. If you two fail in this marriage thing, then there is no hope for the rest of us.” Ayize says.

This is what I’m afraid of, people expect too much from us.

“What if it’s true? What if he cheated on me? The thought of him touching another woman makes my skin crawl.”

“What if it’s not? This is the same as saying you

don't want to give your life to Jesus because heaven and hell are not real. What if you die and find that they are real?" Sometimes I forget that this once party animal is a pastor in the making. "Today is your anniversary, talk to your husband. Kiss and make up, have lots and lots of sex until you pass out."

"You're still as crazy as ever, I thought Nigeria would have changed you by now." Ayize and her family decided to... no scratch that... her husband Neo wanted to tour Nigeria. The man has been obsessed with the country for as long as I can remember, I'm surprised Ayize went with the idea. It's been three years and she says she loves it there.

"Yeyi, stop that you little shits." She yells over the phone, it must be her triplets fighting again. Did I say she's a pastor in the making? I lied...

"What happened now?" My lips are pursed as I fight against a laugh, boy am I glad R.J is grown and no

longer a pain in the arse.

“I have to go babe, I’ll call you tomorrow. Don’t forget to have sex, lots of it.” Her statement throws me into a fit of laughter. “Yeyi, zinja. Come here.”

Oh my God, only she can swear at her kids like that. The line goes dead before I could hear the rest of her cuss words.

“Let’s go out for breakfast,” Randall says, walking out of the bathroom, his chiselled body draped in nothing but a towel that’s hanging low enough for me to see his v-cut abs.

“Breakfast?” The word seeps from my mouth in a shaky gasp.

“Yes, me hemma.” (My queen.)

Lord stop this man, he’s walking towards me and I am a trembling mess. My eyes are not disciplined as they lustfully stare at him like he’s a snack. I turn away from his structure and fiddle with the pillows on the bed, he’s close behind me. His fresh scent is

hovering in the room and Lord I am salivating. I miss my husband so much it hurts. I miss the way he smells, I miss his obsession over me, I miss being in his arms, everything he is.

“Today is our anniversary,” he mentions and I quickly turn in a way he hadn’t anticipated and our eyes meet. His hand is on the small of my back, I see him now, not the blank page he likes to project.

“Are you okay?” He asks.

The corner of his mouth twitches into his cheek. That little rise in the corner of his mouth he’s probably oblivious to, has my body shuddering almost in a violet manner.

“I was thinking we could spend some time with the kids, Liyana has been feeling a little rejected.” This is a blatant lie from me, she’s more jolly lately. I’m trying to avoid awkward moments between the two of us.

“Well, your two brats have something planned for us.” He reveals, only he would call his kids brats. I

give up. His arms tighten around my waist as if letting go would kill him.

“Something planned?” How did I not know about this?

“A party, I heard them talk about it last week. They think it’s a surprise.” That’s his explanation.

“And you just ruined it for me?” I grumble.

He really does not care, now I will have to act surprised.

He’s looking into my eyes, I’m rendered weak whenever he looks into my eyes.

“Well, I might have slipped when talking to R.J. They made me promise not to reveal anything to you, rather I was given a task to keep you busy today.” He mentions as his hand slides down to my butt and gives it a little tight squeeze, I am extremely comfortable with this.

“What time does it start?” I ask, giving in.

“6pm I think, so we’re staying away until that time. Spend the day with me, you’ll look at a few dresses,

go to a spar. Get your hair done, these braids should start complaining by now.” Lightly, he pulls one of the strands just as I move out of his arms.

“Should I be offended?” Offense has already made a home in my heart. The smirk comes to play again, however he looks serious too.

“You’ve had these braids since last Christmas Amara and that was what... seven months ago.” He’s teasing me.

“Well excuse me, sir. These braids are new.”

“Really? How old?” Why is he giving me that look, as if I escaped from a mental hospital?

“Three months,” and I am confident about my answer.

“Okay, let me change. We need to deal with your 3-month-old braids.” He turns with a smile and heads to the closet, leaving me in the company of hilarity and harmony.

LIYANA-

“Liya, Liya wake up.” R.J screams in Liyana’s ear, I would say it’s a norm, however Liyana would have killed him on the first day he tried it.

“What is it Kwame?” She groans, tossing and turning in bed as she struggles to open her eyes.

“Wake up Liya.” An impatient overexcited R.J yells once again, shaking his big sister awake.

He can’t wait to get the day started, it’s the day they have been waiting for. Frustration brushes over Liyana, it is enough for her to want to smack the brat... her brother I mean. Her head almost splits into two as she sits up

“Liyana come on,” he whines, annoyingly bouncing on the bed, his voice unaware of the splitting headache his sister is fighting.

“I’m awake, stop shouting.” Liyana whisper-snaps, while massaging her temples to get rid of the

headache that is threatening to unite her with her great grandfather. Too soon, she is not ready to meet that controlling old man.

“It’s mom and dad’s anniversary.” R.J excitedly exclaims, his sister’s mind is far from his announcement and that compels her mind to fall into a confused state at first.

Think, think Liyana. The world does not evolve around whatever you’re going through.

“Shit!” Her eyes finally pop open, they widen at the boy who is holding a nervous expression on his face.

“It’s finally here.” The nine year old happily chirps, his final remark pulls Liyana into a train of excitement.

Today is their parent’s anniversary, planned by the two Okolie brats... The duo thought it would be nice to throw their parents a party.

“Are they home?” He shakes his head at her

question.

“I saw them leave together a while ago, dad’s got this.” He gives an answer.

“Have you had breakfast?” she asks, brushing his head. He squirms at her touch and grins like he always does.

“I was waiting for you Liya,” the thought of food makes the Liyana want to gag, she hasn’t been able to properly eat anything since the stunt her ancestors pulled. If she could speak to them and ask them to stop, she would. But those ones are like rain during summer, they come when they feel like it. Sometimes Liyana is tempted to let her parents know about this, but where would she begin when she is not allowed to date?

Her heart is heavy, she needs answers as to why her ancestors are punishing her.

“How about you go and have your food, I’ll join you just now.” He nods and pounces out of the bedroom. Liyana’s thoughts begin to hover around Zwelethu, if

he is okay after what happened. It's been more than a week and they haven't spoken, the plan to avoid him is working, but hurting her also. When he found out about her unfortunate state, he didn't run. She thinks herself lucky to have him as a lover.

Her late great grandfather is usually the one who comes forth to relay messages on behalf of the ancestors, he seems to be the one behind the wheel. And lately, the old man has been awfully quiet. Must be nice in the land of the dead.

ZITHA-

My feet hurt and my head throbs, I swear it feels like my veins will explode.

All this dressing up for what? I was stood up by a bloody old man. Grandpa-ugly of all people. Does that fool know how expensive an Uber is from Orange Farm to Sandton? The bastard knows I will come running again next time he calls and he was supposed to buy me a dress for the anniversary

party. I had to use the last cents he gave me the last time I saw him and buy a reasonable dress at Mr. Price.

Tshilidzi Mulaudzi does this every time, he thinks I'm a call girl he can push around when he wants to, believe me when I say he was never like this. He was sweet at first, I fell for his charms although he is old enough to have fathered me and I don't know how I looked past that. I guess he swept me off my feet with the way he cared for me.

His cautions and charisma changed when he had a taste of my body for the first time, suddenly it became about him having me and ravishing my body whenever he wanted to. I wanted out but felt like I would lose the one thing that made me agree to date an old man, financial stability. The stress of taking care of a sick mother who can't move, speak or feed herself and being unemployed would kill anyone, young or old.

It's already dark outside when the taxi drops me off a few houses from my aunt's. The streets are packed as usual, however, walking in this nosey neighbourhood in heels and this short tight dress I have on is a bad idea. These people are looking at me like I was having illegal sex where I came from, it would make a difference if I cared what they think about me.

I walk into the living area to find my aunt watching Rhythm City and Sizakele curled up with her feet on the couch, glued to her phone. I am not even allowed to sit like that, she would start shouting and calling my feet dirty. I remove my earphones to pick up the aroma of food, just in case the music is blocking my nostrils. I don't smell anything. These people didn't cook? I hope they are not waiting for me to start with supper. I have a PHD in burning pap, if they want to go bed hungry, let them start with me.

“My people,” I greet.

It's the ugly looks for me... my mind is suddenly planning evil things, I feel like ruining someone's day.

“Has Suffocate slept with that woman yet? Can you believe he cheated on Puleng again? Men are trash aunty, neh?”

There's that look I was waiting for, she clicks her tongue and changes to 7de Laan. I know Afrikaans, I will ruin this one for her as well.

I don't have time though, there's a party waiting for me.

Whoever invented bathing was bored as hell, for the life of me, I hate taking baths. Five minutes should be enough for me, so I time myself with a song. To look like a lady, eight minutes is an adequate amount of time. Usually I moisturise my body and lotion in the bathroom, it's quicker for me like this. The way to my room is through the living room, I have to tiptoe my way there lest my aunt sees me. Good thing the TV is loud, she misses my steps

when I dash to my room while hiding behind the long couch.

A few more touch ups and I'm ready to head out, on my way, I pass my mother's room. She's sleeping, I will see her when I get back. Now the part I've been dreading, telling the aunt where I'm headed to.

"Aunty," she gives me a dirty look before leaning back on the couch, clearly waiting for me to continue. I move closer to the door, ready to walk out just in case she plans to stop me. "My friend invited me to her parent's anniversary party."

"Is it written fool on my forehead?" She scoffs, clearly vexed.

My cousin finds her mother funny, she's laughing like a donkey.

"You think I don't know that you're selling your body for money? That's why you're able to afford all these nice clothes. It baffles me really because with all this money your blessers are showering you with, you are still ugly. The least you can do is put the money to

use and fix your face.” Her voice rises unnecessarily. The only face I should be fixing is hers.

I have vitiligo, it’s a condition in which the pigment is lost from areas of the skin, causing whitish patches. There’s no cure for it, it’s a lifelong condition and no, it’s not contagious. Apparently that’s not what my aunt and cousin think, Sizakele won’t let me touch her or wear her clothes. She says I’m cursed, the stupidity in this place is real.

“I don’t have a blesser aunty...” I will deny this for as long as I live.

“YEY VOETSEK WENA, THULA.” (Shut up)

Haibo! Arguing with her is always a waste of time, is it safe to tell her she’s half past to her grave?

Shouting like this is not good for her health, nurse or not.

“Can we talk about this later? I have to go aunty, I’m running late.”

“Who’s going to cook?” Is this an ask or an insult?
Her already creased face creases into an ugly frown.
My phone beeps, the Uber is here.

“Don’t cook then, I’ll bring leftovers. Take care of
mama for me.” I say and run out the door, I hear her
shouting out my name as I close the gate. My aunt is
not the one, I need to revisit my prayer, I asked for
Madea, not the wicked witch of Orange Farm.

*****©

I have taken note of the long descriptions and having
that fixed, please bear with me. Although I feel it
helps understand the story more especially when
introducing new characters.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Eight-

AMARA-

The story of how I met Randall is long and unpleasant. It started with a kidnapping, or human trafficking rather. My uncle Moses who sexually abused me from the time I was twelve, sold me to him for a million rand. The exchange was done by Randall's closest friends Styles and Nkomo. I was kept in a room with no food or a toilet to relieve myself.

In a week, Nkomo tried to force himself on me and for a reason I couldn't understand, Randall lost his mind. He beat him to a pulp, that's when things between us started to change, he became overprotective and possessive. I could swear he lived for me and nothing else.

In time, I saw Randall with different eyes. My heart

started warming up to him, I fell for the guy hook, line and sinker.

That's when I found out that my uncle had actually pawned me to a taxi boss who was old enough to be my grandfather and the only way Randall could rescue me from him was by offering my greedy uncle money.

The road to marriage was not easy, it was full of thorns. But we had each other and here we are, nine years later, celebrating our anniversary. I still remember the day I said I do, it feels like it was just yesterday.

"Wow, Amara." My baby Liyana says, standing behind me. Our eyes meet in the mirror reflection. "Papa is going to fall in love with you all over again, when he sees you in this dress."

That is the plan, a smile creeps upon my face. Now I'm more eager to see him, he hand-picked the dress I'm wearing. Nothing fancy, casino royal is the theme.

“Thank you, my love,”

Is it too soon to say I am happy?

“I can’t believe he ruined the surprise and told you about it,” Liyana chimes, bouncing her way to a chair close to the bed and lowers herself down.

“It’s my fault really,” my big mouth sought attention and I ended up telling Liyana how excited I was about the party.

There’s a knock at the door, he’s been doing that a lot lately, maybe trying to check if I’m dressed. He still won’t make love to me, although he’s making progress with the kisses.

The signals Randall gives are that of someone who was sexually molested, the thought has crossed my mind many times. Then again, this is Randall Okolie we’re talking about. He’d kill anyone who dares to touch him.

“What do you think?” I ask him, a smile dancing on

my face. He's standing in the doorway, eyes sparkling. The last time he looked at me like this was the day I stood before him in my wedding dress. He pulls me into a quick tight hug. I hear him sniffing, is he crying? He lets go and looks into my eyes, there is so sign that he shed any tears.

"I'm happy, me hemma, thank you for choosing me." I would choose him over anything in this world, that's how much I love him.

"Okay, okay. Let's go before I die of diabetes." Liyana yelps, clapping her hands to gesture urgency.

He takes my hand and escorts me out of our bedroom, I can hear noise as we approach the flight of stairs. The guests must be here.

"Where is your little brother?" My question finds Liyana who shrugs her shoulders, annoyance daubed over her bored expression.

"Probably stuffing his face with sweets," she waves her hand, making the matter trivial. "You guys go ahead, everyone is waiting for you."

We do as told and move down, I'm still waiting for Randall to tell me how I look. He wants me to remind him like I do everything.

"So, you don't like the dress?" Yeah, I'm getting upset. He looks at me as if I'm the most stupid person he's ever met, of course he won't say, but his eyes convey a thousand emotions. I'm able to read a few when I'm lucky.

"I wouldn't have picked it if I didn't like it," an unbothered tone sashays out of his mouth. This is the right time to yank my hand back.

"But, you haven't said anything about it." Calm down Amara and breathe.

"I did, before we bought it. Don't you remember me hemma?" How do you say God in Akan? Maybe he will hear my prayer when I pray in the husband's language.

"The dress was draped on a mannequin, not on me." No funny looks, I want to complain about this matter or he will never learn. Seriously? He can't keep

getting it wrong. His hand slides to the small of my back as we reach the bottom of the set of steps. Everybody gathered in the entrance hall smiles and applaud us, I guess it's for surviving nine years in war. I find Randall beside me, he's staring back. He leans in and whispers...

"You look better than the mannequin, don't worry about it."

I am done, spent and depleted. There's got to be classes where they teach men how to be romantic, mine is a hopeless case.

The party commences, I spot a few familiar faces and smile when obligatory. Randall won't let me out of his sight, apart from the new found sensitivity, he has become clingy. Although his touches are limited. He pulls me with him to every person we approach. The majority are business partners, I need to have a talk with Liyana. How did she pull this off?

He moves in to deliver something to me as we close

in on an old man, elegantly dressed like most of them here.

“That’s Tshilidzi Mulaudzi.” He says.

This one looks more expensive than anyone we’ve spoken to, Randall tells me he’s a new investor in their company. His eyes are glued to me, I’m getting uncomfortable and that smirk on his face is giving me weird vibes. Randall notices and pulls me closer to his side, a sign of protection.

“Are you sure you’re ready to never look into your wife’s eyes again Mulaudzi?” Randall queries as soon as we’re within earshot, voice void of humour.

He grimaces at the old man who doesn’t look intimidated at all, instead laughs his heart out. Creepy if you ask me.

“Get your eyes off my wife,” a warning from Randall.

“My apologies Okolie,” the old man chortles. I don’t care about his apologies, I’m still uncomfortable.

There's something creepy about him, his eyes somehow remind me of uncle Moses. Men like him always have diabolical thoughts running through their heads. The conversation moves to business, I shouldn't be standing here.

Mulaudzi seems to spot someone in the crowd, his eyes widen or I could be seeing things. Curious as ever, my eyes follow his gaze. I don't see anyone but Liyana and Zitha across the room. They are oblivious to the eyes scrutinising them. He excuses himself and saunters towards them, he better not be lusting over those kids.

"Happy anniversary you two," my attention is jerked away by an acquainted voice. That's Styles and his wife Sethu, I must have missed them earlier. They manoeuvre through the crowd to get to us, Sethu as usual has this smile on her face. Her sister Ayize hates it, she says people tend to take advantage of you when you look like a popeye. Her words, not

mine.

“Did you guys just get here?” I question them.

It really doesn't matter, the most important thing is that they are here. Styles means the world to Randall and him being here is everything. Randall's twin brother Nqabayomzi and his wife Thandiwe could not make it, she is undergoing spiritual training in Swaziland. There seems to be a lot of spirits hanging around us... deep breaths...

“Sorry we're late,” Styles jumps in, giving Randall a look I can't puzzle together. I follow his eyes, he's looking at Sethu's stomach or... belly?

“Oh my God, are you pregnant?” I almost half-scream... this girl. What a way to shout ‘I'm pregnant,’ anyone can spot it with that tight dress she's wearing. Only now she squeals in excitement, reminding me how bubbly she has become. Styles must be giving her something, Sethu was me once upon a time... boring and dull with no life in her. Now she glows like she eats d!ck for breakfast.

“Wow, you guys sure know how to keep a secret huh?” The thought runs to my mouth. I’m kind of hurt, Ayize didn’t mention this to me, unless she’s being kept in the dark as well. Sethu accepts my hug.

“Congratulations.”

This is the second person I know who is expecting, it makes me wonder if the universe is playing a trick on me, my gaze unconsciously moves to Randall and find him staring back. Maybe he’s thinking the same thing.

“Thank you,” Sethu articulates. “Sixteen weeks.”

She reveals before I could ask, her smile widens as she rubs her small bump. My heart is suddenly heavy, no I’m not jealousy... I would know if I were.

“You know how we’ve been trying to have baby since Sihle was four? So we decided to try again and wanted to be sure and safe before breaking the news to everybody.” Styles enlightens, placing his hand on Sethu’s back.

“I’m happy for you, brother.” That’s Randall, the two

shake hands.

I know what is running through his mind, there is nothing he wants more, than to have another baby. As crazy as it sounds, he wants a house full of kids.

Over the years, he's randomly brought the topic up and it's not happening. I don't know why I am not conceiving, if we didn't have R.J, I would have cried infertile. When God wills it then we will have more kids.

When his father died, he was set to take over as King of the Ashanti Kingdom back in Ghana. He's postponed it for way too long, sometimes his words make me believe that he has no plans on going back. That would be a mistake too risky, his ancestors can be crazy when provoked. Maybe that's why they refuse to grant him his wish.

"When are you guys giving R.J a play mate? With Liyana grown, he must be lonely." Sethu just had to ask, this man next to me is eyeing me probably

waiting for an answer. He should ask his fossil grandfather not me.

“That’s a personal question Sethu, don’t you think?”
Thank you Styles.

ZITHA-

His hand is painfully clasped around my wrist, his steps heavy with anger. He’s stomping in the direction of the exit door, dragging me with him to god-knows where. He’s out of breath and rasping in between inhalations. Must be the excess fat, I would think he eats more than he should. With the rate he’s going, he’ll be a perfect candidate to represent a typical BEE. I don’t know what Tshilidzi does for a living, just that he’s into politics.

This party is a little crowded so no one is paying attention to this man manhandling me, he grabs the front door open, and I’m slammed against the wall

the second we step outside.

“Ouch!” A cry jerks out of my mouth. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

He doesn't give me an answer, but clutches my cheeks with his hands. I cannot understand the anger that's directed towards me.

“What are you doing here Zithobile? Are you following me?” Yeah right, imagine. The only thing I would follow is his bank account.

“Why would I do that Tshili?”

“Then, why are you here?” He grunts, voice stern and unkind.

“My friend invited me, it's her parents' party.” Why am I giving him an explanation?

“Don't lie to me, Zithobile. Why the fuck are you here?” His teeth are gritted, veins on his head throbbing in unsaid anger. His hand clutches around my neck, pressing and depriving me of air. This is the first time that he's acting like this with me, my ancestors must be turning their backs on me.

“Let... go...” the desperate plea is forced.

“Are you trying to ruin me, you b!tch?” This man sprays when he speaks, spitting venom along with durable words. It’s getting hard to breathe, and I’m losing my strength while trying to get his hands off me.

“Pl...ease.” This plea should work, my brain is deprived of oxygen and that has my eyes burning with unshed tears. The bastard finally releases me and I hunker down coughing and winded. A hand grabs my hair, forcing my face up. Oh God, this is a devil in disguise. His words do nothing to me, but his eyes are the scariest thing right now.

“Stay out of my way Zithobile, or you’ll beat your mother to the grave.” He snorts and forces a sloppy kiss to my lips, before pushing me. The force is strong enough to throw me to the ground... Look at that son of a bastard walking back into the house like he just completed his greatest task in life.

“You bastard, I will deal with you one day.” He thinks he can treat me like trash and I’ll let it go? I need to clean up or Liyana will cause havoc when she finds out what happened.

AMARA-

Oh here comes Liyana prancing her way across the floor, an enthusiastic expression resting on her face. A sigh of relief takes ownership over my lips, Sethu has been talking about nothing but her pregnancy, I need a break.

“Papa, they want you to do a speech.” Liyana.

She is more animated than any of us are, I love to see the smile on her face. And then? Why is this one puckering a brow? You would think he has stage fright.

“What’s wrong?” I ask him, failing to curb my twitters.

“I’m not doing that.” He’s whispering by the way, Styles and the crew hear his complaint and fall out in

laughter.

“Stage fright, huh?” Styles teases and pats his shoulder. What am I saying? That’s not a pat, it’s a punch. “The great Randall Okolie, afraid of a little crowd.”

“Shut up Styles, I’m just not up for it and there’s no need either.” Randall sounds like a big baby, hands dig into the pockets of his pants and I know they are not coming out anytime soon. This is him trying to intimidate us. It’s going to be hard to persuade him. I will let his friends and daughter do the convincing, I already have a hard time getting him to sing my praises.

“Come on, it’s your anniversary.” Liyana hurdles in.

“Right Amara?”

“Yeah, I think you should do it.” We might spend the entire night going back and forth, so I take his hand and guide him to the crowded lounge where everyone is waiting.

He can’t say no now that I’ve put him under the

spotlight, he glances at me and meets my smiling face. I also should teach him how to return a smile.

“Thank you all for coming,” great start Randall. “And my beautiful wife.” He reaches out his hand to me and I take it. “Thank you for loving a fool like me, for the family we have built together. Liyana and Kwame.”

He brings my hand to his mouth and starts pasting lingering kisses on my knuckles.

“All this means nothing without you, Amara. Thank you for being my best friend and lover. Till this day, I wake up in the morning and can’t believe that you’re really mine and you’re here with me. I want you to know that when you walk into a room, I can’t see anyone but you and absolutely have no desire for any other woman because you’re the only one for me.”

He must have read this somewhere, the Randall I know would never. An applause rings from the crowd, followed by mumblings. I’m too engrossed on

him to pay attention to what they are saying.

“Rand...”

“How can you make me love you more than I already do?” Oh! He’s not finished? “You’re so good to me, I won’t trade you for anything else. I love you, my queen.” This is what Beyonce must have meant when she said drunk in love, I’m not complaining, I love this man. His hands wrap around me in a tight hug.

Randall doesn’t give me a chance to breathe when we pull apart, his lips smash against mine and we’re suddenly locked into a steamy kiss. Till date I am not a fan of PDA, but this man has a way of getting me lost in his kisses.

His soft plump lips are mesmerising, an addiction I have come to love over the years. His hands move to my jaw, they graze my collarbone and down my sides. The warmth has me shivering against him as he deepens the kiss.

Gradually, the noise diminishes. We’re instantly

thrown into a world where it's just the two of us. I feel his hands gently caress my back and lock my arms around his neck to bring him closer.

"I love you," Randall manages to release these words, his lips so close to mine I can barely breathe. He sucks my lower lip before I could respond and I downright lose my edge when his tongue plummets into my mouth and starts a sexual war with my tongue. I can hear myself moaning, my body covered in heat.

My legs give up the will to hold me up, the feeling rushes down to my knees making them wobbly. I think Randall senses it because his arms tighten around me, he's holding me as if I will slip out of his arms. My toes curl, there's a crazy twirl in my belly. I don't know what to call it, but it has me trembling like a leaf.

"Okay... cut, cut, cut." I know that voice, I try to pull out to confirm the girl shouting next to us. Randall

nibbles on my lips one last time and leisurely pulls away, his lips brushing on mine, barely a touch.

We're both chasing our breaths. Heat has travelled to my face, if I were lighter I would be beet red. Thankfully, Randall is still holding me up. I doubt I can stand on my own.

"Wow... that was... something." I knew it could be none other Liyana's friend Zitha. The child can be forward. Liyana is standing next to her with a big smile on her face, her eyes gleaming. I know this is what she wants, for her parents to be together. The guests are cheering, some send us smiles while others mind their business.

"I love you," my husband declares for the second time, his lips playing on my ear. I purse mine to suppress the giggle that wants to spurt out of my mouth.

"These words are starting to sound foreign, you've been saying them a lot lately." My sally puts a smile on his face.

We're interrupted by my phone ringing, it's too loud here, so I excuse myself and scurry to the empty kitchen.

"Hello."

"Amara... it's me..."

"Thanda?" She's crying.

"I'm sorry, I know today is your day. But you're the only one I could call, I'm in trouble Amara."

"What happened?"

"He found me, I've been hiding for hours and I'm afraid he will find me here. Please help me, I don't want to die." Her voice is panic-stricken.

"Send me your location, I'll be there now." She agrees before dropping the call.

I met Thandaza on my first day at work, she's an intern, going from one piece job to another. I guess there was a click and we've been friends since. I think of telling Randall that I'm heading out, but he won't let me go if I do. I'll send him a message and

explain the rest later when I get home.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Nine-

ZITHA-

So much for wanting to drink tonight, that son of a... deep breaths... Tshilidzi has ruined my night. I haven't seen him since he practiced his martial arts on me. I'm slouched on the couch wondering if everyone in this party is as dejected as I am.

"Oh Zitha, I am so happy." A vivacious drawl from my friend. I turn to see her happily pouncing my way. Well, that just answers my question. Different people, different dlozis. Look how content this girl is.

A buzz in my pocket startles me, it's my phone. Sizakele should have said so if she wanted to tag along. She won't stop calling, doesn't she have homework or something?

When Liyana throws herself on the couch, she falls right on my lap and laughs like a drunkard. There's a

problem with that, the only thing she can drink with her father around, is water.

“What do you want Kele?”

“Zitha hurry, it’s aunt, she’s not breathing.” There is absolutely no alarm, in her voice, so I’m failing to untangle what’s really going on.

“Don’t tell me, you fought with your mother and killed her.” It’s the only conclusion I can come up with. Liyana smiles and shakes her head that’s resting on my lap.

“You’re such an idiot,” did she just call me an idiot? This child is disrespectful. “Your mother is the one who’s not breathing.”

“What?” Disbelief clings to my voice as I jolt to my feet, the quick move nearly throws Liyana to the floor. “What do you mean she’s n... not breathing?”

Sizakele is explaining gibberish, her voice slowly

fade away into the background. The only thing I catch in her muddled speech is the word 'dead.' An excruciating pain consumes me at the realization that I might have lost my mother, an ear-splitting sound tackles my ears and my body gives in to shock. It has me staggering backwards, I virtually fall, but Liyana grabs my waist and helps me to sit back down.

Tears stream down my face while my whole body trembles with fear.

"Babe, what's wrong?" Her hands are gripped on mine.

"That was Sizakele, my mother is not breathing. I have to go to the hospital now."

"Let's go," she's on her feet before I could dispute. Orange Farm is far from Johannesburg north, her father will have a problem with her driving me considering that it's dark outside.

“Can’t you ask one of the guards to take me? It won’t be safe for you to drive back alone.” I don’t want to get in trouble with Mr. Okolie.

“Let’s go Zitha, we’re only wasting time.” The order is uncompromising, she’s taking long strides to the door. I run behind her after checking if her father is anywhere close by.

My friend here is a slow driver, she’s trying shame. Nevertheless, I’m subsequently growing anxious. My mind is scrambled, mostly filled with thoughts of my mother.

“I shouldn’t have left her alone Liya,” I’m an idiot, my aunt has been saying it and I called her bluff.

“She’s going to be okay,” she doesn’t look at me, she never looks sideways when driving unless it is required. That’s how much she fears driving, right now she looks like a tortoise with her back hunched and head leaning forward.

“I’m sure those witches did something to her, how is it that she suddenly can’t breathe? We just came from the hospital, the doctor had permitted me to take her home. I can’t lose my mother, she’s all I have.”

“She’s going to be okay,” this is how Liyana is. That awkward look on her face comes during such situations, it’s because she doesn’t know what to do or say. Let me keep my thoughts to myself, not everyone is born to be Dr. Phil.

We arrive an hour later, my butt hurts from sitting for too long. I’ll complain another day, right now I need to find out where my mother is. We meet a nurse who shows us where to go. The room is not that far ahead.

“Time of death, 9:58pm.” Someone says when we dash into the big ward there are a line of beds on both sides of the wall, each filled with patients. My mother’s bed is close to the entrance door, the

doctor who muttered those dreadful words is standing next to my aunt and Sizakele. These two look impassive that it worries me.

I shift my gaze to my mother, her eyes are shut and she looks... I don't know... she doesn't look alive. I'm not familiar with this burning feeling in my heart, I've never lost a loved one before. It's always been just the two of us.

"Doctor, how is my mother?" I ask the plump woman in a white coat, she shakes her head indifferently and I feel a surge of heat rush through my body.

"I'm sorry, we couldn't save her." That's all, she walks out as if she will be implicated in my mother's death. She is probably more worried about that long weave on her head. My feet give up their job to hold me still, Liyana is here to catch me again.

"Zitha, are you okay?"

I'm not there right now, I want to know what happened to my mother. She was fine when I left the house.

“What did you do to her?” I shout at my aunt and her daughter, their eyes speak of repulsive things. They lack remorse and grief.

“Stop being dramatic please, we all knew this day was coming.” Sizakele barks, I feel the animosity and hear the sadism in her tone. The windows to her soul are no better, she is as cold as the woman stationed beside her.

“You bitch!” Everything causes me to do something new, something I have never done before. Her hair is in my grip in seconds, I’m pulling with all my might while she screams for her mother to help her.

“Don’t touch her, let her go.” I can’t see Liyana with how busy I am, but that is her voice, probably pulling my aunt back. The old woman’s arms are wrapped around my waist, lugging me backwards.

The chaos in the room is obviously not allowed, there is sudden noise and many voices. A strong force accomplishes in getting my hands off

Sizakele's hair, as I look up I see a security guard.

The man is fuming and glaring, so is my aunt.

The guard gives us a warning and goes to stand at the door. Liyana moves to my side when I try to jump at my cousin again, I need to release this anger that's eating me inside.

"Let me go Liya, I'm going to kill this witch."

"Zithobile!" That's my aunt chiding me, like a child, Sizakele cries on her chest. What is going on? He sister just died, her cold heart won't let her shed a tear. Even one will do...

"Zithobile yani aunty? My mother was fine when I left. Something must have happened, she wouldn't give up like that. She wouldn't stop breathing just like that." I'm still screaming, I would crumbled to the floor if Liyana were not here holding me.

"How do you know? Are you God?" If I were God, I would wipe you and your frog of a daughter off the

face of the earth. I'm about to retort when I notice a nurse drape my mother with a white sheet.

"NO, NO. NO!" I shout as I push her away and hover over my mother's lifeless body. She can't be dead, not my mother. How am I going to live without her?
"MAMA, MAMA."

Pain knocks on the door and twizzles in like a hurricane uninvited, it sinks through my veins causing me to howl out in its arms. Tears well from deep inside and course down my cheeks as I shake my mother's body, desperate for her to open her eyes.

"Mama," my hands cradle her face. Her eyes are tightly shut, she's irresponsive. "Mama vuka, ngiyacela mama Ungangishiya." (Mom wake up, please don't leave me.)

I can't get her to wake up, her body is like that of a dummy. Why can't I get her to wake up?

“Zitha...” Liyana’s voice doesn’t get through to me, I have shut out everyone and everything. I’ve lost track of her words that abruptly sound like clanging cymbals.

“Mama, ngiyacela. Ngizoba yini ngaphandle kwakho?” (I can’t live without you)

My soul is bleeding and I’m having a hard time breathing. She’s not supposed to be dead, there has to be a mistake. Liyana's arms enfold around me, the embrace is tight and comforting.

“I’m sorry babe,” I fall back into Liyana’s chest unable to curtail my screams and cries.

AMARA-

What is Thandaza doing at an expensive hotel like this? Do interns earn so much? I have to double check the address just in case and... this is it. I don’t bother going to reception, so I rush to the lift just as

it opens.

A woman walks out, she regards me with a soft shifty smile and I return with a weak nod. The familiarity she holds tickles my curiosity, when I turn to double check if I had seen her before, she's already gone.

I make it to the 8th floor in peace, one knock and the door opens. Thandaza looks like she came out of a tsunami, evidence of tears are tattooed on her face. She's wearing a white bathing robe and her eyes tell a story of misery and torment.

"Amara, please come in." The stare she gives me is notifying and probing, she steps aside paving the way in for me. My brows knit together at how she's scanning the foyer, fear overspread on her. Impatience knows me best, mainly when I'm kept waiting.

"What happened Thanda?" She has a habit of biting her nails when anxiety claims her.

"He found me, Amara." She locks the door, goes to

sit on a chair situated by the window and curls up. I'm standing in the middle of the room unable to grasp everything that is happening.

"I thought you said he couldn't get a visa because of his criminal record."

"That is the truth," she answers without granting me a single glimpse. Her eyes are engrossed outside the huge glass window. "I don't know how he came here, I found him waiting for me when I got home last night. I don't know what he would have done if I wasn't with a friend."

"He can't hurt you here Thanda, he's an immigrant in this country. He can't do as he pleases." Thandaza is from Malawi, she came to South Africa after her husband tried to kill her many times. She says he's abusive and very manipulative.

"You don't know Nthunzi, he's very smart. He can outsmart the law, he's going to kill me. You have to help me, Amara." What can I possibly do to stop that man? If he is as insane as she says, then he will

most likely kill us both.

“The only way I can help you is by going to the police.”

“No Amara, you don’t know that man. He’s probably bribed them by now, I wouldn’t be surprised if he knows my current whereabouts.”

Thandaza seems to be giving this man credit, he can’t be that good. We’re startled by a knock at the door, her face alters, a prolonged flicker of dread dances in her eyes as she glances at the door. Eyes out on stalk, Thandaza sits up, her hands palmed on the chair.

“W- What if that’s him?” Her voice quavers, I can hear her rapid breaths from where I’m standing.

“Room service.” Oh! Thank God.

Thandaza runs to open, the man smiles upon seeing me and I don’t have the zeal to return it. I’m away from my husband on our anniversary, he probably hasn’t noticed my absence or he would be blowing

up my phone.

That reminds me, I have to text Randall and tell him. As I bring my face up, I catch the waiter staring, Thandaza is too busy sniffing the food to notice. He averts his intent look and leaves, closing the door behind him.

“You had time to order food?” So much for someone who is running for her life.

“This is for us, I thought you might be hungry when you get here since I dragged you out of your celebration.” She tells me, I am dazed by how she has an appetite at a time like this.

“I’m not hungry,” the truth, it would be weird dining here. Thandaza wheels the cart to a table by the bed, the food does smell nice, but I don’t plan on staying.

“I need to go back, will you be okay?” Great, she gives me that look that makes me feel like a bad friend.

“Please, for a few more minutes Amara, I’m still

scared. I never told you this, but your presence makes me feel safe. You're the best friend I never had." Best friend is taking it a little too high, we have known each for a while, but not enough to wear such big titles.

"I didn't tell Randall I was leaving, he must be worried. I have to go, I'm sorry"

Sadness is wiped off her face as disappointment takes over, how long do I have to ride this train of guilt? It can get exhausting. I know I don't owe her anything, but Thandaza is a good person. She doesn't deserve whatever is happening to her.

There's a persistent silence as she starts nibbling on sticky ribs, she looks up at me, her lips glazed with source.

"Don't just stand there, join me." Her order.

"I'll just have a sip of this, then I'll go." I pick the bottle of water on the table.

"Okay," she grabs one as well and pops it open.

“We’ll toast with water.”

“What is the occasion?” This woman can be strange.

“Life, clearly I’ve got a few days left in this world.”
She laughs... alone like she cracked a joke which I don’t find funny at all.

“Don’t say that Thanda.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, here’s to our friendship.” She lifts the bottle up before taking a long gulp while I manage a few sips.

“You know Nthunzi was never a bad person,”
Thandaza starts, how do I tell her I need to go without sounding rude? In addition, I don’t have time to listen to her story.

For some reason the room suddenly feels hot, I have to remove my shoes as my feet feel sweaty.

“What happened to the air con? It wasn’t this hot when I got here?” My query is snubbed by a sweltering Thandaza, dribbles of sweat are oozing down her face.

“Amara...” she heaves, hand covering her mouth, I think she’s going to vomit. In a split second, she’s on her feet, sprinting to the bathroom, I hear her throwing up. I have to check on her, but I can’t move. My body feels heavy, the dress as well, so I strip it off. It’s not long till my knees fail me, they bring me down unexpectedly, I can’t get up and my head hurts like hell.

“Tha... Tha...” My voice has given up on me, it’s unreachable and so is my phone. I can see my bag on the bed, if I could get to it and get my phone. I need to call for help... anyone... Randall.

Thandaza comes back to find me trying to get up, she looks like a mess. Her eyes heavy-lidded, through my blurred vision I notice how she’s struggling to walk as her feet move slowly and reluctantly.

In a very small amount of time, her eyes roll to the back of her head before she comes crashing down, I

mentally scream for help. Trying to keep my eyes open becomes a mission, I'm trying so hard with all my might but something is pulling me into darkness. Gravity pushes me down, clothing my body with immensity. All of me complies as my eyes give in and my world becomes dusky.

KENNETH-

"Mr Mkhize, your appointment is scheduled for Monday 10am. Are you sure you want to have your vasectomy reversed?"

"I'm not getting any younger doc."

"Well, whoever will mother your children will be one lucky woman." Hold it right there doc, let's control our hormones. Kenneth frowns, like there is no other expression he can conjure up. Suddenly a heart wrenching cry of a woman catches his attention, she's on the floor screaming like a mad person while two nurses are trying to restrain her. The hospital lobby is clothed with her lamentations, for some

reason her cries get to him, they touch his soul and nothing has ever tickled his soul like this. Not even her... the one that got away. Her name has been archived somewhere in Kenneth's heart, the man wouldn't remember where he put the keys if you were to ask him.

"What happened?" Curiosity nudges him, he questions the female doctor who is observing the same scene. His eyes remain on the woman as her exclamations of agony continue to dig deeper into his soul.

"Poor thing, she just lost her mother and she's all alone now. It's strange how she was sick, but her results always came back clean each time." The doctor tells.

"What do you mean?"

"Her test results showed that she was perfectly healthy, but she couldn't speak, walk or even move a finger. The young lady has been caring for her for years, her body finally gave up. Poor thing is an

orphan now.” If pity came with bags of money, the world would be a rich place.

“Mmmhhh.” Kenneth hums, adding a head nod of some sort.

He fails to understand Dr. Linda’s explanation. Is that even possible? There must be an enlightenment to this sickness, doctors must have missed something. He feels a great force pulling him towards the wailing lady and an urge to go comfort her. Something just doesn’t sit well with him, watching her rolling on the floor. Clearly, the nurses are struggling to keep her restrained.

Woah! Where are you going Kenny?

He’s moving towards the strange girl and stops as the doctor injects her with something. He sees how she flinches at the slight pain and slowly fades into oblivion. She is put on a stretcher and wheeled away.

“Thank you, doc.” He doesn’t wait for the doctor to

say anything but takes a different direction.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Ten-

WARNING: This chapter contains scenes of sexual assault which may be troubling to sensitive readers. Reader's discretion is advised.

RANDALL-

His wife has been gone for too long, her phone rings unanswered. It's no secret that Randall has been locked in his own world, a place where he allows no one but his demons. Randall rushes to the kitchen, the last place he saw her headed to. He finds the maid there, bustling about. She turns and smiles at a worried Randall.

"Have you seen Amara?" He sounds a bit rude, but she's used to it.

“No, I haven’t spoken to her today.” At this, Randall frowns. Where could Amara be? She never leaves without letting him know. As he muses in worry, his phone buzzes, it displays a text or some kind of MMS. He swipes to unlock the screen, the only people that have his WhatsApp number are his family and close friends. The unknown number raises questions, Randall still opens the message.

‘If you want to know what your wife gets up to behind your back, follow this address.’

The text is accompanied by a location to the Four Seasons hotel in Westcliff. This is nothing, the trust he has for his wife cannot be broken by anything, right? That woman defines purity in its deepest form.

However, this is the only way he will find his wife, she can’t be in trouble, can she? Amara is a smart woman who is very much capable of taking care of herself. Either way, something does not feel right,

and he can feel it.

He forwards the number to Styles asking him to track it down.

Most of the guests have gone home, argh, the guests are the least of his worries. He leaves the house with a mission to locate his spouse while trying hard not to entertain the message as it claws under his skin, tickling him in all the wrong places.

KENNETH-

There are many reasons why people join cults and for him, it was to put bread in his sister's mouth. He was making money, money he didn't know the source of where it came. It could've been blood money or magic, he was the least bothered about the inconsequential things as long as the brotherhood provided.

From a shack to a mansion in a space of a year, who

said there was no easy way to the top? He found it, although it came with sacrifices, he was willing to hold on to it until... until... heck forever if possible.

Things were going good, his plates consisted of great cuisines. A typical South African dish like pap doesn't have to grace one's plate every night.

He went from riding taxis and would sometimes be a rand short to owning multiple taxis. It was goodbye to the South of Johannesburg and hello to the north.

Life was a bliss until he set his eyes on a woman who belonged to another, he counts it as one of the biggest mistakes of his life. A war broke out between him and the man who had claimed the woman first.

Enemy lines were drawn with a red marker that even scotch bright could not remove it. It came to a point where he had to leave the country after a bullet was pierced through his lower abdomen, almost claiming his life. He knew he had to get away, and it was the

only way he could keep his distance.

Holidaying in China for close to two years didn't help heal his broken heart, upon his arrival, loneliness welcomed him and sadly kept him company for the entire stay. He tried to mingle with the people of the other race, tried to make friends and maybe find a little Asian woman for himself who will give him babies with long- strong black, shiny hair.

His cold demeanour stood in the way of that, moreover the love he had for Amara. His heart and soul were filled with her, she was like an Avon perfume, stubborn on clothes and strong on one's nostrils. Although he tried to forget her, it didn't happen as per his request.

Kenneth decided to expand his businesses in China, shake hands with the big guys and sign contracts that would make him wealthier than he already was. Not that he needed the money, it was not an issue for him as he had more than enough overflowing in

his many bank accounts.

He had a little sister to fend for, all they had was each other, it was imperative that he puts her above anything else; above the woman he loved.

Two years later, he made a decision to go back home. Had he not been home sick and missed his sister, he would've extended his stay in China until his weary heart decided it was time to go back and face the past.

Avoiding Amara has been easier than he thought it would be, besides, Johannesburg is a nation itself. Chances of them bumping into each other are very slim.

Years have gone by and Kenneth has managed to take steps forward without Amara invading his mind. His taxi business is going great, thanks to his friend Siphon Mndeni who foresaw everything in his

absence.

It was nine years ago when Styles Sishi came to him with a plan to steal taxis from a sworn enemy, Bangizwe Mkhize. The prominent and dreaded taxi boss. Forget that they bear the same last name, he didn't know the old man and had no blood relations with him.

Kenneth had found the idea perfect, especially since he had planned to leave the cult. He along with Siphon thrived in attaining Mkhize's taxis leaving the old man with nothing but cents and holes in his pockets.

Sure he didn't work for those taxis, who cares? No one in the taxi business bathes with a bottle of honesty before going to bed at night.

He's been at the hospital the whole day, running errands, confirming schedules and sealing deals. He's tired and can't wait to get home.

He shakes hands with his business partners after a

meeting that took almost three hours, five of them bid their goodbyes and leave the boardroom to go to their respectable homes.

His mind instantly leaves him like it had been doing during the course of the meeting. The grieving girl seems to haunt his thoughts, this is the first time that he's thinking about another woman after Amara. He's confused, what could be the reason that he's engrossed on that stranger?

"Kenneth!" The voice sounds far in his head, but still pulls him back to reality. He blinks and stands from the black swivel chair when he realises that he must have drifted off. "Are you okay?"

He nods his head, the man with him is also a business associate. Kenneth offers that they walk together to their cars. It's close to midnight, the hospital corridor is a tad empty. There are a few nurses doing rounds.

“The meeting went well, I didn’t think the shareholders would like the concept. This is going to make us a lot of money.”

“Knowing you, Mhlongo, it’s all about the money.” Kenneth states as they stride down the hospital corridor.

“And, I will not dispute that.” The grey haired man chortles at his own sally. Kenneth is not there anymore, his mind and gaze have wandered off to the woman running towards them. She appears to be not watching where she’s going. He’s dumbfounded for a minute and by the time he decides to tell her to watch her steps, the woman collides against him. Her hands wrap around him as she tries to stop herself from falling, head on his chest. She is heaving and soft snuffles occasionally escape her mouth.

Kenneth is annoyed for someone who does not like being touched, he sends his hands to her upper arms and gradually detaches her from him. She

doesn't raise her head.

"Watch where you're going," finally he gives the warning he'd been wanting to give since he spotted her running. Something is not right though, the woman is crying.

"Are you okay?" He probes, while trying to catch a glimpse of her face. Something tells him he's seen her somewhere... a closer look shows him the young woman who lost her mother, the one who's been running through his mind for hours. She manages to pull away from his hold.

"Sorry," her apology is a whisper. She takes off running, headed for the exit door.

"Who is that?" His business partner can be snoopy sometimes.

"I'll be back." Kenneth.

Never did he think he would live to see the day, running after a woman is something out of his character. There is no sign of her outside, he vacuums the whole parking lot to find nothing.

“Dammit, what the hell am I doing?” It’s normal that he chastises himself. He is a man who has never let a woman in his life, Amara could have been the ideal partner for him.

His heart remains dark with no one to warm it and creep inside. An ice box is what his friends would call it, what will their reaction be when they find out that he felt a few drops dripping from it today after seeing the grieving girl? What is it about her that makes his curiosity rise like this? The urge to want to know her and the impact she suddenly has on him.

He gives up the search, the girl is gone like a ghost in the night.

AMARA-

Amara is woken up by the coldness kissing her body, she raises her heavy eyelids half way only for them to fall shut. An excruciating burning pain in her

stomach attacks her the minute she raises her eyes again, she tries to wrap her arms around it to suppress the pain, but can't move.

Her body is weak, eyes heavy and head twirling possibly faster than a golf ball rolling on the ground.

At this point, Amara is aware that she's laying on the bed, naked as the day she came into the world.

At first, she is insensible to her surroundings, until she hears sexual sounds of moaning, one belonging to a female and there seems to be other creatures as well. They might have been spotted in the national geographic channel, it is said they are male species and have the power to reduce a woman to nothing. Shame and ridicule her until the world believes she is who they have painted her to be.

The heaviness in her body still lingers, but now it's different. She is sure there is someone on top of her, she blinks to clear her cloudy vision and spots two men on the bed with her. One is kissing his way up to her nether regions, the other planting satiated

kisses on her lower belly.

The heart is one strong organ, although her body has been made weak, her heart reacts. The thud is too wild for a human to handle.

Who are these people? What are they doing to her?

Though her speech has failed, her tears fight the girl in question's battles. They flood on the corners of her eyes and wet the pillows.

"Hel..." her mouth slightly opens, she's going for a scream. But her throat is on fire, nothing can come out of it, not even a smudge of saliva. She can't move, drowsiness has made a home in her body.

Amara feels a soft hand on her abdomen, her chase reveals a naked Thandaza hovering above her as well. The woman appears to be high, she clearly is not in her right state of mind.

There's a huge bump on her forehead that could be

from the previous fall. Amara can't understand why Thandaza is doing this, why all of them are doing this.

It's just too crowded on this bed. She tries to get them to stop, but she's numb.

It's wrong, all of this is wrong.

But there is one problem, her body is not against it. It likes what's being done to it, something has to be terribly wrong.

She is a queen to-be for Pete's sake and a married woman.

Her muscles are sleeping and mind disarrayed. Uncontrollable waves of desire overtake Amara, she suddenly feels muggy. Her clit throbs, pulsating as the erotic sounds made by these three push her to the edge.

She suddenly feels something warm and wet touch her on her nether regions, one guy is licking and sucking her most sacred place.

“S- stop...” releasing words is excruciating, he hears and lifts his eyes that betray his intentions and none of them are noble. His stare is uncomfortable and icy, there is no emotion behind it, but animalistic lust.

He forces her legs open and continues to harass her nether regions, more tears brush out of her eyes when she shuts them. She’s unconsciously moaning and whimpering and stopping at this point is inescapable. The man makes her cum, a feeble satisfied smile plays at his lips before he rolls off the bed.

Guilt and disgust fill Amara up after the wave of ecstasy dissipates. Death is surely better than this, she’s crying more than she’s ever cried in her life. Her body is not done with her though, nor are these men.

Thandaza straddles one of Amara’s thighs and

grinds on it, her moans elevate with each move, getting louder and louder.

That has Amara wanting to release the pleasurable feeling again, her second orgasm is close. It's out of her control.

Her racing heart is telling her to stop, her brain finds logic but it has nothing against the sexual feelings that keep burning through her veins.

She can't control it no matter how much she tries.

There's an undeniable need to touch herself, her p#ssy calls desperately for attention, wanting to be filled. This has got to be the most disgusting thing she's ever experienced. Randall will be devastated, shuttered beyond words.

"Stop Amara, you're so disgusting." She mentally chastises herself, cursing her own body in the process. Thandaza collapses like a corpse on the other side of the bed after her orgasm envelops her.

The second man has just finished stroking himself, he alternates to kissing Amara's breast, running his filthy fingers where ever he can. It feels good to the flesh, however her whole being cries for help.

"No, stop please. Don't do this." It all happens in her head, no words are able to come out of her mouth.

She doesn't want to do this, she can't betray Randall. The strange man is groaning while harassing her nipples. He looks familiar, but her head is too dizzy and vision hazy to put the puzzle together. Amara wants to swallow the moans, however they emit from her mouth regardless. Her body craves for this, but her heart calls out to her husband.

"No," no is enough, right? It should be enough, darn it, it is enough. Why is he not stopping?

Her heart violently drums on her chest when she accepts another wave of orgasm from the nipple stimulation, it engulfs the entirety of her body.

Randall comes to mind, the only man who has ever made her feel safe. She should have never left his

side, self-blame takes centre stage. She curses herself a million times, repulsion covering her soul, body and mind like an eclipse.

All of a sudden, waves of nausea twirl inside her stomach, her head feels like it will swell beyond its normal capacity. The fire in her throat is too obvious to ignore now and her stomach lurches and bubbles.

The anguish in her heart brings about the smell of death and the grave, that's how close she feels it. Once upon a time she had called upon death and this time, it is ready to come uninvited. The thought of dying has never felt so good, better than facing her husband after this. Better than living with this shame.

"Stoop," finally words allow her access and at the mention of this powerful word, Amara manages to push the man off her and because he also seems out of it, he rolls off the bed as if his trance has been halted.

With weak limbs and strength that of an ant, she flips herself over on the bed and lands on her stomach. Attempting an escape, her heart rate rockets. It's robustly thumping hard she can feel it bouncing to her throat, she's left alone on the bed.

However, getting to the door seems like a mission impossible. Her life is flashing before her and at any given time, she will succumb to death. Amara slightly lifts her head, it spins immediately, compelling her to drop it. She blacks out before she could attempt to move again.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Eleven-

RANDALL-

'If you want to know what your wife gets up to behind your back, follow this address.'

He can't get the message out of his mind, for a careful driver, he sure is driving like a mad man. At first the message didn't really register until Amara's words echoed in his head. Why would she randomly mention Kenneth Mkhize during their argument?

"I should have killed him when I had the chance," he seethes under his breath as anger clings on to him. The distaste he has for Kenneth is unexplainable, he had to rent a room to hold his extra hatred for the man.

He remembers the day he shot Kenneth without any regret, the bastard walked out alive. In all probability,

he's been after his wife since. Who else could it be? Amara is so naïve that the word no is foreign to her tongue.

Is it possible that she ran into Kenneth again? They got talking and one thing led to another and... no, no, giving such thoughts a room in his head is utter torture.

The thought of Kenneth touching his wife is stomach-turning, his heart can't handle it. His hands clutch the steering wheel as he presses the accelerator and increases the speed.

He has to get to the hotel fast, this is not how he imagined spending his anniversary, although he hasn't been able to have sex with his wife, at least they would have been together, kisses are better than nothing. Dammit, he was making progress.

Suddenly with the hotel insight, he presses on faster. At this point, he is not thinking straight. Anger controls him like a puppet, directing his steps and

actions. He arrives at the hotel and doesn't give a damn about parking, he grabs his gun and his phone and dashes over to the room.

His heart is beating faster every second as he stands before the hotel room. He thinks of knocking, but chucks the idea. Something doesn't feel right and he can't seem to get the stupid message out of his mind.

With luck, the door swings open with one twist, he steps in, daring it all. The scene before him seems all but familiar, there are three people sleeping on the bed. A man in the middle and two women sandwiching him, their heads on either side of his chest.

Randall moves closer, stepping on clothes scattered on the floor. His wife's dress is among those clothes, he recognises it. Her face comes to light with each step he takes, his heart stops beating when he sees her in the arms of the strange man. What the f*ck? A

threesome?

An incredulous gasp escapes his mouth, he staggers backwards unable to decipher what his eyes are bearing witness to. No, it can't be, Amara cannot do this to him.

He really cannot believe what he is seeing right now, Randall grabs the bedsheet and tosses it across the airy room. Their naked bodies are revealed, the sight brings about tears in his eyes.

His hands find the back of his head, he stands in this position, narrowed eyes piercing the humans on the bed... heart going on its own escapade and veins on his forehead popping out one at a time.

Wrath knocks in his broken heart, he wants to let it in but that's when he's the most dangerous. An angry Randall is a menace to humanity.

For the first time in his life, he's hyperventilating and

he doesn't know what to do. Rage...pain... he's not entirely sure what he's feeling. The balcony catches his attention, he runs outside in an attempt to catch his breath and probably blink away the images of his wife naked in bed with those people.

Randall leans against the wall and chases his breath, it's not working. He wants to cry, scream or spill blood. But whose blood?

Thinking this is all but a terrible nightmare, he turns back to peek inside the hotel room only for reality to hit him in the face.

He immediately diverts his gaze, carries his hands in his head and sinks down on the floor. His heart aching like it's been ripped out of his chest.

"Amara..." a whisper of disappointment emanates from his mouth, followed by a muted sob, he covers his mouth to push it back down his throat. The woman in there cannot be his Amara. It can't be his innocent Amara.

Think Randall, think...

He fishes in his pockets and catches a box of cigarettes, puffing out one or two helps when he's highly stressed. Yes, he never quit. He should have when his wife asked him to years ago, but he would go crazy without it.

The smoke lingers in the balcony, forming thick clouds. A heavy smoker, he's always been, the man is smoking like it's a matter of life and death.

With this pacing he's doing, he'll eventually burn holes under the soles of his shoes.

Then he remembers... he has a gun, he takes it out and a mobile phone. His conflicted mind is of no help right now. Kill or call for help? He opts to call the one person he trusts with his life, the one who has been there for him since he came to South Africa from Ghana at the age of seventeen.

“Where did you and Amara go? You disappeared, leaving the guests unattended.” Styles speaks without sending his greetings, that’s the least of Randall’s worries.

“I’m about to kill my wife,” are his cold words to Styles who knows this emotionless voice and that he should never take it lightly.

“Why?” Styles sounds too calm for someone whose best friend just told him he is about to commit a grave sin.

“Love is a joke,” he’s said these words before. Love is Amara, that’s the only definition of love he knows. If she is not real, then love has got to be a joke.

“What is going on Randall?”

Randall is able to narrate everything to his friend, he’s now standing before the trio, gun loaded and aimed at them. If he remembers correctly, there are three bullets in there, what a coincidence. His heart is suddenly cold as ice, his mind closed off that nothing can possibly pass through. So reasoning

with him would be a waste of time.

“Randall, get her to the hospital now.” A command from Styles. He must be stupid to be suggesting such a thing, hospital for what?

“I haven’t pulled the trigger yet, Styles and when I do, I’ll make sure she doesn’t survive.” This can only be his broken heart talking.

“There’s a high possibility that Amara was drugged with ecstasy. An overdose may result in loss of blood flow to the brain and other organs. She will die if you don’t...” Styles explains, but it’s impossible, right?

“W – What?” The darkness in his eyes shifts a little, letting room for the love that always dwelt there. A frown transforms his angry features. “How do you know?”

“What is wrong with you? Don’t you know your wife anymore?” He purposely raises his voice, this friend

of his can be one stubborn being and right now he is blinded by anger and pain.

“Fuck!” A frustrated scream spurts out of his mouth, unable to take the sight before him, he diverts.

“Styles, she’s... she’s naked and in the arms of another man...”

“Stop being an idiot Randall and fucking get that woman to the hospital or you better have a good explanation as to what happened to her when your children ask.” Randall has no answer for Styles.

He curses under his rapid breath and turns back. His heart breaks each time he sees his wife there.

“Styles...” A pained whisper that brings a lone tear down his cheek.

“I know Randall, I know.” Sympathy lies in his voice.

“Sh— she’s my wife, Styles. My wife,” Do these tears know who they mock? This man is royalty... “They touched her, they fucking touched my wife.”

“Look, I can only imagine what you must be feeling. But this is no time to let your emotions control you, Amara will die. Get her out of there, I’ll call an ambulance for those two. Get your head in the game, don’t mess this up.” Styles is the only one who can talk some sense into him, apart from his twin brother.

“By the way, I can’t locate that number. Whoever sent the text destroyed the sim card, don’t worry, I’m on it though.”

Styles ends the call and Randall knows he has to act now, come to think of it, Amara has not moved with all that racket he’s been doing. He hurries to her side and rapidly scoops her naked body from the bed, he notices trails of blood from where she was lain and his mind finally grasps what is happening.

“Amara,” he lays her on a couch and checks her pulse point. Okay, there’s a thud, it’s very weak but

it's there. Anger is for a minute and love is forever, this would be the perfect illustration. His irresolute heart is beating again, warming up to his humanity.

“Stay with me, baby, I’m here and I’m sorry. Stay with me, me hemma.” (My queen.)

He’s got his arms wrapped around her upper body as he pulls her into his chest. He finds a gown and puts it on her.

As he stands in the door way with his wife in his arms, Randall takes one last look at the people sleeping on the bed. Was his wife part of a threesome? The thought is disgustingly stomach churning, his jaw clenches. He has to get out of there as his head screams KILL, a murder at a hotel would be a mistake too stupid.

Speeding, it doesn't take much time for him to get to the nearest hospital. Styles is there first, waiting near the hospital entrance, his friend never ceases to amaze him.

Styles approaches with two nurses and a stretcher as he pulls up. Randall scoops an unconscious Amara out and lays her on the stretcher, meanwhile can't help but frown at Styles next to him. No words are said between them, they follow behind the nurses, taking long strides as they wheel Amara to the ER.

"You can't come in." A tiny Indian woman, wearing glasses bigger than her face stops Randall as he attempts to follow them inside.

"My wife needs me." Of course he'll grunt, he's frustrated, seething and worried.

"Right now, there's nothing you can do for her. Let us do our job." The look on the doctor's face reprimands him, he wants to dispute, but his common sense; Styles squeezes his shoulder.

"Save my wife, please. She's bleeding, there was so much blood." Randall pleads, defeat and regret washing over him. The doctor gives him her

mundane doctor's smile, which Randall frowns at. She walks into the ER and shuts the door behind her.

His knees fail him causing him to stagger towards the rear, his steps halt when his back hits the wall. Randall cradles his face in his hands as he tries to block all the emotions engulfing him. Standing becomes a task as his knees sway like overcooked spaghetti, he's forced to sink down on the floor.

His anger has a life of its own, he can feel it rising from the depths of his stomach. If it could, it would jump out and stand right next to him.

He has to fight it, he can't afford to lose control while Amara is fighting for her life.

Over the years, Randall has been able to curb his anger, lately it seems to be teasing him, threatening to consume him completely.

Anger is not that big of a deal, right? Wrong, not where Randall Okolie is concerned, the man unravels. He kills anything he sets his eyes on, anything that threatens his family and the love he fought so hard to keep; Amara.

A firm hand grabs his shoulder forcing him to look up.

“Stop worrying, she’ll be fine.” Styles is too calm for this situation, like he is certain everything will be as he says.

“Where are those two?” The fact that he’s asking through clamped teeth is no surprise to Styles, sure Randall plans to find out what really happened in that hotel room and those two have the answers.

“Sent them to a different hospital.” Clever boy... Randall does not seem to think so.

“Why? What if they run?” He barks out a whisper.

Styles slides down next to his friend, their eyes meet

as he prepares to answer Randall's question.

"Believe it or not Randy, they are as badly injured as Amara. You will get your answers, I promise." Styles' promises are the type that stand, if promise Keeper had a face, it would be his.

"What happened in there, Styles? How did my wife get involved in something so disgusting? I should never have let her out of my sight, how will I look at her after this?"

"I know what you're thinking Randall and you need to stop, clearly someone is behind this. Amara won't need your judgemental stares when she wakes up." He knows his friend too well.

Randall growls lowly while rubbing his head, he is letting the anger claw at him once again. "You're going to continue loving that woman the way you've been doing the past nine years."

Of course he will, but will he be able to touch her

after what he saw? The gnawing image is imprinted in his head and no matter how much he shuts his eyes, Randall can't get rid of it.

"Excuse me," he's on his feet in a second.

"Where are you going?" Styles.

"I need air, I can't breathe in here." He responds, denying Styles a once over. He's thinking of going for a drive, hopefully the stupid drive will help him calm down.

"I don't want you to unravel and start killing innocent people, that's why I have to find the forth guy who was in that hotel before you find out about him." Styles murmurs to himself, while watching Randall disappear down the hallway.

*****©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twelve-

AMARA-

I'm a little dazed and in excruciating pain when I open my eyes, at first I fail to grasp my surroundings until my brain comes back from wherever. I'm in a single hospital room, adorned with flowers and get well soon balloons and cards.

The gesture fills my heart with warmth and security until my mind tortures me with flashes of me in bed with three people, Thandaza being one of them. I can't point the other two out.

Shame settles in, calling me all sorts of bland names. An unknown feeling slices through me, it's unexplainable.

Moreover, it's sucking me empty and dry, leaving nothing but a dark hole. I'm alive, but I can still feel the cold embrace of death tightly clinging on to me

like hail storms to rain, never leaving my side.

Various emotions attack me at once, I try to at least fight one and dismally fail. Misty-eyed, I ring the buzzer next to the bed and seconds later a female nurse walks in. Her black 3inch shoes make so much noise on the cemented floor that my head screams in pain.

“You’re finally awake,” there’s no smile on her face, she’s leering at me like I shouldn’t have woken up. It would have been for the best if I hadn’t, I can’t snub this heavy feeling. It feels as though there’s a force pressing down on me and my soul surrenders to the pressure, drowning me to rock bottom.

“Water,” I would say please, but my throat hurts. She pours a glass and helps me to drink.

“How are you feeling?” How do I answer this question when I have no clue? All of me is numb, broken to say the least.

“Shame, poor soul.” I hate being pitied and that’s what she’s doing. At least this is what I’m gathering from her tone and the look in her eyes. “You’re lucky you were not raped, and your husband found you in time.”

She knows? I’m about to ask her when an elderly woman glides into the room, a senior nurse I presume. Her uniform is different from this one’s and she’s got boss written on her crinkly brows.

“Our patient is awake sister Gloria?” Her statement stands as a question. The young nurse nods, applying a smile on her face.

“I was telling the patient how lucky she is that she wasn’t raped,” she says it like the gods are smiling down on me.

And with that, a replay button is pushed in my memory box. I see the images again, I see their naked bodies... mine... the sloppy kisses... myself moaning while those men have their way with me.

The images keep flooding in, suffocating, damning, and revolting. Calling me characterless, and a disgrace. I'm able to recall everything, I remember my body going against me and everything I believe in, yet my soul cried out for help.

"Sisi," the older nurse snaps me back by clicking her fingers to my face. I raise a question with my eyes. "I said you and the baby are fine."

My hand flies to my chest, I feel my stomach twist and goose bumps embrace every inch of my skin, leaving no room for air.

Did she just say pregnant? I'm unable to comprehend what I just heard, so I stare at the nurse who broke the news.

"You didn't know, did you?" The same nurse continues with a question. Skipping my periods is normal for me, I would skip two months and start the following month. They have always been irregular and since I couldn't get pregnant for years,

pregnancy never came to mind when I would skip a month.

“Sisi, are you okay?”

I can't move, nor make a sound. I can't be pregnant, not after everything that has happened. My husband is a proud man, I wish I could say he is no friend to vanity. But... Oh God, how will he bond with his baby, knowing what I did.

“It's normal to be shocked, you and the baby are okay, like I said.”

“How long have I been here?” I drag the question out, it still hurts to speak.

“Three days, the man who brought you here said he's your husband.” Nurse Gloria is quick to respond.

“You're a lucky woman, you know that?” So she keeps saying and I am about ready to call her out on this nonsense. How am I lucky?

“I was on duty the night you were brought in and...”
Gloria again, she seems to be the most informed.
“Your husband said you were hijacked and molested
in the highway while driving home from work, the
doctor had to check if there was any forced
penetration.”

Despair sets in as I’m reminded once again about
my terrible ordeal, it pushes hope out to make room
for itself. I suck in air as if it has become thick and is
now almost difficult to draw in.

“Where is he? Does he know about the pregnancy?” I
change the topic, not wanting to talk about that night.

The two nurses share a look, something I can’t make
out. Talkative Gloria clears her throat, she’s getting
ready to talk while the older nurse checks the drip.

“I haven’t seen him today, I haven’t seen anyone
actually and it’s almost lunch time.” Gloria says as
she pulls a chair and... she’s sitting down. Why is she
sitting down?

“A doctor was assigned to you, he’s currently busy. He will come and explain everything. I will let him know you’re awake.” That’s the older nurse, her shoes cluck loudly as she struts out leaving me with the curious one.

“Uh! There was a... a woman.” I start, wanting to know what happened to Thandaza.

Impatience dawns on her face, she is waiting for me to make sense of what I’m saying, her brows crumple arrogantly.

“Was there someone else admitted that day?”

My eyes are everywhere, doing everything to avoid hers, so she doesn’t see the shame illuminating from my eyes.

“This is a hospital, people are admitted every day.” She says.

Fair enough, I’m prattling here. Perhaps I should wait for Randall, if he’s the one who brought me to the

hospital then he must know where Thandaza is.

I'm a little taken aback when she leans back on the chair and starts reciting a tale about how she's been working four grave night shifts in a row.

"I'd like to go back to sleep if you don't mind." I interject her life story, wincing in pain at the throbbing headache.

"Sure, get some rest." The nod I give her is very much visible, silence hovers over the room when she walks out.

It's barely ten seconds and the door opens... Great, she's back. I'm just going to lie here and pretend to be sleeping before she starts jabbering again, my eyes shut as I dictate my breathing.

Why is she not moving?

There's a heavy presence in the room, it forces me to open my eyes and my heart sinks at the sight of him, it's concretely thumping against my chest, moving closer to my throat with each beat.

He's erect at the door, hands hiding in the pockets of his pants, intensely glaring and I fail to decipher his emotions but can feel mine overwhelm me and in a second I'm going to burst into tears. I don't... the tears are not even halfway to my pupils, yet I'm empty. I can't cry even if I want to.

"R-Randall." My body refuses to sit up, every limb hurts. "Where have you been, Randall?"

Compassion rebuffs my despairing call, I messed up. I'm ruined and judging by the fire in his eyes, he knows or saw what happened. I need him now more than ever, I want his attention but it's not coming and I don't understand it. This man freaks out at the sight of my sadness, it drives him crazy when I'm closed off but right now— right now he doesn't seem

to give a rat's arse. It's breaking my heart, fuelling my emotions.

"Why are you not saying anything?" I question his silence.

With hands plunged inside his pockets, he saunters into the room. Angry eyes glaring and giving a warning like a drawn sword, they tell me that he has activated his emotional indifference. He stops right beside the bed.

I don't want to look at him anymore, but my eyes betray me by following his gaze. He's scowling at me, discontented. His eyes harden, they are dark and vindictive.

"You know what happened, don't you?" This I have to ask, the tension is killing me and this man does not plan to say anything. His stubbornness refuses to let him utter a single word.

There's something eerie about Randall, something I

have never seen before and it sends chills down my spine. I can count times when I've been scared of this man, although the anger was not directed at me.

"R—Randall," the lump on my throat makes it hard for me to speak like a normal person. A frown plasters his hardened face as if he is disgusted by my voice, he knows... he knows...

"I'm... sorry, Randall. I'm sorry."

Maybe this will get him to talk... he doesn't move when I reach out for his hand. The rejection throttles me, clogging my lungs.

"Pl... please talk to me, say something." His eyes flap... once...twice and in a millisecond they are red. He's blinking away tears, jaw clamped and body inflexible. I'm not going to cry over this.

Feeling ashamed and vastly overawed, I turn away and the only thing my feeble brain can do is to fiddle

with my fingers while trying to calm myself and think of how I will face him when I decide to face him. He's still here, glaring at me, I feel the deep cold stare piercing through me, so I cover my head with the sheet. Call me coward, I don't care.

I hate myself for everything that happened and I hate him for not caring that I'm hurting. I can still feel his heavy presence behind me and the yearning for his arms around me elevates to a hundred.

ZITHA-

My heart is as dark as the grey skies today, I don't plan to get out of bed. I'm numb and in terrible pain, I don't know which part of my body hurts. My heart seems to carry the heaviest load and it hotspots other areas. My head hurts that I can't blink without wincing in pain.

"Yey wena, Zithobile," yoh! Yoh! Yoh! Headache...

This habit she has of budging into my room without knocking has got to stop, I don't care if it's her house. I'm forced to sit up from the bed when she pulls the blanket and throws it on the floor. "You've been sleeping since you got home. Who's going to organize the funeral?"

One day, that's all I ask, just one day of peace. Then again that would be asking for too much in this house.

"I don't feel good aunty," I mumble through my pain. "I don't care, VUKA!!!" Gosh, she's yelling. "You have to clean this house, people are coming."

Those people were supposed to be here the morning after my mother died, goes to show how little her siblings cared about her. I blame their father for planting his sperms all over the nation.

"Your mother is useless even in death, she didn't have a funeral policy. What was she good for

anyway? All she ever did was sleep and eat my food.”

What else was she supposed to do? She couldn't move for Christ's sake. This woman has always been jealous of my mother, she hated her with a passion and never hid it.

“My mother and your sister was sick, you know that.” I will always defend my mother no matter what.

Her face scrunches into an ugly frown before she furiously grabs my ankle and pulls me to the end of the bed.

“Aunty, what are you doing?” I yelp and scoot back as I see a slap coming my way. I wonder if there's boiling water in the kettle, I'm in the mood to burn a witch.

“Don't ever talk back while I'm talking, you useless child. Get up and clean this house and when you're done, I want you to bake some scones. Fill a 20litre bucket, a lot of people will be coming. I won't waste my money buying food, since I have to bury that

good for nothing I called a sister. That witch.” That’s it, I’m adding too much salt to her food tonight. How can she say such things about her own sister?

How can she be so heartless?

“Aunty, aunty, please. Huh! Yoh! Stop saying that. Your sister just died, respect her memory.” I’m shouting while standing on the bed, don’t ask how that happened.

If this woman wants to act like street trash, I will treat her like street trash. I can tolerate anything but not a word against my mother. She shoots me a deadly stare, I’ve been dishd with plenty of those to feel intimidated by them.

“Yeyi, back hand, manje...” (I will smack you.)

She yells and misses when I dodge her hand, the move throws me down on the bed. “I want this house clean in 30 minutes and those scones done in an hour. Another thing, you’re paying for the funeral

because if those useless uncles of yours fail to contribute, your mother will be buried like a dog. I'm not father Christmas."

This demon from Sodom and Gomorrah. It's confirmed, she hates everyone. I feel them... the tears are trying to push through my pupils. Two drops plummet from my eyes giving me no chance to negotiate, the woman cackles... it's mocking and disrespectful.

"There's no time to cry, save your tears for the funeral." With that, she walks out, she will replace my door if she continues to bang it like that.

There's one person I can think of who will help me, it's not something I am proud of. Tshilidzi has been taking care of my mother's hospital bills while I gave him my body in return. Disgusting I know...

I hated it at first but grew into it with time, one thing I still can't shake off is the pang of guilt I feel each time he takes a piece of me, leaving my soul in

darkness.

Desperate times call for desperate measures, right? I'm not proud of myself, the man has reduced me to nothing but a sex slave.

I leave the bed to get my phone from the charger and send the darn text...

'My mother is gone, I need money for the funeral.'

Would you look at that? The fool just logged in as if he was waiting for me, my blood boils as I see that he's typing.

'I'd love to help you, but you know what you have to do, sweetheart.'

Throw up, that's what. I might as well dub myself a sex worker. I don't reply to his text, I know where to meet him and have to be on time or I won't be

getting anything.

*****©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirteen-

RANDALL-

I didn't mean to treat her the way I did, God knows I love that woman more than anything I have ever known. It's not a lie that what I saw has ruined me, probably traumatised me for life. No man would be normal after seeing the woman he loves in bed with another man. Those people did not only taint Amara, they tainted my ego as well.

It angered me even more when I couldn't kill them right there and perhaps that would've stroke my ego.

Three days have gone by and I'm losing my mind by the second, not knowing anything is driving me insane. What really happened that night and how is Styles not able to get the CCTV footage?

"You will go insane if you keep thoughts to yourself,"

he pulls me back from the fictitious world of thoughts. Something tells me Styles is a little rusty, it's been years since we've been in the game.

This man was always quick on his toes, the soft life got to him. Being married to Sethu and raising Sihle has birthed dire consequences, look at us looking like idiots. Our enemies are undoubtedly laughing.

“We've been driving for ten minutes now, when are we getting to the stupid hospital?” I've been sitting in the car for about that amount of time, but it feels like an eternity.

I'm sick of this car, the lazy song emanating from the radio and Styles' terrible driving skills. Since when does he qualify to drive old Mrs. Daisy? You would think we're going to a funeral.

“Would you relax?” Styles shoots me a glare, 'not everything has to be fast in life, that's how people crash and burn... his mantra since Sethu and their daughter happened.

Marriage should not change people this way. I want my friend back, he's getting too old and slow for my liking.

"Relax?" Do I even have it in me to relax when my life is falling apart? First it's that bitch Caroline, thinking she can blackmail me. If it wasn't for the hold she has on me, I would've slit her throat the second she put me on a pedestal. And now I have to deal with my wife being molested.

"How can I relax when I feel like I'm losing my wife?" Yes, I'm taking my anger out on Styles. Somebody has to receive what I spew out or I will explode with fury.

"Whose fault will that be Randall?" His question comes in a calm manner, yet annoys me still.

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw what you did back at the hospital, Amara is your wife, not some girl from the streets." His tone is

stern, like a father chastising his rebellious son. I am not going to take it from him.

“I don’t want to talk about that right now,” I tell him.

“I don’t believe you, you say you’re afraid of losing her. Yet, you sit on the throne of jerks.” Styles.

“I am not going to take insults from you, Styles.”

“Fine, do as you please. Don’t come crying to me when everything goes south.” Styles retorts.

“Nothing of that sort will happen, I might have been too comfortable and let things slip out of my hand. I won’t let it happen again.”

“Are you sure?” I don’t like the condemnatory looks he keeps regarding me with. “After what she did to herself last night, I don’t think you have things under control.”

Amara had a mental breakdown last night, I was with Styles when I got a call from the hospital that she tried to take her life. We’re going through a storm right now, I believe and we’re going to be okay...

she's going to be okay, I just know it.

"I am going to protect my family, I don't care what I have to do. They touched my wife, Styles. That is something I'm never going to forgive, they are all going to pay, heftily." My exclamation is a solemn promise, one I intend to keep. "It's been too long since I've tasted blood, maybe I can play with it a little before I accept that damn crown."

"Oh! So, you're considering it?" Styles asks, disbelief lurking in his question. He's complained about my negligence for way too long, he must be one happy bastard.

"What choice do I have? When my father died, I knew that I would have to go back to Ghana and lead my people."

"Well, that's great news." I called it. "My boy is growing up," I ignore his quip. He can be an idiot sometimes.

Styles takes a turn on Perth Rd, I didn't think we were coming this side of Johannesburg.

"Really? Auckland Park?"

"The further away from you, the safer she is." He said, she? I catch the pronoun and blink in confusion. As far as I remember, there were two people in that hotel room.

"Don't tell me, you sent them to different hospitals. I'm not going to annihilate them... yet." I say, keeping my voice neutral. I won't let death find them that easily. Styles steals a brief look before turning his gaze back to the road, he's such a careful driver it's irking.

"The guy was dead when you arrived at the hotel, he was stabbed and left to bleed to death. The blood you saw did not belong to Amara, it was his." Styles delivers as he drives through the gates of Helen Joseph hospital.

"But, you told me they were both at the hospital."

"I did."

"So, Amara was..." part of a corpse sandwich? I mentally finish the nauseating statement.

"Whatever you're thinking is true, it had been hours since he died." Styles interrupts. "Amara is traumatised already, she should never find out about this. Whoever is behind this shit is good, they covered their tracks pretty well. I'm impressed actually, no one has ever challenged me like this."

His tone is sadistic, yet stained with a twinge of amusement.

"I want them dead Styles, every one of them."

"I know, me too." That's new, he's always the one to put me in my place. "There's a wild fire Randy and someone keeps pouring gasoline with an intent to burn everything down, someone is out there to destroy you. You were such a bastard back then that you earned yourself many enemies."

“Cowards, you mean?”

Finding a parking space takes longer than anyone of us can endure, the search is unsettled. I want to get in there, interrogate the woman and go back to Amara. Sure I’m upset with her and may never be able to get over what I saw that night at the hotel, but that doesn’t mean I love her less.

“What about the girl? Who is she?” I ask.

He parks the car, grabs his phone and hands it to me. There’s a picture of a young black woman.

“Twenty five year old, Thandaza Chitawo from Blantyre Malawi. She came to South Africa two years ago, running away from an abusive husband. Got a Job at SABC as an intern, I presume that’s where she met Amara. Her contract ended six months later, I managed to hack into her phone and all her social media accounts.”

“And?” He doesn’t answer, but steps out of the car. I follow behind, trailing his slow steps.

“Typical Jesus freak, shares and uploads nothing but bible verses. The girl is a ghost, I couldn’t find anything incriminating. She keeps her circle small, most of her time is spent in the Lord’s house.” He finds humour in his statement, the light chortle has me shaking my head in amusement.

“It could be a cult, she sounds too good to be true.”

I have come across the goody-too-shoes type, they hide behind the thickest bible they could find and walk the earth like fallen angels.

“Maybe she is, maybe she’s not. The pastor seems legit, his background checks out. But, just in case I missed a spot, I asked Neo to do spring cleaning.” He cackles to an inside joke that has me standing at attention with curiosity. “He wasn’t happy about the job, he said he’s moving to Ethiopia after this and will make sure we never find him.”

Why, am I not surprised? “Let’s hear what this girl has to say.” My steps are suddenly faster, it’s midday and I need to get to Amara before lunch.

We're not allowed to enter her room, apparently she's in a comma and there's a man dressed in foreign army clothes guarding the door. Styles pulls me aside when the doctor leaves us, his brows are knitted together into a frown.

"Someone powerful is protecting this girl, I've let my guard down Randall. This is bigger than I thought." Yeah, only now he says.

"I don't care Styles, we need to get in there. I didn't come here for nothing," this is fucking bullshit.

"Something is off man, she wasn't in a comma a few hours ago. I need to make a call." He pulls out his phone, swipes it open and leaves me standing by the door. I can't see anything from here, there has to be a way to get into this room.

"I'd be damned," he's back, looking upset.

"What is it?" Defeat does not suit him, I don't like where things are going.

“Apparently, someone reported her case to the Malawian embassy, they are protecting her.” I am shocked by his revelation, who is this girl? “Let’s get out of here, we’ll be back.”

Damn right we will.

This is definitely something I will never admit to anyone, but I am terrified. Fear of the unknown has clung on to me and I have no idea how to shake it off.

AMARA-

There are voices in the room, undertones and giggles. They are trying so hard to keep their voices soft but these are the same whispers that woke me up.

Great! I really don’t feel like company, especially not after how Randall treated me, I almost died but he didn’t show any concern instead, looked at me like I am SA’s most wanted criminal.

A tidal wave of emotions overwhelm me as my mind journeys back to a few days back, it appears there is no escaping these thoughts. I'm afraid they will forever refuse to depart from me. To say my tears are stubborn is dry sarcasm really because they pelt up, a lump balls on my throat.

Misguidedly, I clear it and immediately hear a feminine voice say, "She's awake."

The declaration forces me to open my eyes, Sethu and Styles are looking at me. Randall is here too, my eyes densely run to where he's standing and my heart sinks. He's gazing out the window with that annoying habit of tucking his hands into the pockets of his pants. I have a feeling that he's been standing like that for a while now and has no intentions of turning around

The black clothing has defeated me, I have come to terms with the fact that it is a part of him and no one can ever change that.

“Amara, thank God. You had us worried, how are you feeling?” Styles is trying to break the thick air in the room, he feels it too. His dubious eyes keep finding Randall who’s still looking out the window. Mine too, what’s he gazing at out there that he can’t even look at me?

Sethu has moved to my side, she must like these tight dresses.

“We’re glad you’re okay Amara, you scared us.”
Sethu.

The smile on her face has not found me in the right frame of mind. My moods are doing a number on me.

“Randall was the most scared, right Sethu?” Styles intervenes.

His arm drapes around her waist, he looks at her like she’s the only woman in the world. I remember when Randall used to look at me like that, it was also just

a few days ago. Randall is starting to annoy me, what happened to him? Did he suddenly become mute?

The smile hasn't left Sethu's face, I smile back genuinely this time and again my eyes dart to Randall then back to her. She notices and clears her throat.

"I think we should leave you to rest, Liya and R.J wanted to see you. I told them to come tomorrow." She says. I'm grateful for that, I'm not in the right space to entertain them.

"It's good to see that you're okay Amara, you should take care of yourself." Kind words from Styles.

They set out after bidding me goodbye, leaving me with that man over there. I need to see his face, hear his voice, anything.

"Uze."

I don't know what to call him anymore or if baby would do. It feels like just yesterday when he was

asking me to use endearments when addressing him, when we were happy and the future seemed bright. Now... now I'm standing in front of a tall black wall with nowhere to turn. My heart is thudding against my chest, it feels like it wants to push right through my bones and skin.

"Are you going to talk to me or just stand there?"

I don't know if he will turn or the man is dead on the spot and if he does turn, will I see those dark eyes I saw yesterday? I'm not sure I'm ready to have him look at me like that again, it will just break whatever is left of me.

"Do you need anything?" Good! He still has a voice.

"N... no." I want to say 'you'.

"What happened to your wrist?" Okay, he's going to interrogate me.

My eyes unconsciously run to the bandage on my wrists.

I had a little drama last night after I woke up from a

nightmare, I never thought those memories would be so imprinted in my head that they would haunt me so much. The images didn't go away after I woke up, I was reliving every single terrible event of that night. I don't know what happened to me, but the next thing I was tearing this room apart, looking for anything to wipe the disgust and anxiety away. Pills, scissors or jump out the window.

The devil isn't so bad after all, the bastard presented an opportunity and I took it. A pair of scissors were left abandoned in the bathroom, I slit my wrist and hid my disgusting body under the shower. The last thing I remember is someone shouting 'she's in the bathroom' before blacking out.

"Are you in pain?" He asks... that tone?... Ai no.

"N... no." He has me stammering.

"Do you love me, Amara?" Okay, where is this coming from and where the hell is it going?

Yes, I love him. No one has ever loved anyone the way I love him, he has become a big part of me and I

can't imagine loving anyone else. But, I don't tell him that. I'm at a loss for words, my bottom lip is quivering and the stupid tears are bullying my eyes.

He turns, his hands are still jammed in the pockets of his pants and that look I dread is embracing his poker-face. His eyes are still dark and daunting as they were yesterday. He strolls towards the bed and my heart sinks to the depths of my soul.

Does he have to be so unfazed? I almost died for goodness' sake.

"I'm not going to repeat myself." He grunts in a dark tone, he's scaring me. I'm a whimpering mess, and I don't know what to do or say. So, I dig my nails into my palms, an attempt to calm my nerves. That's the only thing my brain can accommodate at the moment. What is wrong with me? I have been married to this man for nine years, how am I suddenly petrified, by his mere presence? The devil is a liar, I refuse to give in.

“Are you going to leave me?” Cold-shouldering his question, I throw him with one as well. I don’t know where it comes from, his face remains unmovable. He’s standing there still glaring at me... Jesus fix this mess of a man you have given me.

He shouldn’t forget what he did to me yesterday, I’m still angry about that. I start playing with the bandage on my wrist and suddenly feel his hand on mine, stopping me from fiddling with it. I look up at him and meet the scowl on his face. He lets go, takes one step back, raised brows calling me on my naivety.

I know that look, he wants an answer and he hates being kept waiting.

“I- I do.” Why am I stammering?

“You do what?” Great, he wants me to spell it.

“I lo... love you.” Yeah, I’m a nervous wreck. Maybe I’m afraid that he’ll ask for a divorce, maybe I’m reading too much into things. Randall goes quiet on me for a second, he’s glaring. The look has me

unsteady with fear this time not fear that he would hurt me, but that I messed up and I just realized it.

“I love you too.” Huh!

He says with the same dark tone, well at least he said it. I’m still loved by him, that’s good.

“I have never loved anyone before, you’re the only woman that has managed to tame me. You’re the only woman who has taught my heart to love, never in a million years did I think I would find myself committed to anyone. I was a skirt chaser, treated women like trash. I would sleep with them then humiliate and throw them away.”

Okay! Why is he telling me this? I hate history, I hated it at school and even more now that he’s telling me this.

“But you... you came along Amara and made my heart a home. You taught me that a woman has to be respected and treated like a precious jewel. You

changed my perception on women and for that I will forever be grateful to you and love you more.”

Randall removes his hands from his pockets and hovers over me. For a second I’m thinking he’s going to kiss me with the way his face is so close to mine, but his dark eyes lack gentleness, they hold on to the darkness.

He grabs one of my wrists, it hurts so much that I wince in pain. I chase the soreness, the bandage is red. I’m bleeding.

“Look at me,” Randall demands, his voice willing me to obey.

I raise my teary eyes, they meet his unkind fiery gaze. Why aren’t these witless tears doing their magic? The man who just declared his undying love for me just seconds ago is hurting me, his face as dead as a rat from Alex.

“If you ever try to take your life again, I will kill you Amara and wipe your existence off the face of the earth. It will look like you never existed, even your

family will forget they once had you. Don't ever test my love for you again because you do not want to find out how far I can go for it."

No, no, no. This is not my husband, my Randall is not a psycho. He can be crazy, but not this. I'm shocked... perplexed by his threats and I find myself nodding.

"That is not an answer," he hisses.

"Yes... I hear you." I say as fast as I can, so he lets go of my hand which he does, leaving a burning pain where his hand had applied pressure. I don't know if I should be happy or scared that this man loves me this much. Any normal person would run and never look back but I love him.

It's not like he's abusive or anything, he just loves me a tad bit too much while I complicate his life with my childish, selfish behaviour and my stubbornness. His possessiveness is different, he's dominant like nothing I had ever known, he expects me to be submissive... report my every move. As hard headed

as I am, we are probably going to have a hard time.

Randall rings the buzzer, seconds later a nurse dashes into the room.

“Her hand is bleeding.” That’s all he says like he doesn’t care, he’s back to the posture he was in, a glower on his face and hands struck into his pouches.

“What happened sisi?” The nurse queries, she looks irritated and pissed. Thinking Randall will answer, my eyes run to him. One day when I get to heaven, I will make sure to ask God what was on his mind when he created men because wow. He is standing all potent and mighty in all his splendour and you know what? It’s the black clothes, yes, I am changing his wardrobe. Not in my house Satan, you will not rule.

“It was itchy, I couldn’t help but scratch.”

Yes, I’m still stupid.

“You shouldn’t scratch sisi, I can’t keep coming here

to fix your bandage hau. You're not the only patient here, haibo! This is the problem with you rich..." the complaints fly in.

The nurse changes the bandage while mumbling words I can't make out and when she's done walks out, slamming the door behind her. Honestly, I don't care about her. It's this man I'm worried about, I'm failing to understand how he can be so angry, yet still remain calm. Not once has he yelled, screamed or shouted since he opened his mouth.

"Are you okay? The baby?" This man has got to be kidding me.

"I'm hungry."

"You haven't eaten anything proper in days, they were supposed to bring you food this morning." He says.

I'm not sure who 'they' are, but I'm guessing the hospital staff.

“They did, it made me want to throw up, so I didn’t eat.” Randall always looks at me like my brain is filled with water.

“I’ll ask Styles to get you something.”

“No, don’t bother him please. I’ll wait for lunch, I’m sure the lunch is not as bad as the breakfast.” I flash in a smile, he doesn’t return it. His gaze lingers on me, he’s studying my eyes as if to see beyond my soul.

He makes the call to Styles, sometimes I forget stubbornness runs in his veins.

“Yeah... Please get Amara something to eat... who?... What? ...”

He makes a slight cluck of frustration, his basic mentality has suddenly come out to play. What did Styles say? This man was starting to loosen up. Gosh!

“It’s okay, it was bound to happen...” he says as his eyes run down to my belly then back to my face. “No, let them be, I’ll sort it out...”

Randall drops the call and the sigh he emits shouts 'aggravation,' the way he rubs his forehead tells me he's one nervous man.

"Your uncles are here," finally he speaks.

Uncle Jonas probably has a machete with him, I would run if I were Randall.

*****©

ROAD TO ROYALTY-

Fourteen

AMARA-

The door opens, I see uncle Jonas first then uncle Mhambi and aunt Petunia follow in behind him. They stand on the left side of the bed while Randall is on the right, uncle Jonas is... well... uncle Jonas.

This uncle better not be here to start trouble, he doesn't look happy to see Randall. I can't twig this part right here, was he not the one who accepted lobola from this man towering over everyone in this room? I don't understand what else he wants.

Like a good son in-law, Randall composes himself. God, I'm a sinner, but not a bad- bad sinner. Maybe ninety nine percent one and one percent good; that should count for something, right?

"Mashenge!" Uncle Jonas salutes, the look in his

eyes says he hates seeing me in here. I appreciate the love he has for me.

“Shenge, Sokwalisa. Oh Jehova, bawo.” (Clan praises)

There is absolutely no reason for my aunt to be so dramatic, then again this is Petunia Buthelezi. “Oh my child, what have you done to yourself?”

Damn, I forgot to ask Randall what he told them. Do they also think I was hijacked, or they know about the attempted suicide?

“I’m fine aunty,” maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. Her eyes are reproaching.

“You are fine? I didn’t ask how you’re doing Mashenge, how could you be so careless? Yazi uzofa Amara, uzofa?” (You will die.)

Her voice rises, it borders on crossness and discontent.

“You think you have the right to take your life? Are you God now Mashege? What did you think was

going to happen to your children?" She's not going to stop, is she?

I look to Randall for assistance, then again I'm wasting my time. This woman is his cheerleader, he probably wouldn't want to get into her bad books.

"Kwanele nkosikazi." (That's enough.)

Thank you uncle Mhambi, dammit I love this man. If it weren't for the hand he just placed on her shoulder, she would continue chiding me.

"My child, how are you? We came to see you yesterday, but you were sleeping." Uncle Mhambi says, voice so gentle it touches my heart. This man not only looks and talks like my father, but he reminds me of him. His attributes, how he cares and loves me like I were his daughter.

"I'm fine baba," I tell him. A smile graces his face as he looks at Randall.

I hope he's planning on acknowledging the family, he must shove his anger into those pockets he's always

digging his hands into.

“Greetings!” Randall salutes, he’s trying to look okay, but I know he’s not.

“Mfana.” (Boy)

Mfana? Mfa... Sigh!

Did this uncle just call my husband a boy? Uncle Jonas though, what is his problem?

“How are you uncle?” That’s my polite husband, don’t mind my words. I’m that wife...

Randall extends his hand out for a hand shake but Jan Van Riebeeck just looks at it completely flouting him. I see Randall blink away the disappointment before clearing his throat and does that thing he always does, that disrespectful thing. His hands shy away and hide in his pockets, I wish he can stop and try to respect these men.

My aunt is not a happy mother in-law, if she could, she would shake Randall’s hand just to show him

that he matters in this family, hence the nudge she's giving uncle Mhambi.

The tension in the room is thick and I don't like it. Everything is going wrong, I need to speak to my aunt, find out what the antagonism towards my husband is about.

"Okolie!" Uncle Jonas.

At least he didn't call him boy again but, why is he shaking his head? This can't be good.

"I don't like you," can we gag this uncle already?

I thought he approved of him, Randall isn't going anywhere and my uncle has to get used to him. He'd say the same thing, I just know.

My eyes search for Randall, he's blank, so my gaze travels back to the old man who's glaring at the father of his grandkids like he wants to murder him.

"Bafo, now is not the time." Uncle Mhambi intervenes, he's against whatever his brother is doing.

“No, bafo. We entrusted him with our daughter and this happens? Should we count ourselves lucky that she is not dead? Nonsense!” Jonas.

“But she’s alive bafo, we should be grateful for that.” Beautiful words from my favourite uncle, I’m buying this one Ferrero Rocher. I hear old people love chocolates.

“It’s not his fault malume, I was...” that’s me, of course I have to fight for this man I call a husband. However, I don’t get to finish my excuses because uncle Jonas shuts me up with a raised hand.

“We will talk about this some other time Mashenge, right now focus on getting better, so we can take you back home. You need to spend time with us Amara, for your sanity.”

Maybe S’dumo would have made a better uncle, I’m exhausted... spent. Is he trying to ruin my marriage?

“Home?” I ask, mouth ajar and eyes dewy. Bear in mind, that’s where I was molested my whole life. Sure I can do visits, as long as I get to go back to my house, to Randall and the kids. Spending the night at Moses’ house will awaken old wounds.

“She’s not going back there,” an imposing tone swans into the room, his unyielding eyes are riveted on the stubborn uncle.

No, no, Randall, no. You don’t know this man standing in front you, be angry but keep it tucked away. Smile like an idiot in front of him if you have to, I don’t want my uncle hating on the man I’m married to. Our eyes meet, I shake my head to get him to calm down, but he’s not getting the message. Instead, looks at me briefly then back at uncle Jonas, straight-faced and eyes as cold as a mid-winter’s night.

It’s over, I am done.

“What the hell did you say, boy?” Yoh! Uncle Jonas.

Lord send an earthquake, Noah’s flood, even

Pharoah will do.

“Do not call me boy and Amara is not going anywhere with you.”

Forget Pharoah, I never liked him anyway. Take me now Lord, these people are trying to kill me.

Can Randall just lose that daunting tone? He’s making things worse.

“Amara is our child and she is coming home with us,” my uncle deadpans.

“Amara is an Okolie now, have you forgotten that, uncle?” Randall reminds him of the obvious truth, it’s the way he says it that does not go down well. I hate this tug of war they are playing, and Mhambi is quiet. One thing I know about my uncle Mhambi is that he loves peace. Plus Jonas is his elder brother, even if he wants to, he can’t argue with him.

Someone is breathing heavily in this room, it’s my aunt. She’s on the verge of calling uncle Jonas out

on his dictatorship, the look she keeps giving him when he's not looking is something to be afraid of. If you want to be in her good books, leave Randall alone.

"We didn't come here for this bhuti, please calm down. Fighting will only crack the strong bond we have built with the Okolies." She was bound to add her opinion, which is very much appreciated.

"Please stop Randall, don't argue with him please." I plead with him, his head gradually moves back and forth in total disagreement.

Can his anger pass already? I miss the old Randall, he's with me right now but his heart is locked up somewhere else. Knowing Randall, he's not willing to back down.

Also, it's that glare and the clenched jaw and the anger scraped on his face. The hands that still linger in his pockets, there must be gold in there. Why else would he take such a standpoint in front of my uncles?

“Sir, with all due respect.” That’s a nice way of saying ‘I’m about to disrespect you, so brace yourself.’

“Amara is my wife, I believe I pointed this out the last time we spoke. She belongs with me and our children, I don’t understand how you think you have a right over her.” Randall retorts.

What did I say? Maybe he would sound less disrespectful if his voice were a little louder. The soft tone he’s using is so wrong, arrogant and hostile.

“Are you saying I have no right over my daughter, boy?”

He’s still calling him boy, this only means he will never accept him.

My uncle Jonas is a gentle human, I’ve seen him. He loves people and the fact that he cannot gel with Randall, means he never will.

It also means I’m doomed, no way am I living without this man. I refuse. Uncle Mhambi has found

a chair to sit on, he's depleted and I don't blame him. Of course his wife moves with him, she's standing beside him like a security guard.

"I would never entertain such thoughts, uncle."
Randall, sounding human, thank God.

"Then, why..."

"Malume please," I interpose, I'm not trying to experience another mental breakdown. "Cut him some slack, Randall is a good husband. He's a good man, we're married malume. You can't keep talking to him like this."

His irritation flares as he crosses his arms, anger is not for old people.

"Mashenge, you would not be in this hospital bed if your husband was as good as you say. You almost died and I will not let that happen again. If I have to keep you away from him, then so be it, your safety comes first." Okay, who is supplying my uncle with nyaope? I have to intervene, it's getting out of hand.

“Malume, I don’t know what you really mean by the things you’re saying. But I can’t let you do this, you know I’m married to this man. He has rights over me, please stop.” He turns his gaze to me and huffs, I think he’s trying really hard to behave.

“I have said my part and I will not argue with anyone about this, one day all of you will mark my words.” Bitter words escape uncle Jonas’ lips. I have one thing to say about that... back to sender.

Randall looks like he’s over everything. He looks defeated by this stubborn uncle, no one has ever stood up to him before and seeing him tongue tied like this just proves to me that no one can defeat Jonas Buthelezi. He will never let it happen, this man is... he’s... let me not ponder upon that.

“I think we should leave bafo, you need a breather.” Uncle Mhambi is my guardian angel... get your brother out of here.

“We’ll be back to see you again, Mashenge,” the stubborn uncle promises. Oh it’s a promise alright.

“Get well soon ntombazane and stop getting yourself into trouble.” Ah yes, only my aunt would think everything is my fault. Uncle Mhambi strokes my hair with love-filled eyes, he’s not going to say the words. However, I know he loves me.

The minute they shut the door behind them, the husband exhales deeply. He’s frustrated, I watch him as he slowly paces around the room. He better not be planning something against my uncle.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

His feet take rest, he pivots on his heel and glances over at me with daggers shooting faster than bullets at war. A sadistic smirk grazes his lips, his pupils dilate as his eyes become dark. A bone-chilling expression I’m yet to figure out what it means.

“Your uncle is a funny old man,” he delivers his sally with a dark tone. What is running through this man’s head? My brain will explode with all this thinking.

ZITHA-

It's been over a week since I buried my mother, I say 'I' because my aunt kept to her promise. She didn't contribute a single cent to the burial, including her other siblings. Toxic family.

Tshilidzi came through for me and that was after he got what he wanted, he wouldn't let me go that night as he went on and on savaging my body. He hit me when I protested that I was tired and sore, the bastard didn't care. I was dropped home around 4am and had to sleep at Ulwazi's house, friends that are there when days are dark.

My mother just died and there I was sleeping with a man I don't even love, I still cringe at the thought of him touching me.

Is it possible to drop dead from a broken heart?
Nothing compares to a mother's absence in one's

life, I don't care how old you are. I feel the void, her absence cuts deeper than a sharp blade. She was my first love, my best friend. The one who taught me how to live, but didn't teach me how to live without her.

My aunt's house feels like a mortuary, it's cold and eerie from the second you walk through the gate. Although mom was bedridden, her warmth still filled that house.

For some reason, someone out there or up there still wants me in this world. But I'm tired, I don't have the strength to carry on.

Tshilidzi has been distant and I'm not complaining, I've been thinking of breaking things with him. But I can't, that man will slice me into pieces. He once told me that if I leave him, he will kill me before he lets another man have me. He factually told me that I am his little obsession and he will never let me go.

The sight of him lately makes my insides churn, the

sound of his voice and everything about him is revolting.

“It must be nice being you, hey?” My aunt’s contemptuous voice pulls me out of the world I have locked myself in, my eyes find her standing in the kitchen doorway. Hands pasted to her waist, eyes piercing and stone cold.

“My pots are burning and you’re busy day dreaming,” her voice is glazed with violence and brimming with hostility.

“Zitha, don’t test me... don’t test me, Zithobile Mthombeni.”

What the hell? The stupid pots are not burning.

“Sorry aunty,” I’m not.

To have her stop from damaging my eardrums, I check the food. Everything looks fine to me, everything but her. I can see her ogling at me from

my vantage point and turn to face her. How can a woman hate her sister's child? This part does not make sense to me.

"Sorry my foot. Go buy cold drink at the garage, I'll watch the pots. And don't buy at the Indian shop, I know the difference." She barks, she's always shouting. I think she's forgotten how to speak like a normal person.

"Yebo antiza," (yes aunt) there's dry sarcasm in my voice. She hands me the exact amount of cold drink, twenty five rand.

"Buy Fanta orange and I want my change, if there's any."

"There won't be change aunty," what is she talking about?

"If there is change, I want it Zitha. I'm not an atm, siyezwana." She argues.

All this, for ten cents change? Jesus is coming...

"Yes comrade," my feet carry me out the kitchen

door just as she shouts after me.

“Voetsek!” That woman is loud. (Piss off) It’s a Sunday today, other people’s aunts are at church.

The sun is hot and I still have fifteen minutes of walking, I should have brought an umbrella. How did I forget it? Sunburn is a severe risk for my skin condition

Phathu once convinced me that no man will marry a girl like me, they’ll just puff and pass, whatever that meant.

I never had a boyfriend in high school while my friends changed them like they change their WhatsApp statuses.

Five minutes into my walk, I notice a black Range Rover Sport with tinted windows driving behind me, this is not the first time seeing it. I started spotting it the day my mother was buried, I first saw it at the

church then at the burial site.

The reason I took notice of it is because no one in my family has such a car, we are not that fortunate.

My uncles hired taxis when they came to the funeral, the important family members drive old bakkies.

They are important because having a car with your name on it is considered an achievement in the Mthombeni family. I know two who travel with bicycles to work, their opinions don't matter during family meetings. Their job is to sit quietly at a corner and chew chicken bones.

The car drives slowly behind me, I'm not afraid of it anymore and I have a feeling the driver is not afraid of me as well, considering how he's unashamedly following me. If whoever is in there wanted to kidnap me, they would have done it already.

"Excuse me ousie," a little boy materializes from behind me, I hate being poked. "They said I should give you this," he hands me a black umbrella.

"Who?" He points at the car, it drives off just as I turn

to look at it.

Okay, that's... weird. I don't believe in witchcraft or the supernatural so I reluctantly take the umbrella, my skin needs to be protected.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifteen-

ZITHA-

Today is the day I will lose my life, my aunt is not going to spare me. Well at least I plan on going back home, unlike those fathers who go to buy cigarettes and lose their way home only to return thirty years later.

Unfortunately, I met the devil on my way home from the petrol station. He got me to get in his car and because I'm not free from the shackles he's bound me with, I followed him to hell.

I hate this hotel, or is it a motel? Of all the hotels in Johannesburg, this is where we meet when he wants to do it in bed. We're at Royal Crown Guesthouse in Yeoville, you heard right. Tshilidzi is dead drunk, he's snoring like the drunkard he is and I have exhausted myself trying to get him to wake up. He has to take

me back home.

It's past 8pm, I don't know how I will get home. I had to switch off my phone after receiving multiple calls and texts from my aunt. The woman has a way with her tongue, ordered straight from hell.

Searching Tshilidzi's pockets, I find R50. It will be enough to get me home. A taxi from Yeoville to Noord is probably R7, the only thing I have with me is my phone and the umbrella, I grab those and run out of the damned place. Jesus, I feel like a prostitute. My mother must be turning in her grave.

Now that I'm in a taxi, I conjure up the courage to switch my phone on. It rings immediately, I'm embarrassed by the stupid ringtone. 'Sister Bettina' was once a song of the decade, these taxi commuters have no right to look at me like I'm giving the driver a lap dance.

"What?" I ask the old lady seated next to me, she has condemned my very existence and ancestors with

that look. I pay her no attention and swipe the phone to answer.

“Aunty don’t call Khumbulekhaya, I’m on my way.” I’m trying to soften her hard heart, not that it’s possible. (Local TV show.)

“Don’t bother coming home wenja, sleep wherever you are. Slyness has consequences Zitha, you will reap what you sow.” And with that, she drops the call on me. She’s bluffing, if I don’t go home, where will I go?

As usual, the queues are long and there are no taxis at Noord. It’s too late to take a taxi to Bree, taxi drivers are more serious about their work on that side of the world.

They have more nyaope (weed) boys here than they have taxis, one of them is looking at me. How do I forget not to take out my phone in this place? I push it inside my bra and cross my arms, this umbrella will come in handy should he try anything.

“Don’t you have two rand for me, my ma se kind.” He says.

I am not his mother’s child and why is he standing too close? I start to move away and bump the man standing in front of me. He turns with a serious tongue click, he watches too many Nigerian movies this one. I give him an apologetic look... the nyoape boy is still here. I’m not comfortable with how he’s looking at me.

“I don’t have money,” can he move to the next person already?

“Is dit so? You’re carrying such an expensive phone mos?” He says.

Why am I his target again?

“Did your grandmother buy it for me?” He frowns at my question.

“Chill ma se kind,” if he calls me ma se kind one more time... “I’m only asking for...”

“I said I don’t have, hau?” My voice rises, and of

course everyone judges me with their stares. Shouldn't they be helping me or something?

"Get out of here, you short shit," I slightly turn in search of the man who just scared the hobo away. How does God make them so tall and enthralling? My mouth drops, don't drool Zitha, it's disgusting.

He's staring with a frown carved on his face, the bright yellow spoti-pantsula hat catches my attention. Who would miss it with that blaring colour?

"Why do you entertain him? Does he interest you?" I'm baffled by his question, stupid is too tame a word to describe him and this pantsula outfit he has on.

"Forget about me, what about you? I thought we left amaTrompies back in the 90's." Yes I said it, how dare he insult me. His brows elevate, his eyes are confused a jiffy. I think he's getting it because they run down his body and a smirk leans on the left side of his face.

“Smart mouth,” he scoffs and shakes his head in disbelief before turning to everyone in the queue. “Three people going to extension 4, get in that white car.”

His hand points to the left, while I follow the direction of his hand, a stampede takes place. Almost everyone in the queue rushes to the Toyota Yaris, I hear a chuckle. It’s the pantsula freak, he’s glancing at me, eyes calling me thoughtless.

“You’re so slow, yeses.” He quips, this man is more annoying than that nyaope boy. “Ngicela ungene emotweni,” (Please get in the car.)

“In case you haven’t noticed, there are five people cramped inside your car.” I squelch.

God-knows I need a ride, these taxis will take forever. He doesn’t observe what I tell him, but starts walking towards his car.

“Let’s go,” he yells when he’s out of earshot.

I have a crazy aunt who is probably standing on the rooftop screaming my name, I need to rush home now. Here I am following a stranger, how we're going to fit inside that car; only heaven knows. Three women and two men are confined inside, they look so ready to go home and the look on their faces say they are not getting out, come hell or high waters. Maybe they haven't met the stubbornness of a taxi driver or is he a taxi marshal?

What the heck?

There's more of us, if he is a serial killer, I'll be running for my life while he kills his first victim and it sure won't be me.

I'm standing behind this tall man waiting for him to put his plan into action. As he opens the passenger door, a chubby woman leers at him.

"Get out," his voice is gentle as he says this. However, dissatisfaction covers the lady's face. I don't see the look he regards her with, but shame moves smoothly over her face. She hugs her big

handbag to her chest and leaps out of the car. I'm told to sit inside, before he orders one more person out. There are four of us now, I don't quite know what's going on. Why this man chose me... favour is not fair, but someone's got to have it, hey?

Maybe he'll ask for my number, he's eye candy, and my number familiarises with such men. Although they never call me back... we're finally moving, thank God.

"The name is Sipho and yes you're paying," it comes out as an order. It doesn't take long for the money to move forward, I collect it. Sipho frowns when I hand it to him, I'm not sure what I did wrong.

"Your money," he better take it, I don't want to be accused of theft.

"That's yours," what?

"Why?"

"Just keep it," his tone is dismissive. The passengers don't hear him because he keeps his

voice low.

“Is this your way of asking me out? You can just ask for my number and I’ll...”

“You’re not my type,” he intrudes and his serious facial countenance tells me he’s not playing. Was Tshilidzi right about men not wanting me? I am offended honestly, the nerve to say it without any hesitation.

“Then why are you giving me this?” I’m angry and make sure he hears the anger in my voice.

“I’m only doing a favour for someone, just take the money and stop asking me questions.” This man is rude, I don’t like him... anymore.

“Is it Tshilidzi? This must be his way of apologising for being an asshole, is this how little he thinks of me? A lousy R80 that won’t even buy me a pair of decent shoes from Small Street.”

These are thoughts that unconsciously escape my

mouth, Sipho considers me with a black stare. My words seem to have angered him, his jawline clamps and his hands tighten around the steering wheel, now we're speeding on the freeway. I take the money, it's not like I have any. Maybe I can bribe my aunt with it.

We are in Orange Farm in less than thirty minutes, he drops the three passengers at a robot. They are told to walk while I'm taken to the gate of my aunt's house.

"Tell Tshilidzi I said apology not accepted," with an attitude I shut the door. Sipho speeds off, he didn't look happy with my statement.

The lights are out and I don't have my keys with me, I walk through the gate, thinking of a lie to tell my aunt. The living room window opens just as I'm about to knock, my aunt's angry face appears. She's wearing sleepwear and a black stocking on her head.

"Go back where you came from," she spits. I pull the

saddest face I could and dash to the window.

“Aunty, I’m sorry. I was kidnapped by two men on my way to the garage, they took your twenty five rand and...”

“I said go back wherever you came from, if you knock on this door again I won’t spare you.” A grim expression swipes across her cold face. “You should have died with your mother, that useless woman left me with a burden... uthuvi” (Shit.)

Her words sting, but I don’t let them faze me. My biggest worry at the moment is finding a place to sleep.

When she’s satisfied with herself, she closes the window. I’m not one to hate on people, but my aunt is pushing it.

Life can be brutal and unforgiving, I must have done something wrong in my past life. Ulwazi is probably tired of me, my walk of shame to her house takes less than five minutes, she doesn’t ask questions when she opens the door but lets me in.

AMARA-

I can't really say it's good to be home, it doesn't feel like home at all. Things are never going to be the same again, the tension that dwells amongst us is a thorn in our flesh.

It's a Friday and Randall didn't go to work today, I haven't seen him since we had a silent breakfast this morning. The man is throwing tantrums, I'm the one who was molested. I didn't ask for it, yet he acts like I cheated. His silence is killing me and I can't take it anymore. I have to swallow my pride and finally apologise to the man or else he will sulk till we grow old.

I'm craving pap so that's what I'm making for supper and it is after all his favourite meal. He's been locked up in our bedroom and I miss him so much. He sure

knows how to go quiet on someone, jeer, he definitely deserves an Oscar.

I'm done preparing supper and I need to find Randall, we haven't spoken about that night. My feet are telling me to stop as I troll up the flight of stairs to find him, it baffles me how I'm suddenly afraid of him. It must be his stony deportment and the dark fire in his eyes.

I'm outside the bedroom and my heart is thumping against my chest, it's so quiet like no one's in there. I can hear the soothing sounds of jazz music playing softly, at least he's still alive. But, since when does this man listen to jazz?

I hope no woman has anything to do with it, I cringe at the thought of it.

I need to control my breathing first, I do that then knock.

Whoah! My heart just did a funny thing there as the

thought of hearing his voice crosses my mind.

Relax Amara, relax. There's no answer so, I go in. Suddenly, I'm nervous. My stomach churns, it happens a lot when I'm nervous.

He's sitting on an antique wood arm-chair, a glass of whiskey gripped in his hand. His head is bowed and has a fist plastered to his chin. The black clothes he has on add to the gloomy mood in this room.

One day, just one day, I am going to burn those clothes.

I take one step in, leaving the door open, my body trembles as I don't know what to expect. The last time I tried to speak to him, he was irritable, his anger scares me sometimes.

I'm thinking he's going to look up, upon feeling my presence in the room, but I'm lying to myself. Desperate for his attention, I plod towards him.

The wooden tiles sing to my bare feet, making soft

thumping sounds, it's the sweat caused by my nervousness. My eyes are on him hoping he looks up. I'm half way there when he does and... Shit!!! The look in his eyes makes me want to turn back.

A look that says 'get the fuck out' so I stop to rethink my decision, is this what our marriage is going to be like? He instils fear in me and I tremble and stay out of his way lest the animal in him is let loose?

No, Amara, you have to be brave, you can't go back now. You have come so far, might as well finish what you started. I know I should back out and let him calm down knowing how angry he is, but I need to talk to him and my heart is stubborn, it won't let me leave.

His compassionless dark eyes are piercing through my soul but that doesn't stop me from plodding towards him. I need to apologize, I need to feel him.

The moment I get to him, I straddle him without wasting anytime, he allows me and I almost sigh in relief.

My forehead lightly presses against his, it feels good to smell and feel this man. To bask in the moment, my eyes shut close while my arms circle his neck. His scent deliciously fills my nostrils and in a subsequent amount of time, his strong big hand touches my waist. A smile almost creeps up on my face but it's quickly replaced by a tear.

It feels so good to be held by him after so much time of yearning for his touch, my heart jumps with joy as I feel his other hand on my waist.

I guess he put the glass of whiskey on the table and just when I think he's about to hold me in that long vindicated hug I have been craving for, he stands up with me still straddling him. My arms are still around his neck, he gently places me down. Slightly pushes me to the side and walks away leaving me in utter disbelief. I can't let him walk away again, it's bloody exhausting.

"That night..." his feet falter at my words, he doesn't

turn though. I have to continue, we can't keep living like this. It will break our marriage. "My friend called me, she was in trouble and... I had to help her."

Randall turns around and I leisurely regret saying anything at his stare down, he crosses his arms and with the coldest tone says;

"Is that a good enough reason to leave our anniversary party and attend to your so-called friend?"

"She was in trouble Randall and..."

"I am not disputing that Amara, the least you could have done was tell me."

"I knew you wouldn't let me go."

"Damn right I wouldn't have let you go." He snaps as his words barely escape his mouth.

"This is the problem Randall," I yell, his ignorance irks me so much. "You order my steps, I have to move at your beck and call."

“Where am I wrong in that Amara?” He steps forward and I have to ground myself so I don’t stagger, I must have offended him with my words, his gaze is chiding. “You know where you come from, what you’ve been through. Haven’t you learnt anything from your past Amara? The enemies that are watching us like hawks, waiting for a chance to strike? How stupid can you be?”

“Don’t you ever talk to me like that again, I am your wife.” I bark.

How could he say that to me?

“Then start acting like it,” the remark grinds out of his mouth. He’s hurting me with his indifference and he doesn’t even realise it. “Not only did you get yourself in deep shit, you were fucking molested Amara.”

“I know that,” if you would ask me the taste of anger, I would tell you. This man does not regard my feelings when he speaks, he’s an insensitive bastard.

“I was there, I remember every bloody disgusting thing done to me and I hate myself for it. But you don’t have to be a bastard about it, can’t you at least pretend to care? Not so long ago you were begging me to understand you, won’t you do the same for me?”

“I’m sorry if I’m not perfect Amara, I’m sorry that I did not clap after seeing you naked in bed with another man?” The words are out there, they hurt and I will never forgive him for this.

The sting in my heart has me slapping him across the face, his head barely moves but my hand hurts like hell. Shock covers his hard face, his eyes widen as if he can’t believe what I just did. I can’t believe it either, I have never in my life laid a hand on this man. I want to take it back, but also want him to writhe in pain.

“Amara?” Disbelieve seeps out of his mouth.

“Why are you saying these things to me, Randall?” I’m shouting, also taking advantage of the fact that

we're home alone. "Have I not been a good wife to you? I have done nothing but respect you and you go and say such things to me? How could you be so heartless?"

"Amara..." I move back as his hand attempts to grab me.

"You have no right to touch me," I sizzle, frustrated and boiling with anger. "I know I messed up, I'm not stupid like you deem me. That shit happened to me, Randall. I can't look myself in the mirror without seeing those people harassing me, I'm disgusted by my own body. I've lost my sleep and about close to losing my mind. But unlike you, I'm trying to make this marriage work and I expect you as my husband to meet me half way, dammit. But all you do is give me silent treatments, throw slurs at me and act like a five year old."

"Are you calling me childish, Amara?" He keeps his voice neutral and I am going to scream if he continues like this.

“I’m done,” I snort in defeat and scepticism. “That’s all that got through to you, in everything I have said?”

A scream is what I offer as I try to push past him, he grips my arms and pulls me back into the room.

“We’re not done talking, don’t walk away from me, Amara.” A growl surges out of his mouth, a dark flame residing in his eyes. I don’t know this man standing before me.

“I say... we’re done,” I’m not usually ratty.

Randall acknowledges my reluctant response with a deep sigh and nothing further.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have gotten married,” anger must be an enemy because here it is destroying us. His jaw clamps at my words, eyes indecipherable, his face is so impassive.

I can’t see his heart, neither can I feel it. His poise straightens, hands find their favourite place and he takes a step back that the small distance between us births fear in my bleeding heart.

“Maybe... we shouldn’t have,” his words are a bucket of water on a fire, so quickly they extinguish my blazing heart. Anger ceases to live in it, but excruciating pain.

Honestly, I didn’t expect him to say it back, he looks at me like the fire in his eyes has been stub out with water, if anything it makes the brown in his eyes more pale. I’m not used to it as it frightens me.

Shock widens my eyes and my heart screams in agony when he turns around and walks out of the room. He bangs the door with so much force that the windows cluck at the impact, I’m not going to cry... I don’t want to cry. But here I am, seated flat on the floor with wet eyes and the sound of a broken heart echoing in the room.

***** ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixteen-

AMARA-

Ever since Chioma went back to Nigeria, taking care of the house has been nothing but strenuous. She worked for Randall before I came into his life, he and Styles found a mother figure in her and so did my kids. No one takes care of this house better than she does, I will need to find a temporary replacement until Chioma is ready to come back.

The click of the door opening and closing sounds so familiar, it has my heart leaping to my throat, he's home. Two days have passed since the argument and no one has dared to mention it once, we carried on with life as if nothing happened.

Negative actions create negative chaos and negative

chaos is destructive. When I look at the situation between us, I see these simple truths at the heart of the matter. We're at a cliff and no one is holding the other's hand lest we fall and burn, I'm tired of the anguish. It has to stop, if only Randall could meet me centrally.

"You know I didn't mean it, right?" I jump at the sound of his voice and turn from the stove to face him.

"Randall!" He frowns at my reaction.

"Were you expecting someone else?" He regards me with a suspicious look, like he caught me committing a sin. Seriously?

"No, you startled me." Why am I alarmed, again? Oh yes, this man has not said anything to me in days.

He's toddling towards me, I have no idea what to expect. If only his eyes could tell me what's on his mind, I'm stationery on the ground with no plans to

move. My eyes follow his face until he's standing in front of me, so close I could smell and touch him. The heart flips when he leans down to steal a kiss, for the life of me, I did not expect this. My stupid-self gasps for air when he pulls out.

And in this moment, I'm reminded of the words we shot at each other, words said out of anger and a pang of guilt flashes over me.

"I don't regret marrying you, I don't regret us." He murmurs, glancing down at me. He hasn't touched me yet, his hands are hidden on his back. "This thing that we have is beautiful and I'm glad you're my wife."

"I don't regret it too," I confess.

What is happening with this man and his mood swings?

The happy moment quickly transitions into awkward silence, I can count times this has happened. The difference now is that he's looking into my eyes, his eyes are blankly impenetrable. However, they aren't

as cold and eerie. Hastily, a hand casually presses on my lower abdomen. For the first time, he's touching the obscure tummy, his fingers gently caressing it. I'm not going to be emotional over this, I'm now certain that he will not abandon the baby.

"Octuplets." Did he just say what I think he said?

Forget the excitement running through my veins. "That's not going to happen," my protest plants a smug look on his face.

"Everybody is doing it, you know?" I want to return that subtle smile, but my mind is still collecting data.

"Who's everybody and since when does Randall Okolie follow what people do? I thought you were a trend setter?"

"I read about a woman who had ten, other people's husbands are lucky, I wonder how they do it..." He steps back, crosses his arms on his chest. He better be kidding about this...

"Then ask that woman to give you ten babies," bad

joke, I scold myself mentally. His eyes are dubious a while, clearing his throat, Randall racks a hand on his nape.

“I think the best part about having kids with the woman you love is that, she’ll nature them in her stomach with so much love.” His hand finds my cheek, the touch is soft and gentle like his words. “I can’t wait, I can just see them running around the house making so much noise. They are going to be the happiest bunch.”

Great, everything was going perfect. He just had to put weight on the pronoun.

“Randall Okolie, we are not having octuplets.”

He’s laughing, it’s light but here and I love it.

“Come sit with me,” okay, we’re serious again.

“What’s wrong?” I hope this is not another fight coming. “I have to finish up here.”

“Leave that and come to the living room,” he says.

I don’t gripe when he takes my hand and leads us to

the lounge. My palms are sweaty, nerves start to dominate over me as I position myself on the couch next to him.

“Tell me about this Thandaza woman,” his beginning has me wriggling on the seat. The mention of her creates a rift between us and I am tired of fighting with him. “What is she to you?”

“We worked together, she was an intern. She would buy me coffee every morning and I thought it was sweet of her, that’s how we became acquainted.”

“What else do you know about her?”

“Uh! Well... she’s married back in Malawi, her husband is here though. He’s after her life, she’s been on the run for a while now.” It doesn’t look like he believes the story I’m telling him.

“I see,” that’s all he offers.

His hands start to trail my arms as he nuzzles his nose into my neck, my skin feels overheated at his

touch. He guides me to straddle him, his fingers are experimental. I'm not complaining, this is what I need.

"I have missed you," he confesses, lips wandering on my neck and collarbone.

"Not as much as I have missed you," a breathy moan comes out of my mouth.

His arms are tightly wrapped around me, the feeling is overwhelming. He's slowly stroking my back, the gentle touch is driving me insane, yet it is calming and brings me so much peace.

"I created a mess and I'm sorry, can we go back to being us?" I request.

My hands nestle his face, his eyes are normal again, reflecting nothing but love.

"Just so you know, that's not what I have been waiting for." He says.

I thought he was waiting for an apology.

“We’re going to work through this together, I’m not losing you, Amara. At first I was so angry that you left the house without informing me, only to find you...” he stops, his gaze irresolute before he looks at me again. “So much has happened and it’s all driving me insane, I thought it best to stay away from you because I was afraid of what I might do to you out of anger.”

Okay! Is that supposed to make me feel better? Why does his love have to be dangerous and possessive? Can’t he be like other men out there?

“I’m not perfect and I can’t do this without you. I don’t want to go back to the man I was before I consumed your love portion, only you can help me be a better person. Make me feel good, me hemma” (My queen.)

Randall places his hands under my shirt and reaches for my breasts, the lustful smirk on his face causes me to frown debatably.

“And then?” I want to know what’s going on in that brain of his, his lips press against my throat and a soft moan slips out of my tongue. His mouth leaves hot kisses on my throat, compelling me to tilt my head back in order to give him more access.

I can do this, I know I can. He’s my husband, not those men... he loves me and would never hurt me, this I am certain of.

But I can’t shrug away the images of that night as he continues to worship my body with kisses. My build stiffens, it’s a slight jolt that he barely picks up. He stops and my heart screams as our eyes meet, I’m afraid that he will notice how uncomfortable I have become. However, his eyes are lustful, promising and expectant.

“MaShenge,” he’s never called me that before.

“Clearly you can’t be sitting on my lap like this and not expect me to get aroused?”

This is the Randall Okolie, I know.

“Aroused?” I ask, trying not to burst into an

embarrassing horse laugh. A ghost of a smile grazes his lips, it's not hard to tell what he's thinking and I am terrified. For the first time in my life, the thought of my husband buried deep inside me, terrifies me.

"The things you do to me without even knowing," his voice is a seductive petition.

His hands are still discovering every corner of my skin, while mine are hooked around his neck afraid to touch him and feel him like I have been wanting to.

He claims my lips in an enticing kiss and in just a few seconds I feel his tongue plummet into my mouth, increasing the sound of my moans.

"I love the way... you hold me..." I hum against his lips and feel him smile through the kiss.

Great, there goes my heart getting carried away and again my mind cheers it on or else I wouldn't have uttered such. Then again, this is me trying to clear

my head of the images harassing me.

I open my eyes to find his closed, this way I won't hunker back to that night. We're both breathless when his lips leave mine, his eyes are diffident... fighting a war I know nothing about. He forces a faint smile before capturing me again, this time the kiss is wolfish, unmodified. He flicks us over so that I'm lain on the couch, he's in between my legs tattooing every inch of me with even-tempered kisses.

This can't be right, it can't be. I shouldn't be swamped in fear like this, I should be enjoying him. Reluctantly, my hands press against Randall's chest with the intent to shove him away, but my fingers take hold of his shirt.

I shudder under him as his tongue darts out across my skin, causing me to gasp and clasp my grip on his shirt.

"I love you..." he releases the words under a raspy tone. Usually I'd respond so flawlessly to his

endearment, but I'm at war with my mind and body that's reacting in ways I never thought would be possible with him.

Randall gradually moves his lips against mine and my eyes flutter shut which is a bad idea as I'm now watching contaminated scenes of myself with other men in my head.

My already heated skin becomes hotter when I feel his tongue against my bottom lip... I want this... I want this... I repeat the mantra as I try to calm myself down and fight the images haunting me. Ghostly, my lips part, granting his tongue access. Every limb in my body solidifies when his tongue finds mine, I thought I could do this.

He stops his gentle kisses, his face falls on my neck. We're slouched on the couch, bodies flush together, breathing rapidly and waiting for god-knows what.

"I'm sorry," he speaks, lips touching my neck. I should offer an apology as well, but I will burst into

waterworks if I dare open my mouth. My body gains its normal weight when he gets off me and I almost miss his brisk steps as he ambles towards the backyard, he's going to smoke. I know he hasn't stopped, maybe that will help him calm down. Something tells me he was having a difficult time with this as well.

ZITHA-

"I promise, I'll be quick."

"No, Tshilidzi, I said no." I push his hand that has been going up my skirt for the past five minutes, this is why I hate wearing skirts and dresses, but he insists that I wear them whenever he comes to see me.

We've been sitting in the back seat of his car for an hour now, parked behind my aunt's house, the streets are full but no one can see inside the car because the windows are tinted and it is night time, that helps hide my shame. I hate this car and

everything it represents, we've done it plenty of times in here and each time I walk out living my dignity and self-respect behind.

"You know I'm tired of you rejecting me," he seethes, eyes filled with rage and overflowing with lust. "I drove all the way here to shag you Zithobile, not to listen to your childish objections. You think I spend all my money on you, for you to deny me of what is rightfully mine?"

Please tell me he did not say what he just said, I know he treats me like his little whore but a little respect would be nice.

What is rightfully his is that short thing between his legs, I swear rich people can get away with anything. Show me a cheque and I'll call your small d!ck a hosepipe, add a few zeros and I'll take a picture of it and send it to an art gallery. Mama taught me to treat people with kindness.

"I'm not feeling well Tshilidzi, please." I whine,

extremely browned off.

He's been trying to 'shag' me for the past thirty minutes.

Does this man know how much he makes me sick? The reason I am still with him is... well... Argh...

I haven't been lucky with getting a job, no one wants to hire me.

All my job interviews end with them asking me about my skin condition and if my family is okay with me looking like 'this'.

Since I have vitiligo, society treats me the same way as it would treat anyone else who appears to be different. I'm started at or subjected to whispered comments, antagonism, insults and isolation.

"I have a headache, my stomach hurts, I think I'm getting corona." Anything to get him to stop touching me, the man's scoff dubs me slow-witted.

"That's an excuse and I'm tired of it," he grunts as he leans over to force a kiss. Disgusted by his lips

touching mine, I tilt my head to the side. I hate his kisses, they are nauseating.

“I want it from the back baby,” at his announcement, he turns me on all fours. My eyes widen with shock when I feel him flip my skirt up, exposing me. I’m on my knees and hands, trembling like a leaf, defeat laughs in my face when his hands tightly grip my hips to pin me down as I start to move away from his hold.

“Tshilidzi stop... I’m... I’m on my periods.” I lie. It usually works, it has to work. Men can be very narrow minded.

Why is he not stopping? I guess it didn’t work because his hand is pushing into my underwear, I’m going to throw up any second now. I reach out to push his hand off just as he grabs the hem of my underwear, however my strength is nothing compared to his because he pulls it down and I die a little inside when I feel his tongue start grazing my butt cheeks. He’s licking me like a bloody dog, not

accepting defeat, I squirm on the leather seats until he flips me back to face him.

The look in his eyes is that of a hungry lion, ready to devour me. My body almost quavers at the sight.

“I change my mind,” he licks my cheek. “I love your face when you orgasm, I’d rather watch that than your flat ass.”

As if he’s ever made me orgasm.

“Wait,” my hand presses on his chest as he leans down for another sloppy kiss, he pulls back a little, not enough for me to breathe. But enough for him to see my eyes, his are heavy-lidded, filled with lust. Bloody pervert.

“I’m still mourning,” yes, good excuse. “My mother just died, we can’t have sex for about a year or else bad luck will follow you.”

This should buy me enough time... or not. The idiot

flashes a grin, his shifty eyes are hinting at something debauched.

“I’m not an idiot Zitha,” his tongue comes out first before he attacks me with a greedy kiss, not giving me time to adjust to the hover machine he calls a mouth. No one kisses like this, I bet you a crazy man would win against this one for best kisser.

“Stop,” I don’t want this, I’m not in the mood today. He’s not stopping, his hands are everywhere on my body, harassing me. His touches are rough and disrespectful, they dub me loose and characterless.

“Stop.” I scream at him, tears and all as I push him off of me. No woman wants to be treated like this, no one should be treated like this. Tshilidzi stabs daggers at me, I know that look. I’ve seen it before, he’s angry and he’s about to act.

“You bitch, who the hell do you think you are?” He hisses before slapping me senseless, I yelp as I send my hand to caress my flaming cheek. “You’re mine and I will have you when...”

The fool doesn't finish talking because the door on his side pops open and in a split second something slurps him out of the car. I hear groans and thumping sounds, it's enough to have me inspect the scene. There's a man on top of him and he's throwing violent punches, I swiftly don my underwear and skirt before peeping out the open door again.

I can't see who it is, there's one street light here but it's too dim to show me anything plausible. To top it off, the man is wearing all black which makes it hard for me to see him clearly. What if he's here to rob us, or worse, kidnap me for human trafficking? I've always wanted to go to Brazil, but not as a sex slave.

The sight of a defenceless Tshilidzi brings about an alien feeling of happiness in my heart, this is not the time but dammit I take pleasure in seeing him in pain and almost out of it. This is by far the highlight

of my day.

“This is amazing,” oops! That was too loud, the man in black stops and with one turn he’s looking at me. I still can’t see him, though I can make out the long hair or dreadlocks rather. I really can’t tell, but there’s a dark aura surrounding him that has shivers rippling through me. My body begins to tremble in fear, I should have ran towards my aunt’s gate. Tshilidzi is a big man, he can take care of himself.

What about me? I’m a woman for Pete’s sake and this giant man shadowing me is... he’s petrifying. How do I fight him off? He’s moving closer, I want to step back. My feet won’t let me, it’s my knees; they are wobbly.

God, he’s going to sell me off, I can’t be a prostitute. My mother will rise from the grave, not only her but the father I have never met. They will tag team just to come and reproach me.

Lord, I’m going to miss my aunt’s shouting, I’ll miss my fights with Sizakele. I haven’t told my crush I like

him, if I survive this, I'll confess on Moja Love.

“Go!” Huh!

I can't move, fear has me paralyzed. I run my eyes to where Tshilidzi is and he's still groaning in pain. He looks weak like he's about to pass out, people are walking by with their rubbernecks and no one dares to intervene. This society though...

“Go!!!” He grunts the second time and that alone brings my strength back, I jump out of the car and scuttle around the corner headed for the house. The black car, the Range Rover Sport is parked across the streets... odd, I don't recall seeing it when Tshilidzi came over around 9pm.

Am I evil for wanting that man to kill Tshilidzi? The thought of him becoming an ancestor excites me in a strange way.

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventeen

ZITHA-

I hardly slept last night, Tshilidzi's phone has been off since. I don't know if he's alive or dead somewhere. The first thing I did when I woke up was check if there was a dead body behind the house and I am a little disappointed that I found nothing.

The least God could've done was send an inkabi to kill that bastard, not a tall black man drenched in dreadlocks and a frown. Some people are born to be disappointments, a waste of oxygen.

There is no sign that an attack had taken place there, basically, there is no crime scene.

Nonetheless, I still want to know who the mystery man is.

My aunt asked about the black eye; you heard right, Tshilidzi gave me a black eye. I had to lie and say I had a fight with Ulwazi. I have known that girl for as long as I have known Liyana, two lonely neighbours met and here we are. We used to argue till we lost our voices, funny how we couldn't stay away from each other although we couldn't stand each other.

Ulwazi lives down the streets with her grandmother and two little brothers about the ages of nine and fifteen.

We're meeting at Eyethu mall for lunch, she's actually paying for lunch. Sizakele is at school and aunt went to work, so that makes it easy for me to sneak out for a few hours. The woman gave me a curfew since I have been coming home late or sleeping out when I want to. I don't understand how she cares about my whereabouts.

I see the friend at Chicken Licken, she's already seated with two cans of fanta orange. She sees me, smiles and waves, I wave back as I walk in.

People stare and whisper from the moment my feet enter the premises, but I don't care, I'm used to it now. There's nothing I can do about my condition and people will always have something to say.

"Dali," Yes, that's what she calls me. Strange, I know. This one is straight from KZN, she grew up playing with bricks on the dusty streets of Umvoti village.

She came to Johannesburg before she could complete her grade 11, my friend could pass off as a guy. She walks, talks and dresses like one. If it were not for her bulky chest and very feminine voice, you'd swear she is a man.

I'm pulled into a suffocating hug until I feel my lungs crash a little.

"I knew it... you called me here to kill me." I express, grunting through the tight hug. She chortles, and I whimper when her hands glide down to my buttocks and delight in a light squeeze. If this wasn't a norm, I would be freaked out. I manage to escape her hug just as she nuzzles her face on the crook of my neck,

her hugs are weird.

“You smell good,” she says, running her tongue over her bottom lip and this girl is undressing me with her eyes, people.

“Where is Thobeka?” Her girlfriend of six months, I should ask because that look can only mean she is sex starved.

I shift away from her stare, she makes me shy sometimes by how her eyes linger on me. Ulwazi shrugs her shoulders, bringing Thobeka up is never a good idea for some reason. “Does she know that you’re a pervert who is lusting after her best friend?”

“She thinks we sleep together,” she provides an answer, a smug look taking place on her face. By the way, she’s a ‘chair opener.’ There is no use in castigating her, she has stubborn Zulu men tendencies.

“Sleep as in share a bed or sleep as in ‘going to Dubai (have sex)?” My query tickles her.

“That girl thinks we’re having sex,” Ulwazi does not seem bothered by the assumptions. In fact she is sipping that fanta orange as if she gets paid to do it.

“You should set things straight, I don’t want to be the cause of your break up. Tell her, I’m not your type.” I demand.

Her brows furrow, the look she regards me with is strange. I stand corrected, but I spot disappointment in her eyes.

“Haibo! Njani?” (How?)

Is she shocked or am I seeing things?

“Because I am not your type, Lwazi.” No, seriously, I insist.

“But you’re my type.” This girl...

“But you’re not mine and stop playing around Lwazi, don’t mess with other people’s children.” I warn her, Thobeka has a grandmother who knows African

science. She knows about trees and what to use them for, you don't mess with that woman.

"Whatever, you can't tell me about types. You're just a female version of a fuckboy." She grunts.

That stings, but I'm okay. She's the blunt type, tells you like it is and I have grown to take her slurs.

There is no lie in what she's said, I give and take. I have a vag!na and if it pays for my shoes, then why not make use of it?

"Words of a thirsty woman, keep going babe." My answer is an ignorant quip. My head shakes as I can't grasp why she thinks we would be paired perfectly. Even if I was a lesbian or bisexual, I wouldn't go for my best friend. Dating your friend is a recipe for disaster.

Her eyes linger on me, scrutinising my face. It's the black eye, she's spotted it and this girl seems angered by what she's looking at.

"You know, I would never do you like that?" I'm already tired of this conversation.

“Yes because I would kill you and bury you in your backyard,” my retort finds her smile.

“Why do you let him treat you like this Zithobile? You don’t deserve this shit,” her voice rises and gets us attention. I don’t get to respond as my phone blares, it’s Tshilidzi. How is he alive? Witches never die anyway, what a waste of excitement.

“Who is it?” Ulwazi snaps a question, a frown appears. Her nose wrinkles in distaste when I show her the caller ID, she hates him as much as I do.

“Where are you?” That’s the first thing he says, bloody fool has no manners.

“Eyethu mall with Lwazi.” She cocks a brow at my response and leans back on the chair. “Are you okay?”

Not that I care.

“You sent your boyfriend to come and beat me up,

now you're acting like you care. Don't piss me off Zithobile, you seem to be forgetting who I am."

"Hey, I don't know that man. Maybe..." I try to explain but he cuts me off.

"I want you at the flat in an hour, you're taking me for a ride little girl."

"Forget it, I'm not coming Tshilidzi." He must think I'm a fool.

"I'm not playing Zithobile, you better be at the flat when I get there, or you will pay back every cent I spent on you with interest." I know he means it with that vile tone. What have I gotten myself into? I need to think of a way out of this.

Ulwazi looks irritated now, like she doesn't want to be here anymore. Her eyes are waiting and interrogative, she will judge me again. This girl has no idea what that man is really like, given a chance, Tshilidzi will not hesitate to kill me. He's a powerful man with connections and that means the bastard will not taste jail.

“I have to go, he wants to see me.” I tell an already angry friend.

“You don’t have to, you know that right? What if he hits you again Zitha? No one will be there to protect you.” The worry in her voice has me thinking twice about going to meet him, on the other hand, I’m broke and have nothing to my name. Tshilidzi does not make empty threats, what on earth will I pay him with?

“Can you hook me up with a gun?” I enquire, voice void of humour. Ulwazi shakes her head, her brows knit into a frown.

“If anyone is going to kill that son of a bitch, then it’s going to be me.” She declares, her lower lip curving into a haughty smirk. “Akabaz abantu uTshilidzi, I will...” (Tshilidzi thinks he’s clever.)

“No,” I interject. “Killing someone is not the same as killing those cockroaches at your house. What, you think you will spray him with doom and he’ll shrink into his demise?” I’m serious though, Mulaudzi is a

dangerous man.

“My brother will help me, I don’t want you involved in any of this Zitha. You still have your whole life ahead of you, if I get caught, I will serve my sentence. I have nothing to live for, I don’t even have matric.” Her words are making me emotional, Ulwazi is crazy.

“Stop talking,” I whisper, covering her mouth. “You can’t talk about such things in public.”

“No one is listening Zitha, I need you to know that I’m here. I will do anything for you.”

“Bathathe sgaqagaqa,” (way to go tough guy.)

“I’m serious,” she snaps and I know she is, hence the fear lurking in my heart. I won’t forgive myself if her life is ruined because of me.

“Yoh Lwazi, my stomach is boiling. You’re making me nervous with this talk, please stop.” Her eyes follow me as I stand to my feet. “I’ll go to the toilet before I leave, please don’t eat my food. You know how to get into my house, right?”

I'm given a reluctant nod.

"Put the food in my room, under the pillow. That demon I call an aunt will be home later tonight, so make sure to be there before 6pm. If she sees it she will demand money for a braai pack."

"Why are you like this Zithobile?" Ulwazi cracks, her hands slamming on the table. I'm done with people staring at us. "This is your life, not a game. Can't you be serious for once?"

"I am serious Lwazi, I'm dead serious." I leave her with these words, my mind considering her plan. Perhaps going to jail for a few years won't be that bad, or we can come up with the perfect murder. I know where to hide a dead body and Ulwazi is the perfect accomplice.

RANDALL-

Over the years, we have accumulated a variety of

trucks. The trucking company has grown tremendously so much so that we have extended the business to other provinces and two neighbouring countries Lesotho and Swaziland.

This is the life I'm comfortable with, not indolent on the throne waiting for villagers to present their troubles. However, that is my destiny, one I cannot change even if I wanted to.

I'm preparing to head home for lunch when a knock at my office door catches me off guard, it opens without my permission, causing me to scowl at the disrespect. My eyes nearly widen at the sight of the intruder, however I settle for a glower instead.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I play it cool, this woman thinks she scares me. The smirk on her face is evidence, my eyes follow her steps as she strides towards my office desk.

"Is that how you welcome your future wife?" The white woman sports a grin, swirling with confidence

and added arrogance as a garnish. Not having time to spare, especially for people like her. I stand from the swivel chair with the intent to throw her out of my office.

“You are playing with fire Caroline,” my eyes narrow in annoyance, the scrutiny I emanate has her blinking away from me. But the witch gets back up before she burns.

“I like fire Randy, and I want you to burn me till I scream with pleasure.” Her voice is erotic, it’s purely disgusting. Her feet slowly lead her behind the desk, she stands a few feet from me, eyes lustfully uncloaking me. If I could, I would pull out my gun and shoot her right here without any hesitation.

“Are you kidding me, Randall?” her jaw drops in false shock and she places a hand on her chest. “I got all dressed up for you, but you haven’t bothered to look at my body. I’m sure you must be tired of your wife’s...”

I don't let her complete whatever her mouth is about to spew, her eyes are wild as I have her pinned to the wall.

"Mention my wife again, you piece of shit. I dare you," a sharp growl escapes my mouth, this woman is not deterred. She smiles, taking pleasure in this moment. I don't know what's going through her twisted mind and the look in her eyes screams lust.

"Oh Randall," her lower lip finds refuge in between her teeth. Her body squirms on the wall and I feel bile rise up to my chest at the realisation of what she's entertaining.

"I love it when you play rough," at this breathy saying, her filthy hand runs down my chest. "We can do it here, I bet you've never done it in your office."

"Don't you have any shame? I'm a married man." My hands release her shoulders, frustrated by her, I step back. "I am not fucking doing this with you, you hear me?"

"Argh, don't be boring. Just once Randy, please touch me just once." Her hands are touching me

again, unashamed and with a mission to unbutton my dress shirt. Disgust scrapes through my veins.

I will never do my wife like that, I'd never cheat on that woman. With one shrug from me, Caroline stumbles backwards. However, she manages to grab my arm and quickly enfolds her arms around my waist.

"Get your filthy hands off me," I push her a little harder this time. She falls ass first onto the ground and gets back up in seconds, her stubbornness irks me. This is not the first time I have rejected her besotted advances, her mulishness always lets me know that her lust for me has returned. I cannot express how much I hate this woman.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" A scream erupts through her lips.

I knew she would eventually snap, getting her riled up excites me. But not as much as the thought of seeing her drowning in her own blood.

“You touched my sister before, why can’t you touch me? What did she have that I don’t?”

“You don’t excite me, Caroline, neither did your sister. She was a loose whore just like you.”

“So, you were drunk when you released your sperm inside her and got her pregnant?” Her question and the tone she uses mock me, she has the nerve to address me with such disrespect?

“You bitch,” I snarl at her remark grabbing her hair in a tight grip. She yelps, but it’s not from pain.

This woman is vile and has some sick twisted fantasy that I will leave my wife for her. The hold she has on me gives her this confidence, god... it makes me sick.

“I can be anything you want me to be, Randy.” She releases a sensual response, her curious hands mapping my chest down to my torso. “I can be your bitch, you can pull my hair, tie me up. You can go all fifty shades of grey on me, I don’t mind.”

Repulsion can't even begin to describe how I feel right now, I'm a man and of course have been attracted to other women other than my wife. The wedding band does not clog one's hormones, however the love I have for Amara has kept me grounded.

Until that awful night...

Caroline is a leech that sucks you till you're dry.

Another push from me sends her crashing onto the ground with a low scream, she raises her head, tears welling in her eyes.

"Why are you doing this to me?" A frantic shout from her.

"I told you to stay the hell away from me, if you ever come at me again, I will kill you."

"Like you killed my sister?" Again she shouts and I snap my head back at the door, if the wrong people

hear her, I'll be in trouble.

“Trust me, you don't want to take me on.” I crouch to grab her chin, she winces in pain when I force her head up so she's looking at me. “I can be your worst nightmare, Caroline. You claim you've seen a footage of me smothering the life out of your sister, right? Then you must know what I am capable of.”

I tell her softly, yet at a volume that reaches inside and instils fear in her. Her eyes retreat, it's as if something in her wavers but she blinks it away.

“I- I'm... not afraid of you,” this is one stupid fierce woman. “You can't touch me, I can destroy you with just a touch of a button. One word from me to my friends and your perfect little life will come crashing down, Randall.”

I need to calm down or this woman will leave this office in a body bag, I remember having a box of

cigarettes in one of the shelves. My nerves are kicking in and it's not good for me to let them out. Hiding behind a strong face is not an easy thing to do, sometimes I want to crumble... fall apart and have someone hold me up.

"Surely we can come to an agreement," I announce as she stands to her feet and regards me with an inquisitive glare. "How old are you Caroline? Twenty... twenty one?"

"I'm twenty four," there's an attitude in her voice and posture.

"Yeah, whatever." Puffing the cigarette, I wave her response off like it's nothing. "You're a high school dropout, blacklisted, you have no one and can't afford yourself a slice of bread." I reason while letting her into my personal space, I did say she's a stubborn one.

"I don't want your money Randy, I want to be your wife. You're acting strong, but I know you're terrified. You don't want anybody finding out what you did and I won't tell if you take me as your wife. Leave your

wife for me, Randy. Make me, your queen.”

Caroline presses a hand to my chest, instead of withdrawing, I let her be. Her arms encircle my waist, her eyes gazing at me with lust filled orbs. My fingers cradle her cheeks, the touch is gentle, barely there. She’s getting comfortable, so I take this opportunity to clasp my fingers on her cheeks and force her face up to look at me.

Fear has not known her eyes yet, I would love to see them drowning in terror. I throw the cigarette butt on the floor and snub it with my foot.

Caroline parts her lips and closes her eyes when I start to bring my face closer to hers. In a millisecond, her arms tighten around my waist. Our faces are so close that the bridge of my nose brushes against hers, the whole time my eyes are open, watching... probing.

My lips shift closer to hers as I mildly trail my hand down to her neck, her breath hitches at the sudden

clip around her neck. This has her eyes widening with shock, I tighten my hand around her neck, depriving her of oxygen as I pull her closer to whisper in her ear.

“Hit me with your best shot, bitch.” I push her off of me, the third thrust is not so vicious. She stumbles growling like a crazy person and manages to stop herself from falling. Her head whips over to me, eyes stabbing and glaring.

“I’m going to ruin you, Randall Okolie, you’re going to pay for this.” She threatens, ironing her skimpy dress with her filthy hands.

“Yeah, whatever.” The nod I give her seems to drive her insane, I see how she’s so close to losing it. “Get out.”

With the authoritative dismissal, Caroline huffs and strides out of my office. I need to find those footages before sending her off to her sister.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Eighteen.

ZITHA-

His car is parked outside, so I know I'm late. I hope he's not in one of those foul moods, he becomes a beast when he's angry. But who am I kidding? The man was barking over the phone.

The security guard runs to open the door as he sees me approaching, it's embarrassing really because everyone opens their own doors without his help.

"Nkosazana," I almost roll my eyes at his salutation. Does he have to be so extra? It's Tshilidzi's money that's making him act like a highly paid fool, I have nothing against him. It's the attention he's bringing to me, now the tenants are glaring at me, obviously wondering why I'm getting special treatment.

"Thanks," I say and hurry to the lift or he will start a

conversation that will eat up my time. The flat is on the 8th floor, I'm still confused as to what this place is. If the residents are permanent or people who come to shag and be shagged like some of us.

Flat number 85, here I am standing outside the door with no gun. He wouldn't dare though, right?

I shrug the depressing thought away before opening the door, something forcefully grabs by hair and pulls me inside. The door slams shut as I release a scream.

Before I can see or fathom what's going on, a hand collides against my cheek and I'm thrown to the wall. My body hits the floor with a loud thud, my mind is blank, everything is happening so fast, depriving me a chance to run or fight back.

I can't see what's happening due to my head spinning, but there's someone, he pulls my hair forcing my feet up. It's him, he's standing in front of me, breathless with anger. Fire in his eyes and a raised fist, he bites his lower as he throws a punch

that sends me to the ground screaming in pain. There's an excruciating burning sensation on my cheek, I'm seeing double of everything while tumbled on the floor like a wet cloth that fell from the washing line.

"Tshi... Tshilidzi," my voice is that of shock as I'm trying to grasp what is really going on. Strange how shock can clog a person's mind, depriving them of sight and logic.

He snatches my hair and this time my mind registers what's really going on, I get that there were slaps before, the pushing and offences. But this? This is all new, for the first time since I've known him, Tshilidzi is thrashing me like I am nothing.

"Stop!!!!" I scream trying to get back up with the need to run out of the flat. He kicks me on my stomach when I'm on all fours, the impact has me gasping for air as my lungs clog for a good second.

God, is this how I'm going to meet my mother? How

will I explain the bruises on my face? I doubt they give you free makeup in heaven before they let you enter the gates, how will I hide my scars?

What excuse will I give her? That a Venda man who was meant to be my Azwindini turned out to be vho-Gizara? I refuse.

“Tshilidzi Stop!!!” Another scream, I don’t want to die.

God I know I thought about following my mother, but that was a secret thought, even you were not meant to hear it. I didn’t mean it... I’m only a woman, frail and without a muscle to open a jar of mayonnaise.

He hasn’t said anything yet but I hear him growling and panting as if he’s ploughing dough. I should’ve tied this synthetic hair up, he has it in his hand and the grip is so tight I feel a few strands snap. I grab his wrist to get him to stop, my mouth feels heavy and wet with warm thick liquid.

Blood slicks to the ground in sickening speed, in this

moment, my nostrils are filled with the smell of blood and there's a lurching in my stomach. Twilight is a lie, they forgot to tell us that blood tastes terrible, it's not edible.

His back hand collides with my face once more, the pain sends me screaming as I hit my head on the wall and tumble to the floor, the man won't stop.

"I'm going to kill you, Zithobile." He roars, his feet thundering on the ground headed my way.

I can't breathe and I'm losing strength, but I have to fight while I can still fight. If I die today, I will die having put up a good fight. As he grabs my hair again, I send my fingers to scratch his eyes. I knew there was a reason I was too lazy to cut my nails, I'm never cutting them again.

Tshilidzi growls and covers his eyes, he doesn't last long in agony because he slouches behind me and snakes an arm around my neck, choking me. My eyes bulge out as my mouth hangs open, a strangled

scream emerging from me.

His arm continues to squeeze, stopping my breath, I could feel my gorge closing. I sag to the ground, kicking my legs and grunting. His grip is too strong to wriggle out of, instant fear engulfs me. I'm not ready to die, Lord save me.

Shembe, my mother, Nomalanga Mthombeni used to call on you. I am her daughter Zithobile Mthombeni, do not let me perish in the hands of this evil man.

Desperation to breathe takes over me, my head spins as I try gasping for air. I can't move, no matter how hard I try, the immense pressure on my throat causes my mind to grow hazy. I'm going to die, I haven't tasted Roco mamas yet. I haven't gone sky diving, I still have to learn how to swim.

Despite the pain, I begin to thrash and buck under his vicious touch. However, he's ten times stronger than me, the edge of my vision darkens and my hands fall to my sides as energy abandons me.

The door literally flies open, it crashes to the floor...
Cheap motels.

There's a man, he's wearing all black, has long thick dreads that are tied in a ponytail. I think I've seen him somewhere but I can't remember where, my vision is vague and all I can think about is surviving this attack.

"Shit!" I hear Tshilidzi cuss, a shaky breath leaving him.

"Let her go." The stranger's voice rumbles like thunder on a stormy night.

Tshilidzi's hand detaches from my neck and I fall to the ground with yet another loud thud, hitting my head in the process. Pain seems to love me since my mother died, every limb in my body hurts like hell. I don't even try to move an inch, breathing already hurts and I'm chasing my breath as my life depends on it. I'll probably die if I attempt to get up.

“Look man, I don’t know who you are but this has nothing to do with you. This is between me and my girlfriend.” Tshilidzi you son of a bitch, ‘thunder fire you.’

“Shut up.” The man calmly snaps, though I don’t miss the authority in his voice.

“You know what I hate the most, Mulaudzi? Nonsense and stubborn people.” The man declares.

Well, I hate people that talk too much, did God not send him to help me? I’m going to die in the presence of fools.

“Zitha, this is what you do to me? After everything I have done for you, the money I spent...” Yoh this man, he doesn’t care that I might meet my mother soon. Me, a sassy ancestor? I’m not ready for that role.

He’s not given a chance to complete his stupid complaint, just one punch, one punch sends him to

the floor. He falls face first right in front of me, I'm dazed by how he's fainted after one punch. What have I been sleeping with? Because it is not a real man.

Mr. Dreads bends over and whisks me up in his arms, I don't know this man but I'm in his arms and he's taking me somewhere. I think of squirming, but something is holding me back, something that says I'm safe.

My eyes are heavy and refuse to stay open, but they are as stubborn. I want to see this person, I want to see his face but it's indistinct. Damn you Tshilidzi to hell.

I send my hand to his face, it lands on his cheek. His skin is soft, his facial hair feels rough against my palm. I feel his eyes on me as he stops moving, there's another presence here. All my useless eyes can make out is a silhouette, it hurts when I blink.

"You know what to do," this tall giant says. I don't hear anything from the silhouette, it moves, so do we.

I'm an over thinker and right now, I see my dead body abandoned somewhere in a ditch and later my aunt and Sizakele dancing to Sithi Sithi on my grave.

RANDALL-

Coming home to his family is something he always looks forward to. It's past 8pm, he made it just in time for dinner with the family. He finds his wife bustling in the kitchen, the aroma gives a homey feeling. It's comforting and warm.

He loves it here and he loves the woman standing behind the stove dressed in a short white dress and a head wrap that makes her look more 'wifey.' She's bare footed, the sight is breath taking that it births a smile on his chiselled face, I guess she hasn't heard him walk in or feel his presence. Or maybe she's deep into thought.

His feet are careful as he tiptoes to her, his arms

wrap around her waist from the back and she flinches in shock, but his scent is quick to work as it alerts her that it's none other than him, the man she's married to.

A smile moves stealthily to her face as he tightens his arms around her. "Why am I turned on by you standing behind the stove?" He whispers erotically into her ear, causing her body to react.

"Because you're not like anybody else, you're a special kind." Her response has him gasping in feigned shock. It's not long when he sighs in exasperation, his face finds refuge on the curve of her neck and his arms tighten around her waist, holding her like it's the last time.

"Are you okay?" It's an uneven drawl, she knows him when he's bothered.

"Me hemma," his lips are against her neck. She tries to turn in his arms to face him, but he doesn't let her. "Something big is coming, the ride is going to be

shaky for a while. We're going to fall me hemma, a lot of times."

"What's going on Randall?"

"I will need you to be strong for you and the kids, promise you will do that."

What the hell? He's scaring her, where is all this coming from? They are going through the worst, surely fate can't be cruel to set them on fire.

"Strong for what?" she snaps a question. He's not making sense and it's getting her worked up. "Let me go."

Amara is wriggling in his arms, he has no choice but to release her from his hold. With a swift turn, she's locking eyes with the man. This man standing before her must be Randall's double, he's blinking a lot for someone whose eyes are forever hardened.

"What is going on Randall?"

“It’s nothing I can’t handle Amara,” he says, stepping a foot away from her. His eyes are shifty now, hiding something. Amara takes his hand into hers, they are sticky which has her ogling down at it.

“Is that blood?” Sure he’s dark skinned, but black skin cannot mask the colour of blood. Randall yanks his hand back and shoves it in the pocket of his pants.

“No,” his voice is laced with confidence. This is the same man who does not dribble on his words. “It’s grease, the car broke down on my way home and...” he doesn’t finish talking as he rushes to the sink to wash his hands.

“Baby...”

“We interrupt this programme to bring you breaking news,” Amara is cut short by a feminine voice bursting through the small TV near the microwave. “Four bodies have been found buried in shallow graves in a farm in Vanderbijl Park, three bodies are

decayed beyond recognition. The authorities believe they are the three young women who went missing six months ago."

"Oh my God," her heart leaps on her chest. Liyana had once told her about the three young girls from her class who disappeared without a trace. Could it be them?

"The forth one is a body of a Caucasian woman who could be in her early twenties," at this announcement, Randall pivots on his heel to catch the news anchor behind the TV screen. "It is said that her death occurred three to eight hours earlier today..."

He's close to the TV and takes the chance to switch it off.

"I was watching that?" Amara complains.

"I don't want R.J to walk in on that, he's still a child." And... that's all. He leaves her to go change into something comfortable.

LIYANA-

One minute she's in her father's house in the comfort of her room, safely tucked under the covers of her queen-sized bed. How she got to the towering dark—wooded area is a Jane Doe, the blackness is eerie, full of mystery and fear. So this is where terror dwells, a place where no human should tread. Her eyes are bulging, trying to take in the dark tree trunks and clumps of bushes. The moon shines through a lettuce of leaves, the stars are barely visible she can only see glimpses of them.

“Where am I?” Her voice cracks beneath shattering teeth and is swallowed by the wind slipping through trees and snapping twigs caused by her faltering steps on the ground. “PAPA! PAPA!”

She exclaims this time, heart slamming against her ribs but there's no one to answer to her cry.

She slows her steps until they come to a halt and gulps at the air, trying to slow her quick breathing.

How cold can this place be? Her body shivers as the wind roughly slaps against her skin, the short nightwear does nothing to keep her warm.

Unexpectedly, there's a sound coming from behind. Fear staples her to the ground, she wants to turn to whoever is behind her, but is she brave enough? Then again this is a matter of life and death, she will perish if she lets fear play her like a puppet.

Liyana slowly turns and there stands an unfamiliar old man dressed in white, his head is covered with grey hair and face hiding below a scruffy beard. Her eyes widen and she starts trembling with fear.

"Be still," the man says in a hushed tone and surprisingly, Liyana's body falls into placidity. "Follow me."

He does not wait for a response but leads the way. Unconsciously, she follows him like a lost puppy. It feels like forever since they have been walking along the narrow trail of leaves, she's tired and sweltering.

After what feels like a lifetime, they reach a familiar house. A place Liyana knows too well, it is surrounded by dark mist.

“That’s my house,” amidst of the dark cloud surrounding her house, the girl chirps with excitement. There is no place like home and right now, she wants to run into her father’s house and take refuge.

“Why can’t I move?” She mumbles to herself, when her legs refuse to listen to its master. The old man hears but does not provide an answer. He’s stationery beside her, gawking over at the two-storeyed building. “What’s going on?”

Just as she questions the mysterious old man, what she sees next widens her eyes. The house she grew up in is on fire, it starts from the ground, spreading up with brutal intentions.

“No, no!” She yells in horror, fighting to get her legs to move. The kind of screams that bypass the ears to pierce the heart erupt from inside her house.

No, God no. Those voices, she knows the people in there. Randall, Amara, R.j... they are screaming for help.

“No, papa, Amara, Kwame.” Liyana flounders her arms as she strains to loosen her feet from the ground. “Help them please, my family is in there.”

Her screams fall on deaf ears, why is this man not doing anything?

Flames swallow the house, rising into the night as if challenging God to come down and witness their glory, it doesn't feel real for a while. However, the heat and smoke choking her lungs give her a wakeup call.

“Nana! (Grandfather.)”

Instinctively, Liyana calls on the man who has always helped them in times of need. He's an ancestor that's always there, or so she thought.

“Nana, your king is dying. Help him, nana, help him.”

She's not sure if he can hear her, the man has been marked absent for years. How do you pacify a sulking ancestor?

The old man beside her turns and begins his walk back to wherever he came from, leaving the young girl screaming her lungs out.

"Liya, wake up. Wake up Liya."

Her eyes snap open and the first thing she does is try to breathe as she feels suffocated, it causes her to cough.

"Liya, drink this." The same voice that woke her up says, for a while she's unaware of her surroundings until her dewy eyes start to take in her bedroom and the figure before her. Her little brother is holding a glass of water, waiting for her to take a sip. Liyana does not care about the water, her brother is alive. Tears come as an overwhelming grief engulfs her, she pulls her little brother into a tight hug, grieving as if she has lost a dear one.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Nineteen-

RANDALL-

With Amara asleep, I sneak out of the bedroom to have a smoke. I need one, my mind has me incarcerated tonight. Perhaps it's the storm that's coming, I'm not quite sure.

The house is deadly silent and the lights are out which makes my feet a bit dizzy as I attempt to stop my footsteps from echoing while I pave my way to the living room.

My mind wanders off the moment I indulge on a smoke, there are so many secrets hidden within these walls, they are painted with the blood of my father and brother.

I can't be blamed for the actions and decisions I took in the past, everything was done to protect my family.

“Papa,” her voice is barely audible, I almost shoot up from the couch but shift to stub the cigarette into the ashtray.

“What are you doing up?” she frowns at my question and tilts her head—confusion sprawled on her face.

“You smoke?” I don’t think that’s any of her business but;

“Yes and you shouldn’t.”

Liyana is too experimental for my liking, she shakes her head before joining me. Her legs hang over the floor as she moves to the far end of the couch.

“Smoking is disgusting,” I like the triviality in her voice, she will never touch a cigarette in her life. Her head finds refuge on my shoulder as she perches herself closer and radiates a dense sigh.

"I had a bad dream, it's not clear anymore, but I remember that our house was on fire. You, Amara

and R.J were inside screaming for help. I can't remember the rest of it, or where I was." Liyana introduces.

"That's a strange dream to have," I don't know what to make of it. Grandfather doesn't hide behind riddles, he shows himself and says what he wants.

"Papa!"

"What is it?"

"Where is my mother?"

"Sleeping, do you need anything?" She sits up, eying me with an inquisitive- fleeting look.

"Not Amara, my birth mother." My eyes bulge out of my head while my heart knocks on my chest.

Suddenly, I trail off, my mind taking me back to the day I promised Olivia that I will make sure Liyana forgets her existence. I made sure she found a mother in Amara and kicked out any craving she could have for her real mother. That woman did not deserve my daughter. Where did I go wrong? Why ask about her now after so many years?

“I don’t know where she is, Liya,” I lie to her like I did years ago when she asked about her. It was the first and last time she brought her up, hence I thought it was a thing of the past.

“You said she moved to Europe with some guy.”

I turn my head to her direction wanting to grasp why Olivia has suddenly come to mind. Did she have a dream about her?

“I said that?” My eyes aren’t really looking directly at her, I’m never this fearful. How am I letting things fall

apart? I hate it when I'm not in control of my surroundings.

"Yes papa," desperation in her voice. Her lashes kiss her upper cheeks as she rapidly blinks. I know she's about to cry when she does this.

"What's going on princess? Why the sudden curiosity? Hasn't Amara been a good mother to you? Where has she gone wrong that you feel a need to replace her?"

She glances up at me as she uncomfortably shifts in her seat, "I- I want to change my surname."

I'm not sure I heard right, "what?"

At my question she scoots a hand's length away, drops her head while fondling with her palms. She's taken up silence and I'm getting agitated. "Liyana!"

"I want to change my surname, papa." Her voice slightly trembles at her absurd announcement. "I

don't want to be an Okolie anymore."

"Where is this coming from?"

"I'm tired papa, I want to be free from our ancestors." I can't imagine what my baby must be going through, I see her point, but changing her surname is out of the question.

"Perhaps it's time you go to Ghana and learn about your roots, what you're telling me is not done Liyana. Where have you ever heard such?"

"I don't want to go there."

"Then stop this nonsense, are you trying to bring yourself bad luck? The Okolies are a proud clan Liya, royalty. It is an insult to want to renounce your own people, your family."

She buries her face in her hands, the sound of her frustrated growl fills the living space.

"I am not renouncing them, I just don't want to be an Okolie anymore." Liyana manages to stop her voice from rising.

This child is still wet behind the ears, if she were mature, these foolish thoughts would not find room in her head.

“You’re not taking that woman’s name, you’re an Okolie, period.” Maybe I sound a little too harsh.

“I dont want to carry whatever it is they have made me carry.” The tone of her voice is slowly transitioning into a disrespectful tone, the look in her eyes daring and hard. Funny how she reminds me of myself, but I can’t let her climb the boat of impudence, I am still her father. “I can’t even have a normal relation...”

The syllables start to fade and shock visits her widespread eyes as she spots a blunder in her statement. “I- I mean, I want to be a normal person papa and the only way is for me to change my surname.”

“Who told you that? Do you even know the woman whose surname you recklessly want to claim?”

“She’s my mother, I have a right to take her last

name. You two were never married, so culturally I'm supposed to be carrying her surname. My name should be Liyana Botha."

"Liyana!" The loudness of my voice makes her jump from the chair. "Don't ever say that again, do you hear me?"

"Why not papa? Is she not my mother?" Spare the rod, spoil a child. I am witnessing it. "She gave birth to me and..."

"And that's the only good thing she ever did, I don't want you associated with that woman." My build towers over her as I stand to my feet, I am dumbfounded by the hate illuminating in her eyes.

"Papa please, I need this. I need her, help me find my mother." Her body sags against the armrest, face crinkling as if calling upon a river of tears. However, Liyana hardly ever cries. Her tears are cried beneath what the world cannot see, she would cry over a sad movie but not a drop for herself, she doesn't express her own pain that way. It's as if there's a blockage,

maybe it's functional as she has been through a lot.

She doesn't move when I reach out to touch her shoulder, rather, her body solidifies at my touch. "Go to bed, it's late now." I tell her with a gentle expression.

Her head whips up, eyes wide as a deer caught in headlights as if she can't believe the words that have escaped from my mouth. Her hand finds mine and with one motion, shoves my hand from her shoulder.

"I will find her myself," she's off running before I could reprimand her.

Dammit Liyana! I have experienced her stubbornness before, but nothing like this. How do I tell her that Olivia died when she was a little girl? How do I tell my baby that I killed her mother? Liyana can never find out about this and now that Caroline

is gone, it will be hard to find that footage.

AMARA-

Randall is not in bed when I wake up which is not a surprise, he's an early bird. Having my husband sleep next to me and not be able to touch him or have him touch me is hell itself, the man does not believe in therapy, if I dare suggest it, he will surely dismiss me.

I look around the room and there's no sign that he's in the shower nor do I hear the water running.

I leave the bed to take a quick shower, I'm hungry so it has to be nippy. Lazy to change into anything because my stomach is complaining, I grab one of his dress shirts and wear it instead. Chioma is not around, I'm safe from prowling eyes and a speech about how a wife should look even when at home.

Liyana has not found her way into the kitchen yet, I don't know how I didn't teach her the basics. Forget that she's royalty, what if she is taken by a commoner? She can't feed her family microwave meals and KFC every other night.

Heading to the kitchen, I realise that someone has beat me to preparing breakfast.

The smell of freshly baked blueberry muffins, lures me towards the pantry, Randall doesn't bake unless Chioma is back from Nigeria.

Confusion slaps me hard in the face when I find a strange woman full of commotion in my kitchen. She could be in her early 50's, I'm hailed with a smile the second she turns. Perplexed and my head forming a million questions at once, I fail to return it.

"Good morning." Oh aren't we chirpy so early in the morning?

"Morning," my answer is an undecided response. I

don't move from the doorway, waiting for her to tell me who she is.

"Breakfast is ready, I already told the king." The king? No one ever addresses Randall with such a big title, I smell aunt Petunia here!

"He said he's waiting for his wife, I'm guessing it's you. He said he didn't want to wake you up because you were sleeping peacefully." The look she's giving me...

Where is this going? Sometimes I sense things and this is definitely going somewhere. Her lips press into a thin line and she crosses her arms. Why does her stand remind me of aunt Petunia? In fact, she's all I see. The difference between them is that this one is short and a tad bit chubbier than my aunt. Leisurely, her eyes sweep down my body. I'm about close to huffing when she brings them back up, clearly peeved. It must be the shirt I'm wearing, it is the shirt. She's a Petunia, I just know it.

“Let me give you advice on ‘Umendo’ sisi (marriage).” Oh wow, maybe I should grab a chair and get comfortable. “Never let your husband wake up before you, he will think you’re lazy and find someone who knows how to wake up early to cook and clean for him.”

She thinks she’s clever, neh? I know the likes of her, let me have mercy on her old soul. It’s barely 8am, how early is a woman supposed to wake up?

“I’m not sure we’ve met.” I try to at least sound respectful, a smile takes flight on her face.

“My name is MaNtombi.” Great, another Ntombi. I wonder how lethal this one is. “I’m the temporary—executive house keeper.” She pats her chest, it’s the prideful smirk for me.

“Thank you for your advice ma, but my husband loves me and whatever you have convinced yourself will never happen.” Yep, I’m that confident, he made me this confident. Nonetheless, I don’t like how her brows elevate, as if mocking and calling me bluff.

“Don’t be so sure about that sisi.” Eh! “That’s one mistake women make, thinking your husband will never leave you because he worships the ground you walk on. I’ve been around for too long and...”

...and she’s starting to annoy me.

“Thank you, ma.” I slide in between her useless guidance. “But your advice is not needed, I’ve been okay without it and I will continue to be okay.”

Jesus! I don’t even know this woman. The itch to click my tongue and shove her words down her throat... but... I don’t want to stain Randall’s image by coming across as disrespectful towards elders.

“Excuse me.”

A little attitude is added to my voice, at this point I don’t care if she thinks I’m rude. I refuse to wake up to bitter old women who have nothing better to do with their time than give stupid advice from the 1920’s. I’m followed by a loud cackle and before

shock embraces me, I hear her clap once. I'm firing her as soon as I speak to Randall.

KENNETH -

Here stands a world plagued by a bunch of species who define themselves by masculinity, domination and stubbornness. A realm that lacks adequate self-control. Men cannot be this cruel, but again, we are a sad human race. God must be ashamed of us.

The chase huh? Look where it has gotten me, a battered stranger in between my bed sheets.

I don't know why I brought her here, but I had to get her away from there. The first place I should've taken her is the hospital, controlled by a full range of emotions, I drove like a mad person then found myself parked in my garage.

The girl has been out of it since yesterday, however, I

am convinced that she will be okay. She's stronger than she looks; put me on a stand in front of a judge and make me swear on the Holy bible and I will prove with no doubt that this is the strongest person I've ever met.

I have been watching her every move, I can't really say why but... she's here... in my bed.

"How is she doing?" Ah yes! She's also here...

Fezekile Mkhize or MaMkhize as she is known, is my father's eldest sister. I still don't know what she's doing in my house. Isisa wants her here, this woman managed to crawl into my little sister's head and convinced her that she needs a mother figure in her life. Her tricks won't work on me, I see right through her.

"Who did this to her? How can people be heartless to do this to a little girl?"

Oh please, do not let her sympathy dribble you, this is how she kisses ass.

Zithobile's face is not too bad, thankfully. One eye is swollen, there's a cut on her bottom lip and her nostrils bear congealed blood. The girl suffers from a fractured rib, nothing major that needs urgent medical attention.

"She's not a little girl, she's a woman." I correct MaMkhize, I haven't looked at her since she walked in here. I hear her footsteps getting closer, she's standing on the other side of the bed in seconds, carefully studying the woman sleeping in my bed.

"Mmmhh! Angazi ndodana, kodwa kee she looks like a little girl to me." (I don't know but.)

Says MaMkhize as if trying to knock some sense into me.

"Why are you in here?" I question her presence, ready

to oust her out of my bedroom.

“What should I prepare for lunch?”

“I told you to stay out of the kitchen.” I don’t trust her, she might poison us.

“You make me taste all the dishes I prepare before Isisa eats them, so I don’t understand why you’re complaining. Besides, you don’t eat my food.” Not only is she not allowed to cook for us, she is not allowed to enter my room.

“I’ll order in,” nonchalantly, I tell her. I’d rather have a stranger cook for us.

With a wrinkled nose, she shakes her head, disapproving of my decision.

“Junk food again? That’s a bit unhealthy.” The woman grumbles.

I’m not in the mood to entertain her, she notices my blank stare and shamefully lowers her gaze.

“If you say so, Kenneth.” I don’t like her tone. “I’ll cook for my niece, till she goes back to varsity.”

“And when she does, you pack your bags and leave my house. You’ll come back when she visits, I don’t care.” I throw the words at her and she receives them with an eye roll.

Zitha stirs a bit, a soft moan escapes her mouth, my feet reluctantly move toward the bed. The impact doesn’t last, as I bring myself to a halt at the realisation of my detectable concern. This is not me at all but this young woman has done something to me, I have been following her because I needed to find out what it is that’s pulling me to her direction. Till now as I’m glancing at her, I still can’t figure it out.

“You need to take her back to her house, she can’t be here. She does not belong here.” MaMkhize advices, now sitting on the edge of the bed, leering down at this innocent lady. Her eyes have that look of disgust as if what lies before her makes her sick, Fezekile Mkhize does not come with peace.

“This is my house,” and I’m ready to throw her out.

“This is Isisa’s house too, think of her, Kenneth. You can’t bring some girl that you picked up from the streets, she could be dangerous.” She’s still talking and has me springing a sigh of frustration.

“Fezekile, if you know what’s good for you, you will leave this room now.” I snap.

She releases an incredulous gasp, cackles and walks out without arguing. That woman is getting on my nerves, I see her agenda. It’s the lifestyle and the money she’s after. Don’t get me wrong, I’m all about family and loyalty but I hate deceivers, fake people.

MaMkhize was bent on sending me to jail after I killed her brother Balungile Mkhize, she was all about getting justice for her useless brother. She sang about how Isisa lied about the months of molestation and that her precious brother would never hurt his blood.

My sister and I— we didn’t fall from a tree, we have a mother alright. That witch Shiyiwe is in hiding, she

ran away the day I killed her husband in cold blood, after I walked in on him sweaty and groaning on top of my sister while she watched. I curse her existence till this day.

MaMkhize knows the story so well, but still pushed to have me thrown in jail. Family meetings were led by her, the uncles were on her side. I just couldn't let it happen though, I couldn't leave my sister alone with those vultures. So I did my research, found their little secrets that could destroy their families. It was left for- he without sin to cast the first stone and well, here I am, a free man.

Now MaMkhize is here pretending that she cares about us, she probably came to finish what her useless brother started.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-

This chapter contains strong language and insults that may be offensive to some readers. Reader's discretion advised.

BAMBINDLOVU-

He's dressed in Umblaselo, his everyday attire. Who cares what people think? He dresses for himself and as a proud Zulu man, he feels a need to show off his culture. Over the years, he lost his heavy Zulu accent somewhere between the streets of eZola and Hillbrow. The perks of being surrounded by the whole of Africa in one small town.

When he speaks, he uses that one signifying coder-slang—kasi slang otherwise described as tsotsi-taal. The language has a flavour of its own, a mixed variety of official languages of Mzansi. Although a

proud Zulu man, he has embraced the language as part of his culture.

To add final touches, he grabs a half empty container of his mother's Ingrams Camphor and applies it on his face. The smell makes his insides turn, it's not like he has an option; he's run out of Blue seal. Now he has to go around smelling like Camphor and Lord it's the green one, the smell is so strong that it brings a person unnecessary attention.

Either way, he looks good and he knows it, one thing is missing though, the 'Zulu Rolex'... Isiphandla (animal wristband.)

That connection with his ancestors... having it would mean the world to him. He knows his roots, where he comes from. He's been in contact with his ancestors when his father was in his life, the age before he could count up to 100 without skipping a number or two. That was before his father's eyes

wandered off their compound, before the big man decided to take another wife.

It's a must to have Isiphandla, his birth right. However, he will need his father's family to achieve that, the same people his mother forbid him from meeting.

"Even if you dare dream about those people Bambindlovu, I will forget I ever gave birth to you." His mother's threat is forever imprinted in his mind, he shivers at the thought. Selling his soul to the devil is always an option, but living without his mother would be a sin.

"Ndlovu!" An ear splitting scream harasses his ears, compelling his face to wrinkle as frustration takes over. He turns to his little sister by the door, her relaxed hair pointing in all corners of the earth as if she was struck by lightning. The brat's face is covered in dry porridge, eye gunk and a grin that sends him rolling his eyes.

"What's wrong with you?" He knows what's wrong

with her, her goal in life is to make his life difficult. Why wouldn't she? The unemployed twelve year old has nothing better to do with her time.

"Mama wants her lotion," the attitude in her voice is on a mission, she folds her arms across her chest, taking on an unrelenting head shake.

"Did I say I'm leaving the country with it?" He retorts, throwing her with a scolding look.

"Ok'salayo, you should have your own." This kid...

"What do you want mubiza? (Ugly)" It's not the first time he questions her presence in his room.

"Mama is calling you, Mr. Elephant." The child speaks with so much insolence.

"Is this why you didn't go to school? So you can spend the day looking like Somizi's mom with a dash of madluphuthu and Vegeta?" He hits a nerve with his quip, the little girl rolls her cartoon eyes.

“Flaunt sisi, asinamona.” (Continue, we’re not jealous.)

“You’re one to talk,” she deadpans. “You’ve been stuck on the 24th of September since you were eighteen, it’s embarrassing. People don’t wear heritage every day.”

He wants to laugh at her remark, but that would stroke her ego.

“You disrespectful little shit,” she ducks with a scream erupting from her mouth when he swings a hand at her.

“Mama!” The little shit... sorry, the little girl screams. Bambindlovu quickly covers her mouth, knowing he will get in trouble with their mother. Thandikela Mbele does not play when it comes to her children, the woman would lay down her life for them.

“If you dare snitch on me, I will call the police and tell them about the 50 cents you stole in my bag last

week. Jail is not a nice place for children.” Her eyes swell at his threat, before he knows it, crocodile tears are streaming down her crusty face.

“But... you said... you won’t get me arrested bhuti.” Now he’s bhuti and not an elephant?

“I won’t if you mind your own business and stop calling me Ndlovu.” He triumphs in putting a smile on her face, the child sprints out lest her brother changes his mind.

The three bedroomed flat occupies about eight to nine people, he shares what was initially a sitting room with his mother and sister. They had to divide it into two bedrooms using a curtain, the kitchen and bathroom belongs to every tenant in the flat.

The cooking space is not far from their room, he finds his mother seated on a chair packing away scones, she smiles and shakes her head as her eyes take in his clothing.

“Uyaphi?” (Where are you going?)

He takes this as a compliment, a miniscule simper graces his face.

“I’m going to fetch the kids, it’s almost 3pm.” He says.

The scones look and smell so scrumptious that he has to grab one and stuff it in his mouth.

“Ah. Ah. Ah Thandikela my love, you’re not done using the stove? I need to cook swirathi (sweetheart), you’re forgetting that we share this stove as a nation.” Jokes a fellow tenant with a thick Malawian accent, materialising from the dim passage. His jest is accompanied by a deep chortle that annoys Bambindlovu to his deepest core.

He wants to wipe that creepy smile directed at his mother, with a slap. Bambindlovu can’t have it, no one talks to his mother like they are climbing down a tree. He doesn’t care about the stupid friendly face

the guy is showcasing, it's fake anyway. He's always been short tempered thus pushing the undersized man against the wall is nothing new.

“Yey, brika msoonu.” Bambindlovu seethes. (Stop right there, asshole.)

The poor man gasps in shock, he can't understand why he's being attacked. He just wants to cook his food, eat and go catch up on Emzini Wenzinsizwa. (Local TV show.)

“Speak to my mother like that again and ngizokunquma isbhamu somdoko, mdidi.” (I'll castrate your d!ck.)

Bambindlovu tosses a warning, his hand tightly pressed on the trembling man's shoulder and body towering over him.

“Oh Nkosi yami, Sokalisa, stop your nonsense.” (My God.)

Thandikela manages to pull her son back.

“I don’t like this mama, this idiot is disrespectful. Is this how he speaks to his mother?” Bambindlovu grunts, shooting the man with an evil glare.

“Ngizom’thethisa nge Alfred Khuzwayo.” (I’ll shoot him down with an AK-47.)

Thandikela buries her face in her hands, this is not how she raised her son. It’s days like these she regrets moving to Johannesburg, the petite man finds a chance to scurry out of the kitchen like a scared little mouse.

This is one over protective son and that’s okay. She’s here today because of his protective nature, he’s only twenty four yet has old man tendencies.

Or rural tendencies per se, the ladies that have been introduced to his queen were forced to wear a doek, cover their shoulders and adorn their bodies with a garment a woman should naturally wear; a dress that covers her knees.

Some stayed, while some couldn’t take second place

in his life. His longest relationship lasted about three months, not that he's an ugly duckling. His looks are a ten, it's his mother and sister that are a problem according to the ladies.

Ah yes! And the fact that he doesn't have a bank account that is overflowing with Mandela notes. Correction! He doesn't have a bank account at all, poverty has never given him a chance to walk into Capitec. He receives his R1200 in a special brown envelop sealed by a Taxi owner using his tongue.

"Hurry back, I have to go and sell these before dark." She declares, packing the scones into a five litre Tupperware container. Bambindlovu is not happy about his mother's announcement, especially knowing she won't be selling anything after 3pm.

"

"No. No. No, Maolady, I can't let you do that. Rather give them to me, the school kids will buy them and if there's any left. I will sell them at the taxi rank."

She nods in agreement.

“Hurry back, if you lose this container don’t come back home.” His mother dishes a warning with a warm smile.

“Hau mama, my life is worth iskhafthini?” (A lunch box?)

“This is not a lunch box, it’s years of collection. You’re a man, I wouldn’t expect you to understand.” He’ll never understand the greedy relationship women have with Tupperware.

“Okay, sthandwa sam. Let me run.” A quick kiss is pasted on her cheek before he heads out.

The caravan is parked across the streets, he loves this car. It’s not his, but he’s made a place for it in his heart. Perhaps one day his boss will wake up in a good mood and gift him this baby for being a consistent transport driver.

Mina, I know people abak’dleli ‘jealousy

Bak'thakathe ngenhliziyo

Izinto zakho ma 'ihlangana

The song blasts through the speakers as he drives away, singing along word for word.

He's parked outside Saint Martin's School in Rosettenville, the grounds are buzzing with little brats scuttling about. In no time, the caravan is filled with not only kids but noise that give him a splitting headache.

With everyone settled, he starts the van. He's got the song on replay, it's louder than the snorty rich kids. There's sudden silence in the vehicle as if the song playing offers curse words, this is how he likes it.

Before he drives off, the door slides open and there

stands a tall lady. Her eyes sweep over the astounded school kids, annoyance taking over her facial features.

“Kwame, what are you doing there?” The lady yells at one of the boys seated at the back. “Come here, now.”

The little boy grumbles and jumps out of the caravan.

“Why are you in there? Are you crazy Kwame?” She scolds him.

“You were taking too long Liya, so my friend suggested that I go with him to his house.” Oh children are so gullible, it’s cute.

“You should’ve called me, you don’t just follow people R.J. What if I got here and you were already gone? Don’t ever do that to me, again.” Liyana articulates, pulling her little brother into a tight hug. He winces and immediately draws back, fear visits his eyes as he hugs his body.

“And then? What happened?” She enquires.

He retreats once more when she extends a hand to touch him.

“N- nothing Liya.” Is his hesitant response.

“Hey, who are you?” Bambindlovu is standing behind her, demanding answers.

“Who are you and where were you taking my brother?” She questions, staring down at him.

“Excuse me, this is a school transport. I’m running a business here.” He speaks clearly.

“A Business of kidnapping kids?” That’s a nippy response from her.

“I’m not surprised, it’s because I’m black, right?”

“Are you calling me racist?” Liyana spits.

“I don’t know,” he shrugs his shoulders. “If it butters your bread.” In addition, he regards her with a bored look. Her mouth hangs open in disbelief.

“I could get you arrested for false accusation and

preying on children,” she’s pointing a finger at him and he’s not okay with it. No woman points a finger at him, his ancestors would slap him across the face for allowing such.

“Go ahead, I have B.C on speed dial.” There’s arrogance in the way he delivers his retort and he’s not even guaranteed that she will not call the cops.

“What?” She is confused and this has him smirking and drawing nearer to her. The lady’s eyes flap a few times as she tries to move away from him but her movement is limited, the car has become a stumbling block. Nothing smells so delicious than a nervous woman.

“Don’t look at me in a rush sisi, my clothes don’t define who I am.” He lies through his scone smelling breathe. “When I say malume, Bheki Cele answers.”

He finds himself funny, I see. The man is laughing as if he won best male comedy, but sister here is not amused. The tongue click speaks on her behalf.

“Liya let’s go.” R.J pulls the hem of her jersey, he

looks ready to go home. Bambindlovu's stare is holding her captive, his eyes are probing and soft. Something suddenly does not add up, something in him familiarises with this girl.

"What are you looking at?" He is used to rude girls like her and knows how to handle them.

"So you're the spiritually gifted girl?" There can't be a mistake, there never is a mistake when it comes to these things. Sure his father abandoned him, but his ancestors remained loyal. They have been with him to this day, whispering people's secrets in his ears.

"What are you talking about?" Her brows furrow as she glares at him, she pushes her little brother behind her as if hiding him from a predator.

"You have weird dreams of people you've never met, you dream of water and being at school. Sometimes you see shadows around you, but you brush it off thinking it's in your imagination." He clarifies.

“How do you know all of this?” She questions his facts, it’s not a first. Some people have gone as far as calling him a witch after prophesying over them.

“Moloi (witch) at your service,” he jokes to receive a snort from her. On a serious note; “you have a calling mfethu (my brother.) If you don’t attend to it, things will go South and fast. You need to get cleansed and then taken to the water, so that you’re able to communicate and connect with your ancestors. If not, you will fall into depression and start having suicidal thoughts.” This is not the life he chose for himself, invading strangers’ privacies. His ancestors are sure having a laugh where they are, if it were up to him, he wouldn’t even be entertaining unfamiliar persons.

“But that’s not what I want,” she argues.

“Look, I know it’s not easy for you to accept this, but if you don’t, your family will pay the price. I can help you find direction if you like.”

“What’s the catch?” Come on Liyana, not every guy

wants what belongs to your 'precious' Zwelethu.

"I don't want anything from you, mfethu."

"I am not your brother, stop calling me that." Liyana breaks.

"Whatever... mfethu, I'm just passing on a message and seeing how conflicted you are, I thought you'd need help. Do whatever you want. I don't care, I don't know you."

He opens the passenger door, grabs the bucket of scones from under the seat.

"My suster, since you look like money. I'll sell you this whole bucket for R300, 750 includes the Tupperware." Mr. Chance-taker, negotiating is one thing he's good at and any normal person would fall under his spell. The lady in front of him looks like she eats lemons for breakfast. "Special offer mfethu, take it or leave it."

"No thank you," is that a look of disgust? Or is she annoyed by his informality?

“Come on, look at your little brother, nkare ke Sid oa Ice Age, one or two scones and he will gain weight fast-fast.”

Evidently irritated, Liyana snatches her brother’s hand and ushers them to her car.

Bambindlovu is left with his mouth sagging open, he wonders if she will heed his advice. He didn’t sign up for this, being a mediator for ignorant people who refuse to accept their gifts.

In his dreams he would hear the sound of his father’s feet, his rumbling laughter and spur-of-the-moment humming. In that time, peace would reign in him until his eyes flap open, forcing him back into the real world. A world where his father chose another woman over him and his mother. This strange gift he has; could it be a punishment from his ancestors for being away from his father? Because it darn feels like one.

*

*

* ©

Writer's note: I need a boost, I would really appreciate your comments. Please recharge me, we were doing well with Vicious Cycle. What went wrong? Are you guys enjoying the story, is it too boring or the writer is not the one?

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-One

STYLES-

This is the third time he's sent back without meeting the woman who possibly has the answers he needs. Her good girl image was wiped off when the men in uniform thought it best to keep her protected. Who is she that she would need the Malawian government to shadow her?

If Thandaza is a big shot back in her country, then how is she running from an abusive partner? Couldn't the same government protect her from this so called husband who aspires to be Mike Tyson?

He rented a small office space in Randburg near Cresta mall, two IT specialists are working under him. Nothing valid has come up yet, they are still oblivious as to who has drawn the enemy lines. The

people who have tried and tested Randall Okolie are still in hiding and that has Styles restless.

He walks in to find the two young men conversing over fat cakes and... it smells like Joko in here. These people look too relaxed for people who have a deadline. He regards them with a frown and discharges a loud exhalation.

“What do you have for me?” He’s shuts the door loud enough to depict the amount of anger pulling at him, they sit up, each sliding his swivel chair in front of the computer.

He’s not in a good mood, he hasn’t been in days since the investigation began. His other men have to walk on egg shells around him, they don’t know him to be vile and ratty. Then again they don’t know him much, to actually predict his mood swings.

“Nothing has come up yet, Styles.” His face hardens upon hearing this. It’s what he’s been hearing the entire week and he’s getting fed up. He knows

what's coming, there has to be a way to avoid it.

"Maybe I should fire you lot and get people who really need this money, you're here all day doing absolutely nothing."

"Well it's not easy..." Oops, wrong choice of words. Styles considers the man with a glare.

"How long do I have to listen to your excuses? You come highly recommended only to give me a bunch of bullshit. How hard can it be to find a man who walked in and out of a bloody hotel?"

How hard is it exactly? It's not like he's a ghost or is he?

"I think we should call it a night, I can't function under a lot of pressure." One of them introduces, rubbing his eyes like an innocent little boy ready to retire for the night. This is what happens when you hire babies, fresh from Wits, they are still teething and only care about spending the money they

haven't worked for.

His phone rings and he has to step out of the office to take it privately, his wife has left multiple missed calls. It's late in the night and he not being home is a big problem. They have argued about his late comings and working himself to exhaustion.

"Yeah," that's not how he usually answers her calls. 'Kitten' and 'my love' have been placed on hold since their last argument, he's still too upset to regard her with those endearments. He's always been the soft one amongst his friends, the rational one who brings peace in the brotherhood.

"Sihle wants to speak to you," yep, she's equally upset.

"Really, Sethu? It's past her bedtime, why is she not asleep yet?" Never has he used a deadpan tone when speaking to her.

"Maybe she would be asleep if you were home," here we go again. The wife and her nagging, she wouldn't be a wife if she wasn't irritating. I

He feels a presence behind him and doesn't have to turn to know who it is, his scent gives him away.

"I have to go," he drops the call not giving her a chance to say whether they are done or not.

"How is she?" Randall asks as Styles turns to face him.

"Fine," his voice is unbothered. Sethu is more than fine, that's what he has convinced himself. "How are you?"

Yes, he's more worried about his brother. Who cares that they don't have the same DNA? They love each other like brothers.

"I'm a big man," his reply. But Styles sees right through him, he's not as okay as he wants him to think.

"You killed her, didn't you?"

Random aren't we, Mr. Styles? Let's keep our voices low, shall we?

Randall folds his arms across his chest, a furrowed brow claims his forehead.

“How did you know about her?” Randall casually asks. His demeanour is that of a man who is free of troubles.

“Is it not my job to make sure you don’t get your hands stained? What did I say about spilling blood Randall?” Styles reproaches him like a big brother... forget that Randall is older.

“My hands remain clean till this day,” he raises them to show how blood free they are.

“Then who did it?” Styles questions, he knows how stupid his brother can be sometimes.

“Since you’re so informed, shouldn’t you know?”

Dammit Randall, we’re getting agitated here. Give us something to work with.

Styles doesn’t say anything, he’s waiting for Randall to grow up and he better do it now, Styles does not play hide and seek.

“Believe me, Styles, I would’ve loved to strangle her to death.” The king finally cracks. “But it wasn’t me who killed her.”

“Okay, I believe you.” Sure he does. “So, what’s this hold she has on you?”

“Proof of Olivia’s death,” he keeps his voice near to the ground, walls have ears after all.

“I’d be damned, the witch has a hold on you even beyond the grave.” Disbelief is laid in Styles’ voice. “What did she want?”

“My last name.” Randall answers.

“What have you gotten yourself into Randall? I told you back then that killing Liyana’s mother was a bad idea.”

Really Styles? Was it really a bad idea?

“I don’t regret what I did Styles, I would do it again.”

He hisses. “She fed my child drugs, made her watch things a child should not see and who knows what else that bastard she called a boyfriend did to Liyana.”

“There’s no use in arguing, we need to do damage control. Find the footage and destroy it.” Styles introduces.

“Yeah, somehow I have a bad feeling about this.” Styles does too, but he doesn’t voice it.

“We should go home and rest, those idiots in there are so useless. I need to replace them.” Thinking back, Styles clicks his tongue at their stupidity.

Randall is quiet for a while, staring into space as if a thought entered his mind.

“Where is Mkhize?” His question is random, it has Styles inquisitively raising his eyebrows.

“Last I heard, he’s herding cows in Msinga.” Styles smirks, loving the thought of his enemy drowning in poverty.

“When last did you check up on him?” Randall’s questions have a purpose.

“Do you think he’s behind all this mess?” Styles offers a query rather than answering one.

“That old geezer has always been smart, I wouldn’t be surprised if he is.”

“I doubt it Randall, Mkhize has nothing to his name but a pair of torn socks. He’s powerless, you would need money to pull this off.” Styles could be right, the two men fall into deep thought. A poor, powerless, former taxi boss is like a poisonous snake with no fangs. Probably, that’s what Mkhize has become.

ZITHA-

I don’t know this place, the last thing I remember is being carried away by the black Bruce Lee. One day

when I'm old and grey, living my last days on earth, I will tell my children about the life I lived.

It's a movie.

There's pain everywhere as I try to move, that bastard Tshilidzi... I know a lady at Noord Street who sells rat poison for R5, I hear it goes down well with beer and Tshilidzi loves his beer.

Where is this place though? I don't recognize this room. I'm tucked under greyish bedding, the room is too spacious for a bedroom. It's so manly and adorned with grey and black. From the walls to the curtains.

The floor is carpeted, with the same dull colours. It looks more comfortable than my squeaky bed, something I would sleep on the whole night. It smells nice, the room smells nice.

I recognize this scent, it brings a déjà vu feeling. But I have never been in here before.

I can't even dream about such luxury, my aunt always wakes me up just when the dream starts. I realise I'm wearing a black t-shirt, it's big on me and has a manly scent. I hope he closed his eyes when changing my clothes, I'm not happy about my rolls and love handles. There's two doors in here, one of them is open.

I hope it's the bathroom, I'm pressed and need to release, so I push my painful body out of bed. It's difficult to walk with all this pain, it has me limping. I think Tshilidzi broke my ribs.

The open door is the bathroom, alright... and... okay... I have never seen anything like it, this person must love these dark colours. It's raining stainless steel in here.

The enormous bathtub in the middle of the room is charcoal black, I'm a little disappointed as I was expecting a bathtub that's gravitating a few centimetres from the ground. I know people who are moneyed can buy anything, including gravity? I've

seen it on TV. There's a shower at the far end corner and a toilet seat not far from it, I'm happy and so is my bladder. The plan is to make it quick and get out of here.

Okay! This is what us, normal people would call a bathroom cabinet, only ours is a small tiny cupboard that can only accommodate toothpaste, your toothbrush, disprin and probably Handy Andy for those who find it necessary to have one.

This one is big, my curious self has me taking a peek inside. How many towels does one need? I bet you a million he's never used any of these.

That's okay, waste money rich people. While we turn our sofas upside down looking for 20 cents to add to the money for bread.

Everything is here, from body lotion, deodorant, fragrance, you name it. It smells like him, whoever he

is. Suddenly my mind takes me back to when he carried me in his arms.

Enough snooping.

There's an old woman sitting on the couch when I come out, her unfriendly face forces my feet to come to a stop.

"Hi." I have to greet first, right? But, her face is still not kind. I know that look, my aunt wears it a lot.

Seeing she's not responding, I tread back towards the bed.

"Yeyi, yeyi, yeyi. Don't sit there." She shouts making me jump as I'm startled by her voice.

"Who are you and what do you want with my son?" She asks, coldly. She must be talking about the man who saved me from death, now I'm waiting for a big cheque with the reference 'stay away from my son.'

“Can you repeat your question ma because I don’t understand.” I’m lying.

“Do I look like your mother girly?” She’s snappy. “Do I look like I can ever give birth to someone like you? What do you want from my nephew?”

Dammit! She’s one of them, the judgemental ones, the mockers, the haters. I know how to deal with her kind.

“Aunty, didn’t daddy tell you?” Her eyes contract at my question, I am going to enjoying seeing her stumble in my nonsense.

“Your father? I don’t know your father, besides, you look like the fatherless type.” Ouch aunty, that hurts honestly, but I don’t care. I have been fatherless my whole life and I have gotten over the pain of not having one.

“You’re right, I don’t have a father.” My teeth are in the mood for a show and tell, I conform showing her all thirty two of them, or is it thirty? I remember losing two at a party last year, I got drunk as usual,

fell face down and lost my teeth. By God's grace it wasn't my front teeth. There's a picture of me trending somewhere on Facebook.

"Then, what are you talking about?" I love curious aunties, my feet start moving towards the bed. Honestly I am not going to miss a chance to lay on such a comfortable bed.

"Your nephew, I call him Daddy." There, is that priceless shocked expression I have been waiting for. Let me lean back and enjoy the show, seriously can her eyes go any wider?

"What are you talking about, you pathetic girl?" Wow.

"Careful aunty, daddy hates it when his baby girl is being insulted. I would hate to be the one to separate you two." I really don't care who she is to this man she talks about, I am leaving this place after her blood pressure has sky rocketed.

"Lalela la ntombazane (listen here girly,) this is not

Soweto. Can't you see you don't belong here?" She's pointing at me with her forefinger. "People will spot you from a distance, you're like a stain on a pure white cloth. Gather whatever it is that belongs to you, oh wait... you came here with nothing, right? Leave as you came, and when you see my son, turn the other way because I will not hesitate to make your life hell." She's barking like a toothless dog.

"I'm not going anywhere, your son brought me here. He should be the one to take me home." I tell her as I stretch my legs on the bed.

"He's not going to take you anywhere, do you see him around here?" Are all aunts this loud? "In fact, he told me to tell you to leave as soon as you wake up."

The woman covers her hand with the sleeves of her shirt before grabbing my arm and pulls me to my feet.

"Hey, you're hurting me." I whine, yanking my arm away. "I don't have a disease okay, the only contagious thing here is your attitude."

“Whatever, I want you out. I doubt you’ll be able to find your way out of this big house, so let me make things easy for you. Follow me and make sure you don’t touch anything, I still have to purify this room.” She says.

“I’m leaving vele, it’s not like I want to be here.” My comeback is ignored, this woman couldn’t care less. At least my shoes are here, I’ll come back for my clothes.

We pass through the kitchen, the evening breeze embraces my body as she swings the door open. It’s dark outside, I don’t know where I am. Where do I catch a taxi and with what?

“Aunt, who is this?” A girl about my age appears from nowhere, carrying shopping bags. There’s a man behind her, with more of those.

“Hi.” She chirps.

How do you return a stranger’s smile again? “Are you

my brother's girlfriend?" Woah! Your brother wishes I was his girlfriend.

"She's no one baby," aunty swiftly jumps in. "She wanted an ironing job." Lies aunty, lies.

I give her a rebuking stare, parents lie so easily. This one and my aunt, same WhatsApp group. They should open a stokvel together.

"Oh, bhuti can give her the job, please wait for him. Maybe join us for supper too." Oh! I like this one, this bhuti she's talking about must be the man who brought me here.

"No, no Isisa baby. You know how your brother can be, he doesn't like strangers. He will go crazy if he finds this girl here. Besides, it's getting late, she won't find a taxi."

"But your nephew brought me..."

"You should go sisi," the aunt interrupts, her voice

rising above mine. “It’s not safe for a young girl to travel alone at night.” Like she cares.

“Okay, in that case, Mandla will drop her home.” Isisa to the rescue, pointing at the tall man behind her.

Shouldn’t he be bhut’ Mandla? He’s old this man, old enough to father this child.

“I’m sure Mandla has to get home to his family.” The aunt again.

Why is she so bitter? Did I sleep with her husband? I think I would know if I did.

“No, he doesn’t mind. Where do you live sisi?” Isisa asks.

Yoh. Yoh, now I must give rich people my location? Lord, you said you will not give me a burden too much to carry, this one is too heavy. Give it to Sizakele, let her feel the heat bra God.

“It’s okay, I’ll send bhut’ Mandla the location in the car.” I say, covering my poverty.

Of all the places God could’ve put me in, Orange

Farm suited him best. The things our father in heaven does...

The aunt next to me is boiling like potatoe wedges on a wedding day.

Speaking of aunts, mine must be breathing fire where she is. I don't have my phone with me and it's probably off. My life is a marathon, I will have to explain myself when I get home... Jehovah, set me free.

"Mandla, please drop her home." I can't say no, can I? I don't want to be stranded here and I don't have money on me. "Put the bags inside and drop her off." She instructs him, I can hear the aunt's fast breathing, she's about ready to explode.

Drama, I tell you.

"Here, wear this." Isisa wraps a warm cardigan around me. "It's cold, we don't want you getting sick." Whose child is this?

I want to protest, but the aunt beats me to it as she grabs the jersey from me.

“You are such a kind soul my child, but no you can’t be this kind. People like her will take advantage of you, you cannot give away your clothes like that.”

“It’s fine aunt, I don’t mind. There’s more where that came from, usisi is trembling.” She takes the jersey from her aunt and puts it over me again, I quickly wear it before the aunt takes it.

“Sisi, I can’t accept this I’m sorry.” Listen to me, respecting money. This is how we get in, think and grow rich. I’ve read the cover of the book, I didn’t need to find out what the contents say. The title told me everything I need to know. Should I ask for my clothes? Leaving them here would be a ticket to come back, let me refrain from asking.

“Okay, I’m lending it to you then.” She smiles and I want to kiss her, I’ll buy her fat cakes tomorrow. Three will do, I have a budget.

“Do you eat amagwinya?” (Fat cakes.)

The question is random, hence the confusion dancing on her face.

“Yeah, my brother is a fan.” Her answer is hesitant, I know she is lying to me. That rich mouth does not know the deliciousness of an oily, hot fat cake.

“Okay, I will bring them for you next time.” I say.

I am definitely coming back to this house, her brother could be my ticket out of Tshilidzi’s life.

Mandla comes back, he looks ready to go.

“Take care of her Mandla.” Isisa instructs, he nods.

“Bye.”

“Thank you sisi, I’ll see you next time.” I tell her much to the aunt’s annoyance, she clicks her tongue and slithers into the house.

After bidding Isisa a final goodbye, I follow Mandla to the car, a smile creeps up on my lips when he

opens the back door for me. I could get used to this.

“You don’t have to do that.” Hehe! I love this life.

“You are madam’s guest.” That’s all he says.

She’s a madam? At her age? Soft life...

“Well, thank you, bhuti.” I fake an English accent only to have him chuckle.

The car is black inside as well. It has tinted windows, no one can see from outside. It’s beautiful and big and it reminds me of that car that’s always following me. These people live like devil worshippers, all black everything.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Two

18+

Explicit content... if you're not comfortable feel free to skip the 1st scene, do not report. For those who would never miss a chance to read explicit scenes, you may want to listen to Adele's Make You Feel My Love while you indulge.

AMARA-

"Where did you find MaNtombi?" We're slouched in bed, a distance between us.

"Some cleaning agency, I figured with Chioma gone, you'll need a helping hand." He's engrossed in a book, since when does he read books?

"Do they teach them to give marriage advice at cleaning agencies?" He tilts his head to look at me

and I can guarantee you, he thinks I'm losing my mind. "She gave me a speech on how to be a good wife."

"Oh!" Oh? Why is he not bothered by this?

"Is that all you're going to say?" I raise a question.

"Is there anything more?" He's not looking at me, why is he not looking at me.

"Yes, help me complain Randall." This man is not a complainer, I know.

He places the book on the bedside table and sits up facing me with a furrowed brow.

"Baby, since when do you care what people think?"
Uh! Since forever.

"Since I was told my husband might find a woman who wakes up early to take care of him." I could swear he just rolled his eyes.

"This is weird, I'm not familiar with the insecure Amara. You're freaking me out, me hemma." He says, and I'm hoping it is a joke.

“I’m not insecure,” I dispute. “It’s just that a seed was planted in my head and I happened to water it, now it’s growing like an infection. Especially after what we’ve been through.”

“Meaning?” He asks, should I dare say it?

The cheating topic always creates a rift between us and I don’t want that. To rid of the elephant in the room, I straddle him and initiate the first kiss. He holds my hips and instantly kisses me back hungrier than I am.

We break for air, my eyes on him and his on me. Both of us are breathing, yearning, sick of waiting... there is no going back, even if we want to. There’s a smirk, eyes heaping with lust. He’s making me nervous and I’m struggling to hide my bashful smile.

I know what is going through his mind, I want it too... I want all of him, buried deep inside me.

His hands relax on my neck and he rubs his thumbs along my jaw, he closes his eyes as he slowly leans in, mine close as well. How will it feel to have him kiss me like he used to? I feel his lips against my cheek, a light brush that sends shivers through my nerves... shivers that make my whole body tremble.

“Tell me now if you’re not comfortable, me hemma.” He whispers in my ear.

I don’t respond, I guess he finds an answer in my silence. His mouth brushes against the bridge of my nose, “Tell me now if you want me to stop Amara.”

At this, Randall grazes my cheek down to the corner of my mouth, it’s torturous, I want him to claim my lips already. So I hold his face in my hands and swallow the rest of his words as I lure him into a wolfish kiss. But Randall being Randall does not allow me to dominate over him, not even through a damn kiss.

The man slows down the contact, kissing me gently, cautiously. Hunger rises inside me, I want more than

this. A soft groan escapes him when I knot my fists in his t-shirt and pull him against me. His arms enwrap around me, gathering me into him. The way his tongue seems to disappear inside my mouth, as if he needs a part of me to breathe. He rolls us over on the bed, scrambled together, still kissing.

A deep moan graces the room, it's mine. His hands discover the tightness of my ass, squeezing, kneading. I feel him smile as he continues biting and sucking my lips while his tongue dances with mine.

His hand continuously runs down my thigh inviting shivers and pulsating heat all through my body. With my help, Randall undresses me, my nightgown is tossed to the side.

I'm naked and shivering under him and he's looking at me, a small smile spreads across his features before he attacks me with yet another slow tormenting kiss.

Why is he not giving me all of him? He lets me remove his t-shirt, we're still held in a kiss, my hands

move up and down the length of his back, the need to touch every part of him is uncontrollable. I allow myself to get lost in the moment, in his slow kisses, his hands mapping my skin. He stands to get rid of the pants he's wearing and is back to sucking my face.

Randall squeezes my inner thigh before letting his fingers find their way to my neither regions, lightly he brushes my clit and I shudder at the feeling. The lips of the man I love take on another smirk, probably at how wet I am. My heart thrums in my chest and I feel myself grow weak when I feel the tip of his length where his fingers had been.

As he gradually pushes himself in, my mind stops working for a second... don't freeze Amara, you can do this. Cheering myself on is an epic fail, the memories are here again, hovering over my head... unasked-for. The only thought I want to entertain is how much I need Randall right now, so I hide my fear against his mouth, kissing him like I'll die if I don't.

He's inside me savaging my body with gentle strokes and this is what I wanted, what I've been craving for. The air around us is thick with lust and desire, my eyes close as I breathe it in, as I breathe him in. Perhaps this way his touches and kisses will erase the painful memories, the shame threatening and bullying me.

But... but, why is it not working? They come flooding in, more powerful as if an evil force is blowing them towards me.

"Pl... please," a raspy breath from me. "Please love me, Randall. Make me pure again."

He's buried deep inside me as I say this, his strokes agonisingly slow while kissing me like I'd break if he went faster. He brings his head up to look at me, eyes drunk with worry.

"Are you okay?" A whisper dances under his breathe. "I can stop."

That's not what I want, he makes me feel better. To get him to continue as I fail to release words, I ambush him with an unquenchable kiss. He purrs like a kitten and I feel him shake a little above me when I send my tongue to find his.

I want to complain when he breaks from my mouth and his perverted whacked eyes find my breasts, the man simpers as he scrutinizes them. He buries his head between them and inhales deeply, my hand finds his nape to brush it as he alternates to sucking my breast.

He comes back with a naughty smile on his face and whispers.

"You taste good, me hemma... I love you."

Darn it, if this can't make me feel better then buy me a coffin because I'm a goner.

"I love you." I whisper back.

Randall claims my lips, my whole body becomes his

territory. I'm completely his, my nails sink into his back. The plan is to keep it as quiet as I can but it's impossible, I'm seeing flames and possibly losing my mind and all my mouth can do is desperately call out his name, his heavy breathing and warm breath on my neck seduces me to an extent.

My hands still intact on where I had placed them, I dig my nails deeper on his flesh as my body opens a red-carpet for an imaginable earth-shattering orgasm.

Just when I think we are done the husband keeps going, my moans elevate with each stroke. My mind has kicked out every toxic thing brought by this world, it's blank... Randall is inside me and nothing matters but getting that toe curling experience.

His heavy breathing matches mine.

Our lips touch for a brief moment, I bite his lower lip just as he pulls out of the kiss and boy do I love the simple smile on his face.

My mouth denies me a smile but gladly accepts loud moans of pleasure. I feel electricity surge through my entire body and tighten my legs and arms around him, he knows I'm close to the finish line.

"Wait for me, me hemma." He says, voice sounding like it's coming from a bottomless pit. I don't think I can hold it anymore, not when it feels this good.

"I- I can't... I need to... let go."

My voice seems to be encouraging him to go faster. I'm getting too loud, so keeping in mind we have kids in the house, I cover my mouth with my hand to stop myself from screaming but he removes it and goes faster. His sexy groans sound like music to my ears, birthing chill bumps on every inch of my skin.

This is the part where I become selfish and let go or I will explode, which I do. My body shudders under him as I give in to the orgasm.

I look at him, consuming my whole being, he's so

gorgeous. The facial expression on his face and the way his mouth moves as he's groaning, relishing every fibre of my being, the sweat on his body. There's a soul connection, tears escape my eyes. Only now I'm reminded that I'm addicted to this man and everything that he is.

"I will always be yours, Amara," he says, moving faster to reach his ending.

That tickle... that kiss... that last push... It's all bound up in this perfect splendid twinkling and I lose control of all my senses.

"F#CK!"

He cusses followed by a loud groan then collapses on top of me. We lie here for a while trying to catch our breaths. His head is buried on the curve of my neck and his warm breath dancing on it. He raises his head after what seems like a minute and a smile creeps on the corners of his mouth. I can bet what he's thinking, we did it. We did it and it feels like the

best thing I've ever done.

My introverted ass has me burying my face in my hands and I fall into giggles, then a hearty laugh escapes my mouth.

His smile turns into a chuckle and before I know it, we are both laughing our heads off. His lips meet mine, they linger on before he flips us over putting me on top of him and his arms clasp around me. I rest my head on his chest, my lower body between his legs. If you ask me what just happened, I'd probably lie... but here I am, naked on top of him.

"That was wild." He says.

"That was something, did you forget we have people in the house? You didn't have to make me lose myself like that," I can't stop smiling.

"I didn't hear you stopping me." Sure he'd say that.

I love him and in need of another kiss, so I pucker up.

"Do you think she heard us?" She hasn't been here

for a week and I have noted how nosy MaNtombi is, she wants to be James Bond—that woman.

“Who?” Really? Is he not the one who said she could have Chioma’s room?

He’s confused, “MaNtombi.” I put his mind at ease.

Let’s hear what he’ll say, I bet it’s not what any normal person would say.

“Does it matter?” Gosh! Just like I expected.

“Really Randall? Can’t we have her stay in the outhouse?”

“With the guards? That won’t be appropriate, Amara.” What’s he talking about? She’s an elder, it’s not like they’ll hit on her. His hands are busy on my back, drawing placid circles. Let’s just say I’m loving the sound of his heartbeat.

“Seriously Amara, you worry too much about what people will say. This is our home and we can be as loud as we want.” He declares, “Next time don't hold back from screaming.”

His hand slides down to my ass and squeezes. I strike it and he removes it with a quiet laughter.

KENNETH-

“Where is she?” Zithobile better be somewhere in this house or I swear... There’s no sign of her in my room, this woman watched me stride there and not once did she stop to tell me that Zithobile is not here.

“Who?” She has a stupid- confused look on her face.

“Don’t piss me off Fezekile, where is she?”

“She went home,” she shrugs, waving her hand like it’s no big deal. With no care in the world, she is comfortably settled on my couch, sipping tea while that girl is out there all alone.

“You told her to leave, didn’t you?” I’m ready to kill someone.

“Why would I do that? She was your guest son, she wanted to leave so I didn’t stop her.” This woman is lying to me and it’s pissing me off, the ignorance she

possesses puts the final nail on my anger.

“I know you, Fezekile.” I take a step to have her stand to her feet, eyes alarmed and wide. “You ousted her out of my house, my house. Where do you get off?”

“No I...” I see a story coming and interject just in time.

“Think about what you say next, you will not like what I do to you if another lie spews out of your mouth.”

“Bhuti don’t talk to her like that.” Dammit Isisa.

My eyes follow her quick steps as she marches towards me.

“Stay out of this, go back to your room.” I snap, I swear I’m losing my patience.

“She doesn’t belong here Kenneth, that girl is a gold digger and...” MaMkhize pronounces.

“Go pack your bags and leave my house.” This could also be my chance to throw her out.

“What? No bhuti, you can’t do that.” Isisa should not be here right now, she rushes to stand beside MaMkhize.

“I was trying to protect you and your sister.” What the hell is she even saying?

“Who said we need your protection?” I ask.

“I need it bhuti, I need a mother. Aunt is the closest I have to a mother.” Isisa cries.

“Oh really? Where was she all those years when I was raising you alone? She didn’t think that you needed a mother back then. Ask her why she’s here now, go ahead.” The girl blinks away tears, her eyes hesitate a minute.

“Bhuti please, if she leaves then I’m going with her.” Her arms circle around MaMkhize, my sister is starting to get on my nerves too.

“Isisa, you know I hate nonsense, you’re not going anywhere” I tell her.

“I will go where my aunt goes.” She insists, glaring

and daring.

“Here’s another thing I hate, repeating myself.” If I have to drag MaMkhize out, I will. “Fezekile is leaving my house.”

“All because of her, Bhuti?” Isisa cracks, considering me with innocent eyes. Dammit! “You’re turning your back on your family because of some girl who’s probably after your money.”

This does not sound like my sister, this is MaMkhize speaking but the words are coming out of Isisa’s mouth. She would never disobey me, nor look down on people.

“ISISA!!!” I yell.

MaMkhize slides in front of her, shielding her from my hand that’s ready to collide with her cheek. I have never laid a hand on my sister but hearing her insult Zithobile stirs something in me.

“Wenzani Kenneth?” (What are you doing?)

MaMkhize shouts, giving me a disappointed look.

“Now you’re hitting me because of that girl bhuti?” I hate how she keeps referring to Zithobile as that girl.

“You better shut up Isisa, I don’t want to do something I will regret.” I love her but right now I will not allow a word against Zithobile. “I’m going to look for her, wena be gone when I get back and Isisa, if you dare follow this woman, you will taste my wrath for the first time in your life.”

I’m not even joking about this.

“Bhuti please, I’m sorry okay.” She bounces to me and locks her arms around my waist. “I didn’t mean to disrespect you, I met her when I got home and I didn’t know that she was your guest. I asked her to stay for supper but she said she had to go, so I asked Mandla to drop her off. She’s probably home by now, she said she lives in Orange farm or something. You can check up on her tomorrow, I’ll go with you. Just don’t let aunt leave this house, I need her bhuti, please.”

This child knows which buttons to press to get me to do what she wants.

“You’re lucky Fezekile, or you’ll be out on the streets.”

This is my final warning, but I don’t tell them. Breaking out of my sister’s hold, I leave them and head to my room.

Zithobile is so innocent, but she doesn’t know it yet. However, I see it, I also see that she’s carrying a heavy burden. That girl does not need stress in her life, she’s already going through so much.

I can smell her in this room, she’s everywhere. On the bed, in the bathroom, the closet. I pull out her shirt from the top shelf, I had to change her dirty clothes when I brought her home. I’m oblivious as to why I thought it best to hide her clothes.

I can smell her on it, funny how I’ve become so addicted to her scent and I’ve only been in contact with her twice. An urge to see her arises, but I can’t, not now at least. It’s late, she’s probably sleeping.

AMARA-

“Mom open the door,” R.J’s distressed voice throws me into a sea of worry. My gaze darts to Randall as I sit up, he jumps off the bed and quickly throws on his boxer shorts. I find something to drape my body as he rushes to open the door.

“What’s wrong?” Worry resounds in his voice, he has a sobbing little boy in his arms.

“Liya is not home, I wanted to sleep in her room after I had a bad dream. But she’s not there, dad.” He’s explaining through tears.

“She’s probably in the bathroom or the kitchen.” Liyana loves late night snacks, there can’t be any other explanation.

“She’s not here mom,” R.J expresses.

Randall steals a look, I see worry in his eyes. He places R.J down and rushes out of the room. The boy clings on to me, I want to follow Randall but

can't leave this one alone. Where is Chioma when you need her?

"Liya! Liyana!" That's Randall calling out to her, I can hear from the tone of his voice that he's growing anxious and frantic by the second, there must be no sign of Liyana. It's very late, the girl is not so rebellious to have run off.

"Where is Liya, mom?" I sit him on the bed, his gaze is fixated on me, fearful.

"Stay here baby, I'm going to check if dad has found her." I tell him.

"What's going on?" MaNtombi is here, I remember telling her this morning not to enter my room.

"Have you seen Liyana? We can't find her anywhere." She shakes her head.

"Madam was the first one to go to bed, she had come to ask me for painkillers saying she had a headache." I'm astounded by MaNtombi's words,

Liyana always comes to me when she's not feeling well. "What's going on?"

"Please take Kwame to his room." There's no time to explain, I paste a kiss on his cheek.

"No. No!" The boy yells and hides under the blanket.

"Don't leave me alone, please."

"R.J, what's wrong?"

"I'm not a bad boy mom," his voice quavers. "I'm a good boy, please don't leave me alone, I will behave I promise." Is he crying under there?

"Baby, what is it?"

"I'm a good boy, mom. I'm a good boy." He's clinging on to the blanket, not allowing me to pull it from him. I win and the second he's revealed, he jumps into my arms and clings his arms around my neck. That's odd, he's trembling.

"He's not used to me yet, sisi," MaNtombi. "Give him time."

“Thank you, ma.” I dismiss her.

Randall walks in just as she strides out of the room. She releases a disbelieving gasp upon seeing him half naked and covers her face, her feet rushing her out of the bedroom. Great, just bloody great.

He’s on the phone, R.J tears himself out of my arms and runs to him. I can’t help but notice how fearful he’s become, Randall pays him attention and scoots him up. The boy snuggles in his father’s arms.

“Okay, let me know if you find her. I’ll head out now.” Randall finishes the call, he’s looking at me, but not directly. Hopelessness has taken centre stage. “The guards say they saw her leave about an hour ago, she took off by foot.”

My heart sinks, that doesn’t even make sense.

“And none of them found it strange? That’s insane Randall.” My voice rises, he frowns giving me a warning look and strokes a hand down R.J’s back. At

this point I'm not bothered by anything, I just want my baby home.

"Where is my baby, Randall?"

"I'm going to find her," he says, however I can't hear the promise in his voice. "She couldn't have gone far on foot."

I'm not stupid, this is South Africa. Women are always a target to predators.

"Take him, I have to go look for her." As he places R.J down, Randall dashes to the closet to change, he doesn't say anything when he leaves the room. Those guards are going to hear it from me, how stupid are they?

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Three

ZITHA-

“And then, wena?” Sizakele says as soon as she opens the door. I’m surprised she’s still awake at this time. I ignore her and walk in, aunt is sitting on the sofa, hands folded across her chest and face flooded with rage.

“Uphuma ‘phi Zithobile?” (Where do you come from?)

The murderous stare almost brings me to my knees, this woman can be scary and today is one of those days. Not that I don’t respect her, but my life has been a mess since my mother died. Perhaps I need cleansing. I hope she notices the bruises on my face and takes pity on me, I don’t want to be a victim of her wrath.

“Aunty, listen to me, let me tell you what happened.”

Where will I start?

The only thing I can do right now is lie. I can't tell her what actually happened, she won't believe a single word.

"I was kidnapped, they locked me up and demanded money. They only let me go when I told them I'm a poor girl from Orange Farm who doesn't even have a cell phone." Why do these lies taste so good?

"That's a lie mom, did you see the car that dropped her off just now? You have a blesser Zitha?" Frogs have voices now, I see.

"That was an Uber, a good Samaritan helped me escape and they requested one for me." Another lie escapes my mouth.

"Stop it, you think we're stupid." Sizakele woofs and no I don't think they are stupid, I know they are stupid.

"Aunty, I swear. You can call Lwazi, she knows what happened. I called her after I was mugged and she

came with her white friend, that's why the car looks expensive. He's a doctor and..." I'm explaining too much and realise when it's too late that my story has changed. Sizakele's loud laughter startles me.

"Enough." Aunt shouts. "I got home from work Zitha, to find the house cold. Windows were open, there was nothing on the stove. You were expecting me to stand behind that stove and cook after a long day at work?" Haibo! Where was her daughter?

"No aunty." In my most modest tone, I argue. I guess it must be a joke because my cousin cackles.

"You don't sleep at home anymore, you come and go as you please in my house." Aunt grumbles. "You're full of it wena mtwana ndini, your days in this house are numbered." (You brat.)

She clicks her tongue and walks off to her room.
Thank God.

"Yeah s'febe." (Slut.)

The bully I call a cousin pokes my head, she's too

close for comfort and I might just bite.

“Don’t touch me.” I snap.

“So your sugar daddy did this to you? What did you do? Huh?” She’s in my face and I don’t have the strength to fight her, I’m tired and frustrated.

“If you want to keep your teeth, stay far away from me.”

I’m about this close... this close.

“I want the truth, you will tell me where you got these expensive clothes. I know your clothes, they are old and washed out. So where did you get these and why do you smell like an expensive man?”

I swear she’s stupid, ladies and gentlemen, I have a dumb cousin.

“Say my dear cousin, is your mother not giving you enough love and attention that you forcefully want to milk it out of me?” My question puts a frown on her face, her expression says she wants to strike me.

“I don’t blame you, I blame your loose mother.”
Wrong button dear cousin. “The apple really didn’t
fall too far from the tree, you are your mother’s
daughter.”

“Trust me, you don’t want to go there right now.” I
warn her.

“Or what, Zithobile, or what?” She’s shouting.

I’m not going to entertain this, it’s late and I’m in pain.
She blocks my path when I try to manoeuvre past
her, rage evident in her eyes.

“I’m still talking to you,” she barks, testing my
patience.

“Don’t start something you won’t be able to finish
little girl, I’m not one of your friends. I will mop this
floor with your ass.” I grunt, trying to stay calm and
collected, ignoring the anger scraping in my veins.
The cousin huffs, daring me to act on my words.

“You’re so pathetic Zithobile, gosh if only you knew

how much I hate you. Your father probably hated you too, that's why he left."

"What did you say?" Shocked as I am, I manage a whisper to have her sneer at me.

"Oops," sarcastically, she covers her mouth. "I guess the secret is out, my bad."

"What secret?" I ask and get another huff from her, it's labelling me witless.

"Your father is alive," she reveals. "Your mother had an affair with a married man and was stupid enough to fall pregnant, thinking he will leave his wife for her. She should've had an abortion, it would've been better than giving birth to someone like you. Why do you think your skin is like this? That's her punishment from God, a punishment for opening her fat legs for a married man."

The warmth from my body abandons me as she drills a hole in my heart and shatters my soul into a million pieces. This cannot be real, my mother would never lie to me. She told me he died before I was

born. She was a devoted Christian, the kind God was proud of. She meditated on bible verses not lies, I trusted her from the moment I sucked milk from her breast.

That woman never seasoned her words with lies, hell would've frozen over had that happened.

I want to press my hand to my chest and stop this sharp pain in my heart, instead I grab the boiling kettle. I don't remember walking into the kitchen and turning it on, but I'm here and there's a kettle of boiling water in my hand and my feet are leading me back to the living room.

"Mama!" Sizakele screams when I throw the kettle at her, she manages to dodge the appliance plus the water. It crashes to the floor and cracks, water spilling all over. I'm not okay. I want her to hurt for the soreness she's instilled in me, I want to see her screaming in pain.

"What's going on?" My aunt's voice forces me to turn

to her, eyes and face wet with tears. It doesn't help chiding the waterworks, they force themselves out of my eyes.

"My father is alive, aunty?" I ask impassively and the woman rolls her eyes.

"Mama, Zithobile threw a kettle of boiling water at me." Sizakele is next to her, arms wrapped around her mother's round waist. In place of safety, my aunt's eyes show danger and a capability of cruelty as she looks at me.

"Don't worry about this bastard child, Sizakele, she's already drowning in pain and I guarantee you that she won't last in this world." Aunt coldly says. "Mark my words Zithobile, if you don't become a nyaope, you're going to follow your mother." In her glare is an expansion of a cold emptiness, a complete disregard for my wellbeing. She takes her daughter's hand and leads her out of the room, leaving me drowning in the pain she spoke of.

Their previous words torment my soul, they sink into

me for just long enough to drive me insane. I cover my face and scream before dropping to my knees and crying out in agony.

BAMBINDLOVU-

It started with a bad dream, ask him what it was about and he'll stare blankly at you. It's exactly 3:02am, there is no sign of him ever going back to sleep. The betrayal of his eyes... they are wide open with no promise to shut closed anytime soon... they are not even itchy or burning to alert him that he needs to go back to sleep.

"Witch!" He hears the insult and many angry voices that pull him out of bed, his ears perk trying to make out what is being said outside his door. How did he miss this commotion?

Wearing only shorts he springs up, flings open the curtain separating his room from his mother's. There,

Thandikela is on her feet, wrapping a morning gown around her. Their eyes clash, the noise outside seems to elevate.

“What’s going on?” The mother asks, a flurry of emotions swiping over her face.

“Stay here, I’m going to check.” Thandikela doesn’t listen, but follows her son out.

A crowd of people are gathered at the open door, full of heightened emotions. Pots and pans in their hands, they are all saying something, each fighting to be heard. Their words directed at someone or something outside the door.

“What’s going on?” Bambindlovu questions one of the tenants.

“We caught a witch trying to break into the flat,” the man says, rushing towards the crowd with a spatula in hand.

“A witch?” Thandikela queries.

Mother and son frown as disbelief etches in their faces, leaving his mother behind, he weaves through the people to get a closer look.

This can't be, he knows the girl standing in the doorway. She's in what appears to be a trance. Scruffy appearance, clothes shabby and covered in filth.

"What is she doing here?" He's asking himself, but a woman next to him gives an answer.

"I was on my way to the bathroom and heard something continuously bang against the door. I called my husband to come check it out and we saw her, she hasn't moved or said anything since. It could mean one thing, she's a witch." The lady finds her statement indisputable as she speaks with confidence.

"She's not a witch." Bambindlovu argues.

He's only met her once, but is certain that she is not what these people say she is.

“I agree, she can’t be a witch, she’s too young. Look at her dirty clothes, I think she’s a hobo.” Another woman somewhere in the crowd adds her opinion, which is a mistake. Without a word said, Bambindlovu glares at her, letting his eyes sweep through her body from head to toe. She squirms as a rush of discomfort washes over her.

“A hobo?” He speaks through gritted teeth, regarding her with the coldest look he could summon. “Don’t say that, don’t. That’s a person, if you have nothing better to say, shut up and go back to sleep. Or afford her the dignity of her own humanity.”

Like the Israelites crossing the red sea, he splits through the two men standing in front of him. Shields the lady in question as he faces the idiots who think God left them in charge of the world.

Attacking is for cowards, that’s how it’s always been. Heroes stand their ground and defend... protect.

This is the road Bambindlovu has taken, he is a

Buthelezi... it's in his blood. His mother would testify of it.

“You people think are clever? Huh?” He starts, pointing a finger at them. “You can't even protect your children from the rapists you call boyfriends and husbands, all for the sake of warming your beds at night. But you have the audacity to attack a young woman who is oblivious to her surroundings.”

“Nonsense,” a macho voice at the back yells. “We are not children Bambindlovu, don't try to feed us with lies. We know a witch when we see one.”

“Do you have proof that she is a witch?”

Bambindlovu throws a question at him. “People sleepwalk, it's bloody normal. You can call her appearance dirty if you require such a cheap ego boost, but do not call her a witch.”

He pauses, studying their stupid faces. These bloody idiots are so dumb, they'll believe anything that comes out of his mouth and he knows it well.

“If anyone dares to attack my girlfriend, I will burn them alive, not even your grandmother’s sorcery will save you from me.” There’s silence, confusion and worry loiters in the air. Did he just say girlfriend? The tenants seem to be wondering what this is all about.

“Do you think I’m stupid not to know that the woman I’m dating sleepwalks?” Okay... it’s working. They are eating the lies he’s feeding them. “I’ve taken her to doctors le bo Jack Bemel (witch doctors). Maybe your grandmother will do a good job, ousie Maki?”

The woman gulps, surprised at the sudden question.

“M- my grandmother is not a witch.” Why so defensive sister Maki? It’s only a question.

“Yeah and my girlfriend is not a witch.” He retorts and serves them with a heavy tongue click.

He sees the guilt engraved in the tenants’ faces, in how they realise they have done a grave sin. Bloody dot-to-dot thinkers. (Morons)

As he takes a step, hand in hand with the young lady, the people step aside and no one dares to argue with him further. He has so many questions for her. How did she get here, why is she covered in dirt and how did she know where he lives.

“Place her on the bed, I’ll get her something to drink.” Thandikela says.

She would side with her fellow tenants, but they can be unreasonable. This child looks like nothing like a witch.

“What are you doing?” He questions his sister, yes, she’s awake, very inquisitive and has her big head dipped under her mother’s bed.

“Checking if the salt and vinegar is still under the bed, I put it there before I went to sleep to trap witches.” Her answer tangles his already tangled mind.

“What?”

“Yes, I...” Sindisiwe stands to her feet, ready to give

her brother a long explanation.

“Shut up,” Knowing she’s going to confuse him further, he shuts her up. He squats in front of the young woman, eyes probing... this is her alright. The girl he prophesied over, why is she here though?

“Lili,” he’s not sure but he remembers the little boy calling her that just the other day or was it Lilian or Lindi?

“Is that her name?” Doesn’t this little brat have school in a few hours?

“Go back to sleep Sindi,” he doesn’t give her a once over as he’s looking at the ‘zombified’ young maiden seated in his mother’s bed.

“Shame, you bring a zombie into my house, on my bed and expect me to sleep?” She’s swinging her head as if her neck has loosened.

“She’s not a zombie, stupid.” He pushes her head and she falls on the bed but gets back up in a flash.

“Can I take a picture of her? I’m trying to gain followers on TikTok and Insta, this news will make me famous.”

“Sindisiwe!” Thandikela chides her little gremlin, she’s back from the kitchen, carrying a cup with steaming beverage inside. It’s a motherly thing. The girl turns to face the wall because she can’t let her mother witness her award winning eye roll.

“I made her tea,” mom says. Really though? “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know,” Bambindlovu steps in, gaze on the cup held by his mother, he’s trying to grasp what tea will do to help this poor soul. “Sindi, get me cold water from the fridge.”

The girl’s eyes snap open, wider than they usually are.

“Whose fridge?” She murmurs, “because your mother does not have a fridge and I don’t remember

you saying sis Sindi change your clothes, we're going to Joshua Door to buy a fridge. And I know you are not talking about Ousie Maki's fridge."

"Yey, voetsek, voetsek." The brother pushes her again. "Just bring the water, now."

"Mama, listen to your son." Sindisiwe whines. "Ousie Maki doesn't want us touching her fridge."

"What do you want to do with cold water Sokalisa?" Thandikela.

"What do you want to do with this tea MaOlady?" In suspense, he waits for an answer with a raised eyebrow. His mother does not deliver.

Taking a head shake, he saunters to the kitchen and yes, Bambindlovu does not care who bought the fridge. The water belongs to the government not Maki.

He's back with a jug of ice cold water, ice cold because he added blocks of ice inside. Without any

hesitation, he splashes it on Liyana face.

“Sokalisa?” His mother chides him.

“Oh god, this is better than Korean drama.” Sindiwe sings, her phone directed at the young woman.

That’s right, she’s recording everything. Someone call the cops on this brat. “I’m finally going to be famous, look at God. He sure works in mysterious ways.”

“Why did you do that ndodana?” (Son.)

“This is why?” He points at a coughing Liyana who alternates to gasping for air. He didn’t think it would work, a proud simper visits his lips.

Liyana’s eyes are wide with terror, flicking from side to side, trying to grasp her surroundings and how she got here. She wants to move, but feels as though she’s welded to the surface she’s settled on.

“What’s going on? Where am I?”

Her disorganised thoughts become disorganised words and sentences, sweat beads on her forehead

or is it the water that guy over there viciously poured on her face? Her chest heaves as she struggles to breathe.

“Hey calm down,” seeing the expected panic, he keeps his voice soft lest he frightens her.

“Where am I? Who are you people?” Her eyes widely dart around, looking for an escape. Her movements mirror her words, giving an impression of not knowing which way to turn. Bambindlovu stands to grab her hand, it’s a soft touch, but Liyana flinches, yanking it back.

“Don’t touch me,” fear has vacationed in her voice.

“We’re not going to hurt you sisi, you came here by yourself. There are witnesses outside this room who can attest to it.” Thandikela says as she has gathered the girl’s thoughts. Liyana’s eyes seem to relax when she notices the little girl who is clinging to her mother’s skirt, they look like decent people and that’s more than enough to get her to calm down.

“Ho- how did I get here?” She would move from the door if she were comfortable around them.

“You tell us, last time I saw you, you were glowing like Kelly Khumalo. Flaunting amashwang-shweng.”
(You had beautiful hair.)

Liyana dodges his hand that’s coming for her hair,
“But today you look like Whitney Houston on drugs.”

“May her soul rest in peace,” Sindisiwe adds to her brother’s mention, still not brave enough to leave her mother’s side.

“Stop it you two,” Thandikela reprimands her brats.
“Come sit.”

She brings Liyana to the other side of the bed.

“I feel so tired, my body hurts.” Liyana complains.

Could she have walked from Houghton to Hillbrow?
The child is barefooted, dressed in nightwear and looking like she survived a hurricane. Bambindlovu leans on the wall and stares at her.

“How did you get here?” The question belongs to

him.

“I don’t know, the last thing I remember is resting in my bed and....” her explanation fades as she jolts to her feet, “I have to call my father. May I borrow your phone?” She’s asking Thandikela who nods and fishes for her mobile under the pillow.

“I don’t have airtime, you can send him a please call message.”

Liyana frowns not because she’s complaining, her father won’t see the message, if he does, he won’t respond to an unknown number.

“You’ve got airtime Sokalisa, give the girl your phone.” Bambindlovu scowls at her suggestion.

“I owe Cell C about R50 mama, where will I get anytime. Sindi is loaded with airtime.” He says, scratching the back of his head.

“I used it to buy data.” That’s the little sister, she adds a yawn on top of her excuse. Before his mother could complain, he pulls the one he bought at pep

for R200. This one is for emergencies, might not be fancy but it's as important as an iPhone. It has airtime, makes and receives calls and to top it off, Hillbrow thugs will never ask for it.

Liyana makes the call, she explains what she knows to her worried father who asks for directions.

"Please give him directions," she holds Thandikela the phone.

"We're in Hoofman Newyoker, between Kaptain and Quartz." She tells him the name of the building and street. The king knows the streets of Hillbrow like the back of his hand as it was once his humble abode, he sends his gratitude and drops the call.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Four

BAMBINDLOVU-

Thandikela finds a knitted jersey inside the china bag next to the bed, “Here, you’re shivering. I would lend you my clothes, but they won’t fit you.” Liyana takes it with a grateful smile. “Sokalisa, give the child a pair of pants. You’re a size 30, they won’t fit, but they will do.”

Bambindlovu gives her a look, it’s not every day his mother asks him to lend his clothes to strange girls. It never happens, not even his last girlfriend had the chance to wear even a sock and she was his mother’s favourite.

He doesn’t argue, but obeys.

Now, where did he put those formal pants he wore at a friend's wedding two years ago? He flips the mattress over and finds them right under it, wrinkled and smelling mouldy. However they are new, he wore them once. Giving away his t-shirt as well won't hurt.

"You can change in there," he points towards his room after handing her the clothes. Beggars can't be choosers, reluctantly, Liyana stands to do the needful.

A mousy laugh erupts in the room when she comes back looking like a coat hanger that's holding Bambindlovu's clothes. Sindisiwe has left her manners in her sleep, laughing at adults is not okay.

"Don't mind her, my child." Thandikela says, taking note of Liyana's shyness. "You look fine, come sit down."

Her eyes remain on the ground when she treads towards the bed, she's suddenly become shy... It could be that the only man in the room is staring,

mouth ajar. He's not sure what to think about what he's seeing, what he is sure of is that it's a sight he'd look at for days on end.

"Sokalisa, go make a cup of tea for our guest, so she keeps warm while waiting for her father." Thandikela brings him back to life, he runs his hand behind his neck and nods

"Give me your phone, " he snatches his sister's phone and deletes the video that will make her 'famous,' flushing her chances of being Mzansi's next queen B down the drain.

"No Ndlovu, don't delete it." The child is crazy with anger, tears fill her eyes but this brother gives no care whatsoever. "I knew you don't want to see to me shine, don't be that brother Mr. Elephant."

"Sindi don't talk to your brother like that." Thandikela.

"But mama, my life is ruined. My entire career was in that video." Sindisiwe complains, looking ready to

throw a tantrum.

“I see, was that your backup plan, just in case you fail school?” Bambindlovu has put the puzzle together.

“School is not for everyone,” the girl replies under her breath.

“Go to sleep doti, and don’t think you will stay home tomorrow because you slept late. You’re going to repeat grade 7, mark my words wena.” And with that, he ushers Liyana to the kitchen.

Who said Zulu men don’t know their way around the kitchen? Not this one, of course he’s skilled in making tea. He’s not Thandikela’s son for nothing.

Blue and yellow metal mugs are placed on the small table at the corner of the kitchen, the tea is black and piping hot. Perhaps she would drink it if it were not served in an enamel mug, she’s not about to nurse a burnt tongue for the next three to five days.

He opens a cupboard, takes out a half-loaf of white

bread and a container of Rama. He picks out four slices of bread and spreads the Rama on them. Yes, yes, they can also butter bread like pros. Do not judge this Zulu man.

“Eat,” he orders, voice suddenly deep as he puts the plate on the table and settling down in the opposite chair.

“I’m not hungry,” she tells him. It’s bloody 3am in the morning, who has an appetite at this time?

“Suit yourself,” he shrugs and grabs two slices joined by the yellow spread. Folds it and squashes the bread in his hand until it is one hard roll and dips it in the yellow mug. His head starts to move to no sound as he chews his life away, evidently enjoying what’s in his mouth.

“There’s nothing like black tea and white bread, ngathi ngiyaphupha.” (Feels like a dream.)

Not that she cares, but oh well... the words are out

there.

“Is it not too early to eat?” She’s not judging him, it’s a simple question.

“I didn’t know our stomachs were given curfews.”
That’s his answer? Really? Come on Bambindlovu, make it believable at least. “Try the tea.”

“How did I get here?” Her mind is still there, it’s normal. Anyone would be shocked, she’s tired, drained and her legs feel numb. Bambindlovu pauses his chewing session, takes another sip of heaven to help push down the bread and stares at Liyana.

Okay... it’s getting uncomfortable in here.

“You said the last thing you remember is going to bed, right?” He asks and she nods in response.

“What’s your surname?”

“Okolie.”

“What kind of surname is that?” This is Bambindlovu

Buthelezi, the tsotsi –taal speaking, umblaselo wearing, black tea lover- overconfident, proud Zulu man.

“My father is Ghanaian,” she leans back on the chair and folds her arms across her chest.

“I see, what are your clan names?” Too many questions from this man, they dribble her mind leaving it mystified.

“Is there a purpose to this interrogation?” She asks.

“Yes, I want to know how you call upon your ancestors. When you acknowledge their presence, you should recite clan praises. They love it, it makes them happy.”

“We don’t practise that, my great grandfather usually comes to me in a dream or manifests through me. That was a long time ago, when I was young.”
There’s dread in her voice, a glint of sadness.

“When you were young and innocent,” his words.

“You’re either stained with something they don’t

approve of or you have done something they don't like. It's your fault he hasn't come forth in years.

What have you done Lili?"

"None of the above," his words seem to annoy her. Who is he to criticise her like this?

"Don't bite my head mfethu, it's just a thought." He takes a long loud sip, and moves in closer. "Look, some ancestors can be very possessive, especially when they want you all to themselves. Do you have a boyfriend?"

"That's none of your business," who is he to ask her such a personal question?

"Mfethu, umuhle kakhulu to have this attitude. You asked me a question and this is me trying to add 1 and 1 so we get to 2. So far we're getting 7." (You're too beautiful.)

He's making sense, although he too has no clue why

the girl came to his house.

“It really is kind of strange that we met once and now we’re sharing bread in my kitchen. There’s a purpose for that.”

The only reason she nods to his explanation is because he speaks like a man who is sure of what he’s talking about. He seems like the type she would follow to wherever if he were to convince her, it’s in the way he carries his words and himself, like a grounded warrior at war.

“I think your ancestors brought you here,” Bambindlovu finally sheds light. “The old man, is he your maternal taima or paternal?”

“He’s my father’s grandfather,” she says. “But why am I here? Why bring me to your house?”

“I wish I could tell you Lili, abaphansi are on holiday right now. I would call but I hate it when I’m sent to voicemail.” To think he was making sense, now the

man has gone back to speaking gibberish.

“Can you speak like a normal person so I can understand you?” Liyana is getting upset.

“Give me your numbers, I’ll contact you when they decide they want to speak.” Now you’re talking, sir.

Liyana calls it out without any hesitation, he dials the number.

“It’s ringing,” he tells the lost-looking girl. “Most girls give the wrong number, so I had to check.”

“I’m not most girls.” Damn right, she’s not.

A maskhandi song resounds in the tiny kitchen, too loud for a man who shares the flat with a rainbow nation.

“I think it’s your father,” he tilts the phone to show her the unsaved number. She takes it and swipes to receive, her father tells her he’s outside and that she should hurry.

“I have to go,” she stands, eager to get out of the flat.

“I’ll walk with you, the lift isn’t working and it is said you hear an extra pair of footsteps on the stairs when walking at night.” There really was no need to utter such, Liyana’s eyes expand with fear. “You’re lucky you were a zombie when you came here, your ancestors are brave hey. Hillbrow is not a kind place for shiny girls like you.”

He calls his mother to accompany them and explains how Liyana’s father will probably kill him thinking he’s her boyfriend.

Like Bambindlovu had said, the stairways are creepy and dark. Thandikela leads the way, while he walks behind her with Liyana clinging on to his arm. She did that when they entered the fifth floor and hasn’t let go since. It’s dead silent that he can hear her heart thumping against her chest.

“I lied about the ghosts, relax.” He mumbles to her

when her hand tightens around his biceps. Liyana ignores his statement, there's no way she's letting go. The escapade comes to a halt when they get to the reception.

"I'll stay here mama, you go ahead. We don't want to give the old man a heart attack." Thandikela hums at her son's suggestion. "Lili, save my number when you get home and don't hesitate to call me. Maybe I'll fetch you next time you feel like visiting me in the middle of the night, it's better than walking from the north." He's kidding, the faint smile on his face says so. But because he is an idiot...

"It's Liyana," the correction is not coming from a bad place. "...and thank you."

He doesn't say anything in response to her remark.

"You can keep the pants, but the t-shirt and jersey have a name, Lili." This is not what he really wants to

say. "Return to owner."

We've already pointed that he's an idiot.

Amusement plays in his voice and eyes. Liyana flicks her brows in acknowledgement before walking away with Thandikela. Bambindlovu watches them until he can't see them anymore. What a way to start one's morning.

ZITHA-

"Zitha wake up, wake up Zitha." That's my mother's voice but how? She's dead... "Vuka Zithobile, there's someone in your room. Zithobile Vuka."

Her soft tone quickly transitions into an aggressive one, it jolts me out of a deep sleep.

"Jesus!" I scream the second my eyes snap open.

What is my aunt doing here? She's standing at the foot of my bed, glaring at me coldly. She has nothing on but a black cloth wrapped around her. She looks terrified and a little lost.

"Aunty, what's wrong? What happened?"

She frowns, clicks her tongue and walks out, leaving the door wide open. I know I'm not her favourite, but a little respect would be nice. I leave the bed to close it and get a muscle spasm on my left leg the moment it hits the floor. It throws me back on the bed and an unexpected scream flies out of my mouth.

The pain shoots all through my body, making it hard for me to move for a minute. I'm thinking aunty or Sizakele will come but nothing, that's how loud I was. A little prayer later, it starts to fade. Finally, I'm on my feet, I close the door and feel a need to lock it for some reason.

The time on my phone says it's 4:30am. Why was

aunt in my room at this time? If she wanted something she should've told me.

“Brah God, you're not sleeping, are you?” He better not be sleeping. “Look, I know it's quite late and I haven't been around for years. I would also get annoyed if someone knocked at my door at this time. But listen, my favourite father in the world. Daddy dearest.”

Suddenly I am taken back to the words I spewed to Isisa's aunt.

“Okay, I know I called another man daddy. Don't be mad, just grant me this one wish. I promise I will start watching T.B Joshua from tomorrow. Protect me, daddy God. The daddiest of daddies. My one and only, jy is my hart se punt. Thank you, I love you. Good night.”

(You have a special place in my heart.)

AMARA-

“Mom, can I not go to school please.” R.J says to me when I pull up outside the school gate.

“Why? Are you okay?” Maybe if he told me this before we left the house I would have granted him the request, I’m feeling overprotective since Liyana gave us a scare last night. He’s sitting on the passenger seat, engrossed on the school grounds. It’s flooded with school kids rushing inside the gates.

“I don’t feel like school today,” not a good enough reason to miss school.

“Nice try, I’ll walk you to the gate.” I dash out of the car, it takes him a minute to follow me. “Why the long face Kwame? Is there something I should know?”

The boy is dragging his feet, he shakes his head without looking up at me.

“You don’t have to accompany me to the class,

mom.” He’s suddenly timid, withdrawn.

“Are you afraid I will embarrass you in front of your friends?” No answer. “And I thought I was a cool mom.”

“It’s not that, my teacher...”

“Mrs. Okolie.” Mrs. Chala appears from the classroom, wearing her usual big grin. She’s a short chubby, light-skinned woman, round in all areas of her body, including her cheeks.

“Morning,” I salute.

“What a pleasant surprise,” her eyes fall on R.J who is perched up against me, he drop his head and offers a low;

“Good morning Mrs. Chala.”

“Since when are you shy?” I ask him.

“He’s not the first one, my class is filled with bashful students. I’ve been with them for three months, they will open up with time.” She adds, smiling down at my son. “I love children and teaching just as much

and because of that, children open up to me with ease. I believe Kwame will do the same, he's a good boy."

Her expression comes with her rubbing his head, R.J does not respond to the touch, however he grabs my hand and tightens the grip.

"I've heard how the student counsel praises your work and experience," I say.

"Well, I'm glad you've heard nothing but good things." That's her answer.

"You were a mayor once upon a time, the community loves you and looks up to you. We need a good mentor for our children and you are it Mrs. Chala." The woman nods, still grinning.

"I'm glad you have trust in me, Mrs. Okolie and it is an honour to teach your son." She proclaims. "You may go to class Kwame."

With this, he runs into the classroom, no goodbye or anything.

“I guess that’s my cue, I will take my leave now.” I bid her goodbye and take off.

I’m meeting up with Sethu at a café close by, it’s her birthday tomorrow and she wants to have a little get together. There’s a problem though, Styles advised against it. She wants my help, something about asking Randall to tell Styles to take a break from whatever they are doing. I’m yet to hear what she has to say about the matter.

I find her settled inside, sipping on coffee. Her facial features are changing, her nose is growing bigger- face becoming fuller... things I hate about pregnancy.

“Should you be drinking that?” I ask as soon as I’m within earshot.

“I will go crazy if I don’t.” We share a brief hug.

“Would you like anything?”

“I’m okay, I had breakfast before I left the house.” I

respond, positioning myself opposite her.

“How is Liyana?”

Liyana was still sleeping when I left the house, Randall stayed with her after they got home early this morning and hasn't left her side. Her explanation was that she couldn't recall how she got out of the house and whose house she went to. Sethu nods and hums as I explain Liyana's situation, I happen to notice how she's not entirely with me.

“You seem jumpy, is everything okay?” I have observed how cautious she is to her surroundings. If she's not scanning the entrance, she's browsing the area.

“Do you ever get that feeling like you're being followed?” She keeps her voice low, as if afraid of being heard.

“You're being followed?” I reply with a question.

“I'm not entirely sure, maybe I'm being paranoid.” She leans in closer. “Don't make it obvious, but see

that woman behind me? The one in black?”

I see the person she’s talking about, she’s on her phone, minding her business.

“What about her?” I ask.

“She comes to my work place every single day at 12pm and only orders a cup of tea. She would sit there for hours without any company, don’t you think that’s strange?”

“People do that,” as far as I know.

“But, why is she here though?” Sethu stops, turns to glance at the woman then back at me. “I bumped into her at the mall yesterday and now she’s here. Something is fishy Amara.”

Sethu finishes with a deep exhalation, you know that feeling you get when people are talking about you? Yeah, I think it just visited that woman because she raises her head and our eyes instantly meet. My mind works overtime trying to figure out where I have seen her, I know I’ve seen her somewhere.

Don't ask me why I'm still looking at her, she's also bold enough to keep the gaze.

"I said don't make it obvious Amara," Sethu chides me with a whisper. But I can't remove my eyes from her, then it hits me, the memory flashes in front of my eyes.

"Oh my God," I jump to my feet as the realisation smashes against me. "It's the woman from the hotel."

I remember bumping into her in the elevator.

"What?" Sethu doesn't know the full story, but she turns to her direction. The woman stands, eyes still on me. She winks and the creepiest smirk I've ever seen plays at her lips.

Wanting to ask who she is, my feet move towards her but she grabs her belongings and hurries out of the café.

"Hey, wait." I trail after her, Sethu's voice follows me, telling me to come back. It's painted with worry, I

don't pay her any attention. There's no sign of the woman outside, she has disappeared into thin air, as if she was never here. How will I find her in this crowded place? Dammit!

*

*

* ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Five

ZITHA-

Waking up at 5am to prepare breakfast for aunt before she goes to work is a profession in this house. But today, today I have taken my time, choosing not to be a slave in 2021. I'm not sure what time it is, the sunrays bursting through the kitchen window tell me it's past 8am.

'Sis May and Thoko' are still sleeping, they think life is a film those two. Wait till Karma pays them a visit.

The oats are almost ready to be served. There's a sudden presence that compels me to turn, my aunt is standing in the doorway, eyes too shifty for someone who is forever glaring with confidence.

Hatred nudges me as I'm looking at her, how can a woman be so heartless? My mother was a total

opposite of this one.

“Aunty!” Yes, I’m boiling with anger till now.

I thought today was her day off... whatever, it is better that she stays away from me today. She doesn’t look at me but opens the fridge and takes her lunch box. She’s headed for the door now...

“Aunty, your porridge is ready.”

She clicks her tongue without turning to look at me then storms out, banging the door behind her. Yoh! What’s wrong with her?

“What did you do to my mother?”

What makes her think we’re on speaking terms after what she did? I decide to start with last night’s dishes, Sizakele takes the plate that was meant for her mother and dishes up for herself. Does this girl know how to prepare porridge?

“What’s wrong with you? I asked you a question.”
She comes to stand next to me and leans against

the counter, it's the fact that she's eating the food I prepared with no care how it got in the pot.

"Are you still upset about last night?" Lord, this girl better not be talking to me.

"I need to clean the house, wash that plate when you're done. I'm not your maid, bloody fool." I won't be saying anything further and the smell of oats is making me sick, to a point of wanting to throw up, then again it could be Sizakele's face.

I leave her in the kitchen entertaining a tongue click.

Liyana has been distant lately, I need to call her. Zwelethu better not have turned my friend against me or I will slice his balls into a million pieces. The door in the sitting room opens and the first thing I see is a big head.

"Dali!" Ulwazi walks in, the girl never knocks when my aunt is not around. You'd think this house belongs to her grandmother.

“Too early for visits, don’t you think?” I’m not entirely shocked by her sudden visit, she’s standing in the door way eyes popped out.

I know what this is about, to think I almost forgot about the bruises.

“I’m fine Lwazi, you can close your mouth.”

“That bastard.” She shrieks, rushing over to inspect my face. “I’m taking you to the police station, you’re going to report him. That bastard is going to pay for this.”

My cheeks are buried in her rough hands and she’s looking into my eyes, hers holding on to anger.

“You can let go now, I’m fine hau. You don’t have to be dramatic.” I claim my face back, Ulwazi is fuming with rage which I completely get.

“Let’s go Zithobile.” She grabs my hand and starts pulling me towards the door, I take control of my feet and stop them from moving.

“I told you, I’m fine, Lwazi.” Her insistence causes

me to snap, my bruised face is the least of my worries at the moment.

“You’re fine? You’re fine Zithobile?” She shouts.

“Have you seen your face? You look like a battered housewife. That man does not deserve you, why are you still with him?” She’s getting louder.

“We’re not dating, you know that. He’s just my source of income, that’s all. Must you shout? Yoh, I’m not in the mood.”

This whole Tshilidzi issue drains me, I’d rather not talk about it till I figure a way out without going broke. I’m not about to start asking my aunt for money to buy sanitary pads, last time I did that, I was given R4 to buy tissue at the local tuck shop.

“Not in the mood huh? You won’t be in the mood when you’re lying dead in a coffin.” She’s probably right, he might end up killing me.

“What are you doing here?” Sizakele’s voice slithers

into the living room, the sound of it makes me cringe. Ulwazi's demeanour changes, she frowns at the cousin and I'm reminded how much these two hate each other with passion.

"Zithobile, I thought this demon had gone to school, otherwise I wouldn't have come here." Ulwazi.

"Who are you calling a demon?" Sizakele is always shouting like her mother.

"Wena mthakathi." (You, witch.)

I can see she's just about ready to fight her. This friend of mine is bigger than Sizakele and that will not stop her from beating up this little girl black and blue.

"Get out of my house." Sizakele demands.

If it were a day I was not emotionally drained, I would have given her a piece of my mind. The friend puts her stubbornness to practise, she finds her way to the sofa, crosses her legs and folds her arms. The look on her face right now... too dramatic and extra.

“One day is one day wena.” Sizakele dishes an empty promise.

“Oh, I’m waiting honey, we can even make it today. Someone needs to panel beat that ugly face of yours.” Ulwazi.

She’s still a woman underneath the mannish posture. Ulwazi is dead serious, I see it in her eyes, Sizakele sees it too and she’s afraid of her.

She snorts and walks out of the house.

“Witch!” Ulwazi hisses, I love this girl. “I’m late for work. We’ll talk when I get back.” She stands up and gathers me into her arms, the hug is so warm, makes me feel like I’m not alone. I’m in the verge of breaking down but opt to swallow my emotions, this one would burn down my aunt’s house with her and Sizakele inside, if I tell her what happened.

I find myself a bit clingy, holding on for a little longer when she lets go.

“What’s wrong?” She knows me, I’m not usually this insecure.

“Nothing,” I move out of her arms, eyes darting from place to place to avoid shedding tears. “Just thanking you for what you did to Sizakele, next time add a punch or two and I’ll probably kiss you.”

My heart does a summersault due to the smile she offers, a head shake later, she kisses my cheek and leaves me alone to drown in my troubles. I need some distraction, something that will make me forget my mother and father’s betrayal. I wonder where that mama’s boy Tshepo is, yawning under him is better than anything right now.

There’s someone tickling my door, the knocking does not stop until I open it to see the ‘Umbrella’ kid, looking like he just woke up. His crusty, boogers-filled face smiles at me.

“Dumelang.” He greets and hands me what I recognise as my bag, a peek reveals my belongings.

Wait... Am I kicked out before actually moving in? Why did they bring back my stuff? I know wealthy people don't have time for us, but he could've brought it himself.

"Where did you get this?" I ask and he points towards the gate.

As I step out, I see the Range Rover, today I'm finally going to meet him. My stomach tosses nervously at the thought.

The kid scurries out the gate and I plod after him.

Today he's brave enough to park across the street.

For a second, I think he will drive off but doesn't.

Instead, the driver's door opens. One foot pops out, black shiny formal shoes, the second one follows. I don't know if I'm over excited, or it's something I ate but my stomach starts acting up as I approach the car, my head spins and everything becomes fuzzy.

I stop in the middle of the street to shake the dizziness off, someone is rushing towards me. It's the man who got out of the car. Before he gets to

me, I feel my body fall but I don't hit the ground, a pair of arms catch me.

AMARA-

Randall has been working on finding out what actually happened that day at the hotel, the woman I saw probably knows something. It can't be a coincidence that I bumped into her again and that look she gave me was too suspicious.

I hurry back inside to make a call.

"Why did you run after her, Amara?" I will give her answers when I'm done talking to Randall, his phone is ringing.

"Me hemma," he answers.

"I saw her," there is no time to greet. "The woman from the hotel was here Randall."

"Where?" He asks, I could hear him moving. "Where

are you?”

“At a café in Rosebank, she’s gone. There’s no sign of her anywhere.” Sethu frowns while staring with an inquisitive glower, I’m yet to fill her in on what happened that day. The only person I’ve spoken to about the matter is my husband, it’s a really sensitive topic.

“Go home Amara, I’ll meet you there.” That sounds more like an order.

“I’m with Sethu, we’ll go once we’re done.” The man I love sighs, making sure I catch how frustrated he’s become.

“Go home Amara, now.” He gives a final order and hangs up.

“What’s going on? How do you know that woman?”
Sethu.

“Come home with me, I’ll explain everything there.”
When Randall says move, you have to.

It's times like these I'm taken back to his controlling ways, some say he's over protective while some say it's the leader in him. You don't tell him what to do, rather he tells you. His twin brother Nqabayomzi and Styles are an exception, they can get away with pushing him around.

Thankfully, Sethu doesn't ask questions. She pays for her coffee and we head out while she complains about the mysterious woman, being pregnant and the father of her kids.

RANDALL-

It's a good thing Styles was with me when Amara called, he opted we check out the café before meeting up with Amara. We're here, standing before a displeased young cashier, must hate her job.

I was left stunned when he handed me a fake police

appointment card, "We're going in as detectives." He said.

Over the years, I've learnt not to question the things he does. You need to be a certain somebody in order to get to the TV room, the cards should come in handy. The woman frowns at it when I swipe it over her face, fast enough she doesn't get to see the details on it.

"Do the surveillance cameras work?" Styles asks pointing at the two cameras in the café.

"I think so." The lady says, bored expression set on her face. "The manager is not around, he'll be back after 12pm."

"Okay," Styles delivers with a deadpan tone. "Where is the security room?"

The woman rapidly blinks at the standoffish manner emanating from Styles, I'd be nervous too. She clears her throat and tells us to follow her. We enter a storeroom, kitchen looking place. Storeroom because it's flooded with boxes and Kitchen

because there's a microwave and tea sets. They have a desktop as well, Styles is on it in a jiffy.

"Please hurry, I will get in trouble with my boss?"
Stupid.

"You may leave," I dismiss the nervous looking lady and shut the door when she steps out.

"Wow," Styles sighs grudgingly. Stands back from the desktop and... I know this head nod. He does this when he feels defeated or has been dared.

"Please tell me we found her," he shakes his head and chuckles incredulously.

"I don't know what we're up against Randall, but the sons of bitches have challenged my intelligence."
His tone is cold, face impassive.

"They beat us to it?" He nods at my question.

"The footage is dated till last night at about 11, everything that happened today has been wiped clean. There's not even a sign of Amara and Sethu

being here.” Anger dwells in his voice.

“The idiots are not so smart after all, their first mistake was to delete everything. Unless it was intended, they want us to know that they are here and watching us.”

“You might have something there,” he says. “I hate this game Randall and only because I didn’t start it.” He grinds his teeth as he exhales a long sigh of frustration.

“Doesn’t matter, we don’t have to follow their rules Styles.” I pat his shoulder to get him to relax, the man does not work well when frustrated.

Styles looks at me, eyes mischievous. I know this man not to be a quitter, I have stood in reverence at how smart he is. His tenaciousness is something to boast about.

“We have to get Thandaza out of that hospital,” he states. “Dead or alive.”

“Relax Peter Parker, what help will a dead body do?”

“Let’s get out of here, we can’t have this conversation in here.”

He’s right, we head out. I can’t say I’m not disappointed. Gone are the days when things were so easy, those were the days I took Amara right under Mkhize’s nose. The old man was sly as a fox, but had nothing on us.

“Mkhize.” Styles steals my thoughts, just as he starts the car.

I am going to kill Mkhize and everyone who has his blood running through their veins. The memory is still clear in my head when he came to my house demanding Amara, as if she was a bag of mealie-meal.

His obsession over her has always been dangerous and I believe he hasn’t gotten over her. He might be down and out, but that doesn’t mean his desires died with his riches.

“Are you sure Mkhize is where you say he is?” I ask.

We have to keep our eyes on him, one small mistake and we’ll trip and fall.

“I have no doubt it’s him, or that’s what he wants us to think.”

“I say we pay him a visit.” I tell him.

It was years ago I suggested we kill Mkhize, I was willing to do it myself. Styles was against it after finding out the man fathered his wife, he opted to strip the old man of everything he had. If he had listened to me, we wouldn’t be in this situation.

“I say we do it.” Styles.

I thought he wouldn’t agree. I guess we’re doing this and if I’m lucky, I will get to put a bullet through Mkhize’s head. *

*

*

* ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Six

AMARA-

“Sisi, you're home early?”

Since when does this one open the door? The smile on her face has me almost taking an eye roll, should blame the hormones for my dislike towards her? Randall refused that we get someone new, his explanation was that we can't have people coming and going with kids in the house.

“Someone called in your absence, she said her name is Ifeanyi. She wanted to speak to the king.”

MaNtombi says, following Sethu and I to the lounge.

“Did she leave a message?”

Why would Ifeanyi call on the house phone? She knows where to find her brother when she wants to

speak to him. The only person who makes use of the house phone is Randall's granduncle. He's the one standing in for Randall back in Ghana.

Randall had asked him to take over as king forgetting that's not how things work. Not even his twin brother is worthy to sit on that throne, apparently a calamity would befall any intruder. Like Randall, you would have to be elected by the ancestors.

"No, she said she'll call later." MaNtombi answers my previous question.

I didn't think Randall would be home this early, Styles is with him. At their presence, MaNtombi rushes out of the room. Am I the only one who finds it strange that she doesn't greet? In fact, she hardly looked their way.

"You replaced Chioma?" That's Styles, eyes following the woman marching toward the kitchen.

“Chioma is irreplaceable, she’s here for the time being.” I answer standing to greet the husband who denies me my right to see his smile. Grumpy Randall is a worried Randall, he’s not upset with me, is he?

“You’re angry?” I ask, only to receive a furrowed brow.

“We’re going to KZN tomorrow.” Something tells me this ‘we’ includes me. “Pack our things.” I knew it.

“Why?”

“We might have a lead,” he’s not going to continue, is he?

“Wait, is this about what happened to Amara at the hotel?” Look at Sethu, asking with her happy-go-lucky attitude. I happened to fill her in on everything on our way home.

“It is,” Styles answers.

“You two can’t miss my birthday celebration, can’t you postpone it?” I almost forgot about Sethu’s small gathering and why does Styles have that guilty

look on his face?

“Your birthday will have to wait Sethu,” Yeah hey! This is how a man digs his own grave, the look Styles is getting from Sethu...

“We’re not postponing anything Styles,” pin drop silence in the room and tension too thick it would need a bulldozer to remove it. “My birthday is tomorrow and we are celebrating it tomorrow.”

Eh! Is this Sethu or her sister speaking through her?

“This trip is important, we can’t postpone it.” Styles says, settling down beside his wife is a mistake too many, this woman is fuming. That’s the thing about short- quiet girls, they are innocent and cute when at peace. But start at them and they explode like bombs in Iraq.

Sethu stands, so does Styles. I'm not comfortable with how they are looking at each other. Where is the love?

"I don't care," Sethu releases the words through clamped teeth. "You'll go after the dinner, I don't care. I want you at my party Styles and that's it."

"It's just a birthday party Sethu, you'll do it when we get back." Someone tell this husband of mine to shut his mouth.

Sethu raises a hand to dismiss Randall's opinion, she's looking at Styles as she does this and I am not sure if this is a right move on her part.

"Stay out of this Randall," Okay... I'm definitely sure this is not a right move. Did she just dismiss him like that?

Should I call for backup?

There's a look on Styles' face, I'd probably get it wrong if I were to describe it.

"We don't do that here, Sethu." Styles says, too calm

and collected it has me clearing my throat, seconds apart, Randall clears his as well.

“You will have to choose Styles, Randall or your family.”

How long has Sethu been married to Styles Sishi? As long as Randall and I have been married and I am surprised by how she does not know that you don't do that, you don't separate these two men.

Before Randall and Amara, before Styles and Sethu, there was Randall and Styles or Styles and Randall. Whichever way you want to put it, I myself have never dared put Randall in such a position. Afraid he'll choose his brother over me and I have to give it to the Miss. She has one hell of a nerve.

“That's absurd, nothing like that will happen.” Randall says.

“I'm waiting Styles,” Sethu disregards Randall's authoritative tone. Let's be thankful her eyes do not

shoot lethal laser or she would be a widow right now.

“We’re going to KZN tomorrow,” Styles answers, nonchalantly. Sethu’s face expresses pain. A deadly glare is thrown at Randall by the one and only. She storms out, I would follow... but...

“Dammit!” The expression from Styles sounds painful, he looks at Randall. Are these two having a silent conversation?

“We’ll go the day after tomorrow,” Randall proposes. I’m a proud wife.

“No, Sethu is being childish. We’re leaving tomorrow, the enemy does not sleep.” Styles replies before following Sethu.

Is this Styles choosing Randall over his wife?

My assumptions were trailing on the right path, there’s trouble in paradise.

“What was that about?” I’m curious, but this man does not provide an answer. He shrugs, takes my

hand and starts leading me to... Where are we going really?

ZITHA-

The smell of a hospital always takes me back to the day my mother died, it comes with the pain and déjà vu feeling. My eyes open and of course I'm in the hospital, a private one. That's the first thing my mind registers. I hate it here. Ulwazi is here, watching me. Is it too soon to say it's kind of creepy?

"Hey, how are you feeling?"

"Did I have a near death experience?" Otherwise, why is she here? Ulwazi is supposed to be at Checkers shouting 'next customer please.'

"Apparently you fainted, and someone brought you in." She answers.

Now that I remember, I was headed towards the Range Rover and then everything went blank.

“Where is he?” Why am I asking her this? She looks confused.

“Who?”

I don’t know who but I want to know where he is.

“Do you mean the person who brought you in?”
Ulwazi queries. “I got a call from someone, telling me to come to the hospital, I don’t know where they got my number. When I entered your room there was a man, he didn’t say much nor accept my greeting. He left without a word.”

What is his problem? Till when is he planning on playing hide and seek? I’ve hated the game since I was a little girl, I have a phobia of being alone.

To think he’s helped me a number of times and I have never truly seen his face, come to think of it, there were no pictures of him in his room.

“What did this person look like?”

“Arrogant as fuck.” Lord! Is that jealousy I sense in the tone of her voice? “There was something dark about him and the fact that he was in all black did not help. I have to admit that I was startled at first, I stood at the door like a frozen full chicken.”

“Can you go see if he’s still around?” I have to see him.

Ulwazi does not approve, she frowns.

“I’m not doing that, what’s with you and old men? I know you don’t have a father, but take it down a notch.” This witch.

“Sometimes I hate your blunt tongue, you’re an idiot Ulwazi, you know that?”

“I’m your idiot and you love me,” she’s smiling. “I’m serious though, you need to stop. Those men come with ten children and women from each province.”

“Relax, I only want to thank the man, not let him into my pants... yet.” She shakes her head, jaw clenched.

What did she think, I would let money on legs pass without tasting it? According to my senses that never lie, he smells too good. It's mouth-watering, and if he is Isisa's brother the man must be good looking because she's a looker herself. I see it... I see myself on top of him, having my way with him. Vision is vague, but I see it. The thought of it has my p#ssy excited.

"Slut," Ulwazi taps my head, predicting my thoughts. "Get your mind out of the gutter, lust is a sin just so you know."

Then I would happily bounce to hell because there is no way I'm going to withhold from salivating over that money-smelling man.

The door opens and a nurse walks in, I feel a pang of dissatisfaction as I was hoping to see him. Man like being disappointments.

"How are you feeling?" Nurse.

"When can I go home?" I don't want to be here.

“The doctor will be with you just now.”

Speak of the devil, he walks in just at her announcement.

“How is our patient?” Doctors and smiles... jeer.

“I want to go home.” I tell him.

“You can go home if you like but I suggest that you stay, we have to keep you overnight for observation.”
Doctor.

“What’s wrong with me?” What observation? I feel fine, unless I have a life threatening disease I got from my father’s side of the family. Curse that man.

The doctor looks at Ulwazi, then back at me. Clearly he has something big to say and is not sure saying it in front of Ulwazi is a good idea.

“She’s my friend, bhuti. I can’t afford this place, so staying overnight is not an option. Can’t I give you my numbers and I’ll keep you updated on my health via WhatsApp?”

Ulwazi chides me with an icy glare, yoh this girl. I’m

not flirting with the doctor, he's Indian and I see them as brothers from another mother.

"The bill has been paid Mrs. Mkhize." Haibo! Mrs. Mkhize? Me, Zothibile Mthombeni is a Mrs. Mkhize?

"You're mistaken doctor, she's not married." Ulwazi is a dream crusher, I don't envy her life.

"I'm sorry, I thought since Mr. Mkhize paid the bill..."

"Can I pay you to continue thinking doctor? I really like the way you think." He looks confused.

Listen, it's not every day I get to play a married woman.

"Do you realise there is a serious matter at hand?" The dream crusher says. "Zitha, I know you like hiding behind this crazy behaviour. But one day you will have to come out and face the music. Now stop stalling the doctor and let him tell us why you can't go home."

I hate her...

“The baby’s heart beat is faint, hence we have to keep an eye on you.”

Wait!!! Ba... Did he say baby?

“What baby doctor?” I’m going to die, this is worse than a life threatening disease.

“You’re five months pregnant, it’s been too long and I thought you knew.” Five months pregnant? And he says it like it’s normal. There’s nothing normal about any of this.

“No, someone paid you to say this, right?” My voice cracks, I’m a trembling mess. I’m not a fan of surprises or pranks.

“I don’t understand ma’am,” he says he doesn’t understand. What is going on in this country? I knew I voted for the wrong party.

Ulwazi looks spooked out, normally, she’d be yelling at me and telling me how irresponsible I am but

she's too quiet.

"Look, bhut' dokotela, I would know. It's my body, I would know if I'm pregnant. I just had my period last month and the month before."

I did, right? Yes, yes. I remember clearly.

"I was kicked a number of times by a size 10 foot, there's no way I'm pregnant. My stomach is not that big that I wouldn't notice a change in it."

Frustrated, I flip the bedsheet open and pull the hospital dress up, revealing my flabby stomach. Did you catch that? I said flabby, baby bumps are round and hard and there's occasional movements in them.

"Where is this baby you speak of, there is nothing in here."

He smiles, what the hell is he smiling about? He sees my death, doesn't he?

"Please relax, this is normal. It's completely reasonable for a woman to make it to 30 weeks

without looking pregnant.” Doctors must fall, I refuse. “This is called hidden pregnancy. One in four hundred women are this far along before they realise they are with child and some women make it all the way to labour before they understand they are going to have a baby. Mental health problems bipolar disorder, stress, depression, are common causes.”

“That does not make sense, Zithobile cannot be pregnant.” Ulwazi finally speaks.

“Do you want me to recommend someone to talk to?” He’s asking me shit. I want this to be a dream.

“We can also do a scan.”

“I don’t want to see anything, I can’t be pregnant. Oh God, my aunt is going to kill me.”

“I recommend you try and get some rest, an upset mother means an upset baby.”

“Whose mother?” I snap, he better not be calling me a mother. I didn’t sign up for this position, bloody hell,

I didn't ask for a womb. Why must such things happen without my permission?

"I'll leave you to think about this, try and relax, okay."
The doctor says before walking out.

"Why is he forcing this pregnancy on me?" I ask
Ulwazi.

That look better not be directed at me.

"How did this happen Zitha?"

"I don't know, I didn't want this, I don't want this
Lwazi. I've been careful, I took my contraceptives. I
hated it when he touched me, he never wanted to
use protection. He said no other man will have me
but him and that there was no point of using
protection."

She's looking at me like I was going house to house
asking for people's husbands to make me pregnant.

LIYANA-

Sleep is the most peaceful feeling in the world, or is it taking a dump? But some say death is the most peaceful thing on earth. Liyana cannot relate, in her sleep she's never alone. Nor when she's awake, there is forever a presence with her.

Like in this case, Liyana is woken up by the feeling that there's someone in the room. She doesn't want to open her eyes, but thinking she's being paranoid, she opens them to find a stern looking man and woman seated on both ends of her bed, staring at her. If anger comes in human form, then they are it personified.

They look like they are from the mid 1800s, judging by their clothes. The man looks well in his early thirties, he's wearing a brown suit and a flat cap, but the outfit somehow looks a bit unkempt. The middle-aged woman is wearing a royal blue short sleeved pinifa and a white head wrap.

Liyana has grasped that this is not a dream. She feels blood throbbing through her veins, gulps down a ball of fear as she prepares to release a record breaking scream. Her mouth opens, it's in her chest, but nothing is coming out.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Seven

LIYANA-

Imagine the worst nightmare you've ever had, then imagine you're unable to wake up from it because you're already awake. All those strange things that make sense when you're dreaming because you know it's a dream, start to make sense with your eyes wide awake.

They have to be mystic beings, it's the only coherent explanation, not only have they filled her with fear, they have taken her vocal sound. The two beings stand to their feet, eyes still kept on her as if waiting for her to move.

Unconsciously, Liyana glides out of bed. They don't waste time but start walking backwards, without

turning their backs on her nor removing their angry eyes from her. Phantom footsteps resound on the floor.

Like magnet Liyana trails after them, her feet don't belong to her anymore, she has lost control over them.

Without tripping or stumbling, they make it down the flight of steps, headed to the backyard.

“Miss Liya,” MaNtombi calls out to her, she rushes back to the kitchen to leave the washing basket. She was asked to keep an eye on the princess and here she is running after her.

As she gets to the sliding door, she finds it shut which is odd. This door is never shut during the day, one pull and it won't budge. The maid panics, her boss, not Amara... she has not seen that woman past an ordinary girl who is married to a king, until then, the respect she is ought to give the wife would have to remain tucked away somewhere in her busy head.

Her salary payer... her landlord gave her strict instructions to keep watch over the girl outside, but how can she now, when the stupid door is standing in her way and she can't see anything beyond the sudden fog? Talk about strange happenings.

The daylight loses to darkness, the skies become grey and hazy.

Liyana looks up at the sky unaware of the bodies that have suddenly materialised from under water, not only are there two dead bodies inside the pool, there is blood in the water.

She should be afraid, screaming for help. But there is nothing in her that tells her to do so, instead, her eyes wander off to the two beings who are now squatting over the pool. They wash their faces with the unclean water about three times before looking up at her.

Their grim faces have suddenly changed, she is now looking at Randall and Amara, blood leaking from

their eyes in miserable streams. That's right, they are crying blood. Now disguised as her parents, the couple join hands and cautiously tread down the five steps leading inside the pool. The bodies are no longer there, what remains is the bloodied water.

It's as if she has forgotten to scream, her emotions have been switched off although she watches them submerge into the water and does nothing to stop them.

Unexpectedly, thunder resonates and lightning charges, bringing her soul-pulses back into a steady and strong rhythm, as if her heart needed a jumpstart.

Liyana covers her eyes, it takes a few seconds to take a peek and to her surprise, it is daylight. There is nothing out of the ordinary, the pool is as clear as the blue skies.

Her eyes whisk around searching for the people who brought her out of her room, her parents as well and

there is no one in sight.

Amidst of everything that has happened, she remains calm. It's not a surprise to her that she has a gift, the girl has seen worse.

"Miss. Liya." MaNtombi has finally made it outside.

"Are you okay?"

"Did you also see that?" Liyana asks.

"See what, Miss. Liya?"

Don't waste your time Liyana, she does not have the answers you seek.

"I have to go," Liyana announces and pounces off into the house, a thought has come to mind.

She knows who to call.

ZITHA-

There is no rest for the wicked. I have heard this

saying many times in my life and boy have I been wicked and this is my punishment. Will I ever know peace?

Ulwazi and her heavy presence are still here, she's more upset than I am. I tried talking to her, but was given a black stare. I need someone to tell her that we are not an item and there is no way under the face of the earth I will ever consider her as a potential lover.

There's a sudden knock on the door, it opens immediately after and Isisa walks in. The girl smiles the moment our eyes meet, I would return it, but my heart is sitting on my throat.

"Hi," she sings.

Must be nice to always be this happy, some of us can only dream about it. We return the salutation and fall into silence, she senses it and clears her throat.

She's carrying what appears to be bags of food.

“I brought you food, I thought you might be hungry considering that hospital food tastes like cardboard.” She says, placing the bags somewhere in the room.

Right! About telling Ulwazi that I am not her girlfriend, I need that done sooner than Mandela was freed from prison. The girl is glaring at poor Isisa, mind you, she has no clue who she is.

“Hi, I’m Isisa.”

I’m grateful for meeting intelligent people who know that introducing themselves is a must because I was not going to do it.

“I met Zitha the other day at my house.”

“Wow, how many are we, Zithobile?” God, heed my cry. My ancestors have turned against me. Ulwazi embarrasses me sometimes.

“Control yourself please, I don’t want to be a

laughing stock.” I whisper enough for her to hear, she’s not getting rid of that frown anytime soon.

“Ulwazi, her best friend.” She says, folding her arms and suddenly deep-voiced. Who is she trying to intimidate?

The look on Isisa’s face tells me that she senses she’s not wanted by this thing I call a friend, her smile fades as she sits on the edge of the bed. She’s not going anywhere... I like...

“A little birdy told me, he’s worried about you.” Isisa introduces. I don’t need Einstein to tell me who the little bird is.

“Your brother?” The question was at the tip of my tongue, why not let it out?

“Yes, I believe you two have met.” I wouldn’t say.

“Is he afraid of women?” I must know, maybe the man plays for the other team.

“No,” sure she would defend her brother. “He’s a little

busy.”

“A little huh? How come I haven’t properly met him then?”

“I can call him and give you the phone so you speak to him.” She says.

I find Ulwazi who shakes her head no, it’s too late to stop Isisa, not that I was going to.

“It’s ringing,” she tells me, flashing a faint smile. My palms start to sweat, it’s strange for me because nothing makes me nervous.

My eyes are undisciplined, they linger on the door with an urge to catch a glimpse of him. Just a glimpse will be more than enough for me.

“He’s not answering,” Isisa says, also taking note of my wandering eye.

Why do I get a feeling he’s doing everything to avoid me? Not being wanted is not a first, I have grown used to it. However, it hurts every time.

LIYANA-

Every good thing he's learnt was on the other side of a curious wandering. He's only nine, and exposed to everything the world can offer. Good or bad, if he's lucky he'll stay hidden under his father's wing. If not, he will crush and burn with the rest of us.

Liyana sees him and scuttles out of the car to meet him halfway, she's always excited to see her little brother.

Getting out of the house was a decision she made after speaking to her new found 'friend' over the phone, the two agreed to meet up where they first met. The school.

"Why are you wrinkled Kwame?" She reaches to iron out his school shirt and tuck it in, but the boy flinches and draws back. Eyes wide and fearful.

“And then?” Of course she doesn’t know him to be jumpy, she’s basically his second mother, some days she baths him before bed.

His, “nothing,” is a whisper. He keeps his head low, nervously playing with the slings of his back pack.

“Kwame...” The boy winces at the sound of his name.

“I prefer R.J, please don’t call me that.” He says, not looking up to see the shock painted on her face.

“Since when? I’ve always called you Kwa...” R.J clenches his eyes and that has Liyana biting her tongue. “What’s going on?”

He doesn’t answer, but drops his school bag on the ground. He kneels, not minding the dirt and fishes into it.

“What is this?” Liyana questions the A4 paper he hands her, it’s printed with a school logo at the top, a stamp and a signature probably from the principal or class teacher.

R.J hangs his school bag over his shoulder, eyes curious and probing while his sister silently reads over the document. He too has no clue what is written in it.

“A movie night on Friday and it’s compulsory?” A frown grows on her mystified face as she reads from the paper.

“Can I not go Liya?” He’s frowning like his father, a splitting image he is.

“It says here it’s compulsory.” Liyana mumbles.

It’s hard to understand why a movie night is compulsory, is it educational or something close to that?

“I hate movies, I hate everything that has to do with movies.” The boy grumbles, he’s about close to throwing a tantrum. “It’s disgusting Liya, it’s disgusting. Please I don’t want to watch movies, I hate them.”

He's getting loud and gaining himself attention from bystanders.

"Hey sweetie, it's okay. You don't have to go, but I will have to speak to your teacher first."

At this promise, R.J hides his face on his sister's tummy, arms tightly wrapped around her waist.

"You really don't..."

They are interrupted by loud music booming from a white caravan that's not supposed to be speeding in the school premises, Liyana pulls her brother to the side lest the senseless driver hits them with the car.

"What an idiot," she whispers to herself.

The idiot parks the caravan two vehicles away from hers and dashes out of the car. He's flaunting his favourite attire; umblaselo, a pair of what used to be white chucks looking like he washes them in mud. They have seen better days.

The man dodges a few of his short and loud passengers as they run to the caravan as if they will be left behind.

“Never having kids, no thank you.” He decrees, watching the brats with a curled lip. “No offense kortess.” (Short person.)

The act of repentance is directed to R.J.

“Wise decision, I’m sure no one wants you as a father.” Liyana feeds him his own medicine, he replies with a huff.

“Mfethu, did you bath?” What is he on about? Liyana scowls, she remembers bathing and sees nothing wrong with her.

“I’m not here for a makeover,” she reminds him and her retort brings a smile to his face.

“Okay, tell me what happened?”

Down to business because well, they are not really friends. To get comfortable, Bambindlovu leans

against Liyana's car and folds his arms.

"Wait in the car R.J," what she has to tell him can't be heard by her brother, he already has a hard time sleeping at night. Kwame does not look pleased. A little frown builds up on his features as he drags himself inside.

"Like I explained on the phone, there was an angry man and woman and..." Liyana recites the vision to him again, leaving nothing out. Bambindlovu nods in understanding.

"I'm not a seer, we should get that out of the way first. They tell me things I should repeat to certain individuals, no visions so far. I have nothing right now, but dreaming of bodies in water stained blood could be considered an omen, that something bad is going to happen to you or someone close."

Let's not make a mistake, he is not a sangoma hence the assumptions.

“Okay, something has to be done to stop that, right?”
The thought of her family hurting is unbearable.

“Yes, but like I said I’m not a seer. I can’t tell you how to prevent the omen from happening.”

“Great,” she’s disappointed. There has to be another way out of this. Bambindlovu stands in front of her and looks down at her, brows puckered.

“I can still help you find direction.” That’s better than nothing, right?

“I would appreciate that.”

“Okay, you will need to buy a white cloth.”

“What kind of white cloth?” She asks, seeing nothing but silk.

“You wouldn’t know where to get it, I’ll get it for you.”
We’re being generous today. “You will need to pray over it for seven days before using it.”

“What is it for?”

“To cover your head when you pray and...” Someone just released a chuckle, it’s the Okolie’s first born. Bambindlovu waits for her to share the joke.

“I don’t know how to pray, where will I begin?”

She’s graced the walls of a church before, some days Amara would drag her with her. However Liyana never showed interest in being a Christian.

“Praying is easy, it’s a conversation with God. Like what we’re doing now.”

Not that he’s a prayer warrior, but he’s heard his mother’s late night and early morning prayers. The woman would present her children to God before anything else.

“The cloth will get rid of the bad headaches you think are migraines. This is the first step, you’re going to have to wake up at 2:30 or 3am to pray. Don’t forget to wear the doek when you sleep and when you pray.” He makes it sound so easy.

“Also, try listening to Zion or apostolic songs. You need that drum in your ears, it helps with the ringing sound you sometimes hear.”

“Okay, will things be fine after that?” Liyana queries, but the man disappoints by shaking his head.

“You still have a long way to go Lili. Be careful, don’t allow anyone in and don’t trust people with your gift, always listen to your gut.”

“Can’t I go to those ‘I receive’ churches and have them pray for me, perhaps all of this will stop.”

That sounds good, who would’ve thought of that?

“You can’t pray away amadlozi, you think they are angry now? Try and chase them away and you will see how powerful they are.” Why does this sound like a threat? It’s the way he says it.

“Great, I think I’m going crazy.” She grumbles.

“You’re not, this will pass. You will be okay, Mfethu.”
His hand lands on her shoulder, to show support.
There’s a little staring contest and it’s not going
anywhere.

“LIYANA!”

Shit!

She knows that angry voice, it can only belong to one
person. The one who is not only after her heart, but
her clit as well. She turns and there he is, Mr. Push
and Thrust. To think Bambindovu will remove his
hand from Liyana’s shoulder and step back... he
doesn’t move an inch.

*

*

* ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Eight

LIYANA-

“What’s going on?” His eyes are burning with rage, if he had an axe he would chop off Bambindlovu’s hand.

“I would remove that hand if I were you,” he’s talking to Bambindlovu... such disrespect.

“U na le jive ntwana?” (Do you have a problem?)

Daunting as ever, he’s not going to change anytime soon.

“Yes, get your hands off my wife.” Zwelethu grunts.

Ah, dreams! They can be the most beautiful thing in the world.

Bambindlovu is hit with a wave of laughter, his big hand stands still on Liyana's shoulder. She would intervene, but finds all of this too childish to entertain.

“Lili, ujola le feranjie?” (You're dating a hobo?)

He's not a hobo sir, his father was once a taxi boss and his brother lives a lavish life somewhere in this country.

“Zweli...” Liyana tries to explain, maybe if she would move away from the guy in front of her, it would lighten up the atmosphere.

“Get your hands off her wenja.” (Bastard.)

Zwelethu can't stand what he's observing, he wants to ask Liyana why she's letting this idiot touch her. But can't show his insecurities in public.

“Phola ntshebe,” (Relax.)

Bambindlovu articulates, his top lip pulls up on one side, before a grin stretches on his mouth.

“Piss off!”

Can we get Mkhize's son a glass of cold water? He's boiling with rage and Bambindlovu happens to find a joke in it.

"Ni jola nabo Hellen Zille, mfethu?" (You're dating an insecure man?)

Disbelief in his tone.

This is the last straw, the insult pulls a frown on Zwelethu's features, his retort is clogged by Liyana's awaited intervention, "Stop, Soka."

"Soka?" Someone's happy. "You have to be my mother's child, no one has ever called me with such care."

Either he's truthful, or trying by all means to crawl under Zwelethu's skin. One chiding look from Liyana, the poor man steps back, creating space between him and the lady in question.

"What are you doing here?" That's the first thing that

pays her mind a visit, Zwelethu glowers at the enquiry.

“Is this why you haven’t been taking my calls?” The question flies out with thorns on it, it’s not coming from a kind voice.

“Mfethu, I have to go. We’ll talk.” Maybe he has chosen wrong words, he could’ve said bye and went about his way. Now he speaks of a ‘talk.’ What ‘talk’ is what an angry Zwelethu wants to know.

“What is he talking about? Who is this fool Liyana?” Mkhizes and not watching their mouths.

Bambindlovu does not appreciate being called a fool, he gets into Zwelethu’s personal space. Facial expression suddenly turned sharp and business like. The two men stand head to head, breathing in each other’s faces.

“Stop!” Liyana slides in the middle of the bulls, annoyance playing at her face. “Thank you Sokalisa.”

She’s dismissing him, he shoots Zwelethu with a

final glare and walks off to his kids.

“Are you cheating on me?” An insecure man is a dangerous man.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you know I would never do that.”

“Who is that, then? Why was he touching you?” Eh!

“He’s no one Zweli,” she’s irked by the interrogation.

“What are you doing here?”

Ah yes, he hasn’t answered this question. What is he doing here?

Zwelethu blinks, his eyes move to find a grumpy little boy in the car. He waves, but R.J does not return it, he opts to look away.

“I was passing and saw you standing with another man.” He’s starting and liyana is not about to entertain him. “Is this what you do behind my back, Liyana?”

She doesn’t usually do this... roll her eyes at him.

However he is annoying her with his insecure ass.

Remembering that her brother is waiting, Liyana turns to leave. She has it rough already and this man who is meant to bring peace, is giving her nothing but a headache.

“Where are you going?” He grabs her hand, halting her steps. She’s not given a chance to reply when the little man in the car jumps out. Too small to see— jaw clenched and eyes piercing at the man tall enough to squash him like a cockroach. He looks ready to attack, chest heaving.

Zwelethu finds it cute, he smiles at the boy and lets Liyana’s hand loose.

“You’ve got yourself a little protector there.” He chortles at his two cents. “You’re cute, I like you. But you don’t have to worry, your sister means a lot to me. I would never hurt her.”

Liyana feels a yawn coming, it’s really strange because this is the man she loves, the man whose voice she would bask in. As a matter of fact, there

was no twinge of excitement upon seeing him.

“I have to go,” her words have dived into a cold front.

“Can I see you later?”

What is this man asking? Their relationship is forbidden to begin with.

“My parents aren’t home, I need to stay with my brother.” Excuses, excuses.

“Please baby,” the low tone always makes her weak in the knees. It’s not doing anything today. “I miss you.”

It’s a whisper, R.J doesn’t hear it all the way from down there. He is scrutinising Zwelethu under his gaze, a need to protect has come over him. Who is this man touching his sister?

“Call me tomorrow,” it’s the least she could do for this person she loves.

Well, would you look at that? Liyana has made an

achievement using her girlfriend tender, Mkhize is all smiles. Forget that it's a side smile, the man is happy. That's all that matters.

He stands aside and watches the car drive away, the feeling of being watched nudges him. His head whips from side to side searching for the eyes that are drilling him and there— a few lanes away sits a man in a caravan. The same man who he found touching his girlfriend has the audacity to scrutinise him with a deadly glare.

Zwelethu would go after him, only to confront him and tell him to stay away from his trophy, he can't though. It's unexplainable... he feels an extra set of eyes piercing him.

Darting his eyes around is futile, there is no one else staring but that man in a Zulu traditional attire. Something is definitely off, shivers ripple through him and he shakes it off. The man in the caravan says something and one of the big kids pulls the door shut. He drives away, slowly this time around.

AMARA-

It must be nice being Sethu, the trip has been cancelled. Randall insisted even after Styles pushed for it. So tomorrow it is, she is going to have her party. We're driving home from their house, we were called over by her, wanting to apologise for her behaviour. I have a feeling the apology was forced.

Somehow I have always known that being married to an Okolie wasn't going to be simple, yes they are royalty but they come with their own skeletons.

I love him nonetheless. The family, or what's left of it; is not the typical family one would come across. Randall's parents were toxic, the most selfish people I have ever met.

With a breath and a blink of an eye something runs into the middle of the wide open road,

“Randall!” I scream as the car swerves off the road, his incredulous gasp is too weak as it slips out of his mouth.

The sound of squealing tires pierce through my ears. In the midst of everything and with my eyes tightly shut, I hold on to the dashboard. The car stops, there’s a prolonged silence, only rapid breathing keeps us company.

“Are you okay?” Booming with concern, his voice compels me to open my eyes, he’s touching me, checking for any injuries. Shock has rendered me mute and I nod instead.

“What was that?”

“I think I hit something or someone, stay here I’ll go check.” He says opening the door.

A bubble of curiosity is forced down my throat, I step out into the darkness. The road is not busy, too quiet and creepy.

“Amara, stay in the car.” I’m about to turn back when

I see a figure standing about ten feet from the car.
Randall quickly grabs my arm, pulling me to him.

Under the stars and crescent moon, it's not hard to make out that the person has a medium calibre pistol levelled at us. A black mask veiled from his nose down, I'm shoved behind the Okolie colossal gent and I grip the stitch of his blouse as fear laughs in my face.

This must be a nightmare, our lives flashing before us. All I can think about are my kids, getting home to them with their father alive. But, what if this person shoots him? I wouldn't know what to do next, one thing I know though is that I would die for him.

"Move." The gunman commands, a grim tone.
Randall does not surrender.

Speaking into the cold night air with anger brewing in his tone, Randall replies, "If it's the car you want, take it."

“I want her.” The man proclaims, and his remark alone has me tightening my hands on Randall’s top. One thing I’m certain of is that he would die before letting anyone touch me.

With a determined stare, he lifts the gun skyward and pulls the trigger with an echoing bang. In shock, I scream clutching my arms around my protector’s waist. His body feels tense, and I know he’s got some type of fear as well. Whether it’s fear of dying or me taken away, I can’t say.

“Move.” The gunman shouts this time, the second shot is muffled, as though the sound travelled through sea water to get to my ears.

“No!” A stern denial, unflinching. This could get us killed.

“I will shoot, move now.” He roars, his feet seem to be dizzy, irresolute as he starts to move toward us, ever so slowly.

“Randall,” my voice releases a frightful whisper, he

spreads an arm in front of me, cautiously backing us away from the predator.

A police siren calls out into the night, I see a bright light of a car coming from behind us. The gunman stops, eyes wide, he pivots, scurries toward the bushes that swallow him in a jiffy. Randall's body twitches, he wants to run after him. Is he crazy?

"Don't." I plead desperately, sliding in front of him.

Relief plays around his face, yet he is consumed with anger.

My face is cradled in the palm of his hands, "Are you okay?" Is his solemn question. He pecks my lips when I nod and envelops my structure in his arms. I'm not okay, who was that man?

Against Randall's will we are forced to go make a statement at the police station which is pointless because the man had a mask on. Then again, this

country is special. The police are not about to go on a wild goose chase, we might as well have been ambushed by a ghost.

On our way home from the station he opens the glove compartment, takes out a 32 calibre pistol and places it on my lap. I don't do guns. I hate these things, he knows that.

"Keep it with you," I get a brief glance from him before he sends his focus back on the road. "I'm not always going to be with you."

"So?"

"So, you will need to protect yourself." Why does he sound angry? Is it my fault we were held at gunpoint?

"I don't want to walk around carrying a gun Randall, you know how I feel about them."

"Stop being stubborn and take it, did you not see what happened back there?" His rhetorical question has me rolling my eyes. "You're going to have to

protect yourself.”

“There are pepper sprays for a reason,” my stubbornness earns me a stern look. Argh!

Arguing with him is like pouring water on a duck’s back, I shove the damn thing in my bag for peace’s sake. I will have to purchase a pepper spray. Piercing silence takes over the rest of the ride home, most of the houselights are out when we arrive.

There are guards outside, patrolling. We enter through the back door, the sound of a glass shattering startles me that I scream and jolt back.

“Dammit!” Randall hisses, glaring at the woman standing in the middle of the dim kitchen. She looks like she’s seen a ghost.

“MaNtombi, you scared me.” I tell her, as I chase my breath. I have had enough scare to last me the entire year.

“I- I’m sorry madam,” madam? Since when am I

madam? She's kneeling, collecting shards of glass from the floor. Randall strides past her, the walk tells me, he's annoyed.

"I couldn't sleep, so I came to make a cup of tea. I wasn't expecting anyone to walk in, you scared me sisi." We're back to sisi? "I will replace the cup."

"Don't worry about it," she nods. "Are the kids sleeping?"

Another nod from her, she's staring, eyes probing. "You look shaken, did something happen sisi?"

I don't recall if I have mentioned that this old woman is too nosy, probably looking for something to gossip about.

"Goodnight Ma," I walk past her, but her eyes follow me. She must find me rude, I find me rude sometimes.

*

*

"He said move." I tell Randall as we lie in bed, I'm

curled up in his arms, appreciating that he's alive and here with me. My mind keeps trailing back to that awful scene. "He wanted to kill me or take me away"

"I wasn't going to let him," his riposte runs through my ears before I feel a soft kiss on my head.

"I know." I believe him. "I thought he was going to kill you when he fired those shots, I don't ever want to feel like that again, Randall."

"Don't talk about it anymore, go to sleep." It's so like him to be aloof about life threatening issues.

Something is bothering me though, I have to get it out of my chest and hopefully this one will help ease my thoughts.

"Randall!" I look up at him from his chest. "Do you think it was..."

"No, no it wasn't." Predicting my question, he interposes, jaw tightening. We never speak about him, since he disappeared. "You know I will always protect you and our kids, with my life."

How can I not know? He shows it in his actions, the words he speaks and his possessiveness.

When death is staring at you right in the face, you realize the worth of life.

You appreciate the people you love. When you are at the verge of losing someone dear, people that mean more than the world to you, you love them more than you did seconds before.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Twenty-Nine

BAMBINDLOVU-

Time cannot be slower than this, or is it because he's been keeping track of it since he went to bed at around 10:00pm? He tosses and turns, impatience curled up with him. The phone rings, it's the alarm he set for 02:57am. He grabs it, he's not sure how this will look. Perhaps he'll be labelled a psycho, but whatever.

A few scrolls down, he finds the number saved under the name Lili. A smile moves stealthily on his mouth, such a weird name but he likes it.

For a second he thinks she will answer instantly then he smacks himself on the head. It's in the wee hours of the morning, Lili is obviously sleeping.

Perhaps this is a waste of time, perhaps this is none

of his concern. If she is serious about seeking help, she will wake up on her own. Why must he remind her?

“Hello,” a sleepy twang says on the receiving end. He sits up straight like a robot.

“Are you on your knees?” His question.

For a while, she doesn't say anything, it has him thinking she has fallen back to sleep.

“Bam-bam?” The same voice inquires as if she can't believe he called her so late.

“Bam-Bam?” He doesn't know a Bam-Bam, calling him by his clan name felt too good that he almost broke into isicathamiya dance, now there's this... whatever it is.

“Liyana, it's me Bambindlovu.” Not Bam-Bam...

“I know, why did you call? Do you know what time it is?” No even her boyfriend has dared to call her at this time.

“It’s 3, time to pray.” He reminds her.

“You said you’ll get me the white cloth, I thought I’m meant to start once I have it.” That is what they agreed on.

“Yes, I know.” He’s silent for a while, dammit, maybe this wasn’t thought through. He could lie and say the underground gang sent him, or he could tell her that he couldn’t sleep for a reason he doesn’t know and the entire time thoughts of her kept him company.

He hears shuffling on the phone before a feminine voice says, “I’m on my knees, can you guide me? Maybe until I know what to say to the man upstairs.”

He smiles, a head shake.

“You should spend time with my mother, she’s God’s favourite child.”

It’s a joke, Liyana finds it and titters.

“Do you have a white candle? Two would be great.”
He asks.

“I do,” he hears more shuffling, funny how she doesn’t ask him to hold. A minute later there’s life on the other side.

“I lit them, that’s what I was supposed to do, right?”

“Clever girl,” his answer tickles her laugh box, however this time she snorts.

“Your head is covered and you’re on your knees?” He has to leave his own bed and get on his knees.

“Yes,” she answers.

“I’ll pray first, just to guide you. Don’t laugh, I’m not used to it as well. I’m sure the man upstairs falls asleep when he hears my voice.”

That’s because he spends most of his time emsamo than in church, when his mother and sister put on their best Sunday clothes, he adorns the temple of the Holy Spirit with his favourite attire, drops them at church and finds his way to MTN taxi rank to spend time with his taxi driver friends.

They are more Zulu than he is and the only people who remind him of home... when he was a child. One day, just one day his mother will perhaps heal from what he believes is a broken heart and let him go back to his roots. Find his father's family and connect fully with abaphansi.

LIYANA-

"Wake up monkey, time for school." Their mother has an early shift, it's left up to her to get the child ready for school. It's somewhere around past 07:00, she woke up late because of the late night prayer session with Bambindlovu.

The boy is buried underneath the thick comforter, striding closer, she pulls the covers to find his eyes clenched. His lashes are moving so she knows he is not sleeping.

"R.J wake up, you're going to be late for school."
Silence. "Kwame."

He jolts up to a sitting position and shouts, "I don't want to go to school."

His outburst stretches Liyana's eyes, this boy has never spoken to her like this. His face falls when he realises what he's done.

"Sorry Liya." He mutters, looking all kinds of innocent.

"What's going on R.J? You've been acting strange lately." He throws his body back on the bed and drapes it with the blanket.

"I'm fine." His voice contradicts with his words, Liyana knows this little person more than he knows himself.

"What did dad say about lying?" R.J winces as he hunkers back, their father does not condone lying. But...

"My tummy hurts, please don't make me go to school."

Liyana checks his temperature, he seems to be fine. The look in his eyes tell a different story.

“Okay, you can stay. I’ll call your teacher and let her know, you have her number, don’t you?” There’s no response coming from him, Liyana sees his mobile phone on the bedside table and reaches for it.

For a while, he doesn’t look at her. It’s not that she hasn’t picked up the change in him, this is not the Kwame she knows and she misses the cheerful boy who would light up the room with his big smile.

“Why does your phone have a password?” That’s strange.

Kwame freezes, and his lifeless eyes widen before he drops them.

“M- My friend put it there.”

“Okay, what is it?” His rejoinder is a shrug, the little human curls into a fetal position. Getting nothing from him, Liyana sighs and leaves to get her phone. The number is saved somewhere there.

“Hello,” a female voice.

“Mrs Chala, hi. You’re speaking to Liyana, Kwame’s sister.”

“Yes, good morning.”

“Kwame is not feeling well, he won’t be able to come to school today.”

“Oh, the class is going to do an English assignment today, if he’s not at school then he’s going to flunk it.” Mrs. Chala says.

“Can he do it next time?” It’s one assignment, nothing major.

“How about I drop by after school? Maybe I can help him with a few points.”

“That won’t be necessary, I’ll send you my email address, please forward it. I’m free today, I’ll help my brother.” She can also use this to spend time with him.

“Hello, Mrs. Chala. Are you there?” This is because the line has gone quiet.

“I’m here.” The woman answers, I’ll do that, bye.” The call is dropped without her bidding the woman

farewell.

The day drags like it usually does when she's home, Kwame hasn't left his room. She's worried about him, it's not like him to be curled beneath the covers the entire day. When she asked what the problem was, the boy gave his typical reply, "Nothing."

This is when she believed that something is definitely wrong with him, how does she get him to speak when he's closed off like this?

*

*

*

'How did you sleep? Any nightmares?'

'Okay I guess, I don't remember what the dream was about. But I remember having one.'

‘Don’t worry about it, that’s normal.’

‘I think I prefer it this way, not remembering my dreams.’

‘Don’t throw a party just yet, not remembering your dreams is not always a good thing. It’s possible they might have conveyed an important message to you.’

They have been chatting back and forth for over thirty minutes now, he was the first to text her. The man seems to be more determined than she is, it’s not that she doesn’t appreciate his help and it helps to have someone to share her problems with, someone is who also gifted.

He wraps up the conversation by telling her that he’s got work to get to, she reads the text and exits the app without replying.

The door to her bedroom opens and in pounces a chirpy Zitha carrying a half empty bottle of 4th

STREET.

“I didn’t know you hired a new maid,” that’s her greeting. “You should’ve told me, I’ve always wondered how it would be to call you madam.”

Anyone could make out that the girl is drunk, Liyana grimaces at her, it’s barely 5pm and her friend has lost touch with the real world.

“Are you kidding me?” Shock in her voice. “If my father comes home and finds you like this, we’re both getting into trouble.”

“Relax princess, I’m not staying.” Zitha stumbles to the bed. “I don’t like your new maid by the way.” A burp bubbles out of her mouth and the drunken lady bursts out laughing, this has Liyana studying her with a critical squint.

“Argh,” Zitha, taking a sit beside her friend. She gulps down the drink like she’s drinking weak Oros before explaining her actions, “Something to soak my throat,

it's too dry.”

“Zitha, you are so unnecessary. Why do you drink like this?”

If only you knew Liyana.

The look on Zitha’s face is that of lassitude, someone who is fed up with life and what the world has offered so far. She stares into thin air, as her mouth readily opens to accept another intoxicating liquid.

“One morning my mother stopped breathing for six minutes, yes I counted. It was the worst six minutes of my life and you know what my aunt did? That witch, put on her nurse’s uniform and went to work as if nothing was happening.” Another sip.

“I was stranded, had no money for an Uber so I can take her to the hospital. All I could do was pray and ask God not to take my mother. Her last days on earth were painful, I know because she still shed tears in her vegetative state.

To this day, her tears haunt me more than anything. I need this to forget, since I can't stomach reality, let me stomach this cheap wine." She takes another sip and releases gas through her mouth.

"Babe, I'm sorry." Her arms wrap around her drunk friend. "I can get you a therapist."

Zitha moves out of her arms and stands to her feet, completely ignoring the help offered to her. "Have you ever thought about death?" The question is random, which is why Liyana's face crinkles into a frown.

"How can I not when I'm surrounded by dead people? It's all I think about actually."

Sarcasm is found in her voice, she takes the bottle from Zitha and drinks. Too bitter for her, so she spits it out on the rug.

Amused by her friend rejecting alcohol as if it is poison, Zitha's face turns sour, she's been drinking the darn thing like it tastes like water.

“Can we sit here and bask in the presence of silence, I miss my friend.” Zitha says.

Something unsettling about her voice, a million questions fill Liyana’s head. Nevertheless, her friend asked for silence and that, she will gladly give.

*

*

*

ZITHA-

This is the last place she thought she would find herself, it’s not her first time coming here. A friend once dragged her to these dark alleys, a place that is only visited at night. That time she couldn’t understand why the friend would do something so vile and evil and swore that it can never be her.

How the tables have turned, but she didn’t have the

courage to ask one of her friends to accompany her. She's here now... Her situation is way different, what she is about to do could land her behind bars. It's a risk she's willing to take, maybe she will come out of it alive and if she doesn't, at least she will be reunited with her mother.

Her heart is screaming in her chest, telling her to go home. Feelings can wait, this is more important or else she will wake up the next day engulfed by regret if she doesn't do it today.

A foul smell lurks in the dirty room, it's not as hygienic as she thought it would be. The single bed mattress looks like it has outlived Jesus, no doubt those are blood stains on it. The flickering light is giving her a headache, she wants to do this and go home to nurse her bruised integrity with more cheap wine.

The old woman who directed her to the backroom has not come back yet, Zitha is growing tired.

The creaking sound of a door pulls a light gasp out of her mouth, the old woman is here.

“Why are you standing there? Get on the mattress, I don’t have all day.” The woman says, anger helping her portray her rudeness. “Do you have my money?”

Zitha nods, “You’ll get it when you’ve removed this thing inside me.”

Ouch, labelled a thing before you see the light of day? Maybe it is better it’s removed, earth is not a place for angels.

“What about the deposit? I’m not performing anything without it.” She’s adamant, much to Zitha’s irritation.

She pulls a few notes from her bag and gives them to the unhappy old woman.

“Get on the bed,” a command.

The old hag’s appearance lacks gentleness, it has Zitha rethinking her decision. But she wants it out,

she's already found a place where she will bury the fetus if she makes it out alive. In her aunt's garden... she finds it better than disposing the little human in a trash can.

Ignoring her morality telling her to get out, she does as told.

Her body shudders when it sits on the mattress, is that blood she smells? Her stomach churns at it, bile races up her chest, but she manages to clog it.

"Your clothes?" The grumpy old woman questions, now holding a cup with some thick black liquid inside.

"I don't have to remove them, I came prepared." Ah, yes. Wearing a skirt and no panties was a wise decision.

"Drink this." Granny extends her hand, Zitha takes it. The thing smells worse than the blood on the mattress. Zitha doesn't ask questions, she closes her nose as she brings the cup towards her mouth.

“Chances are you might not make it, I’m not going to take responsibility for what happens here. You can go and die on the streets for all I care, I’m not going to lose my business because of murderers like you.”

“Do I look like a killer to you, magogo?” There’s more Zitha wants to say, like telling her she’s the scum of the earth, the worst thing that has ever happened to humanity. This room bloody smells like death, it recites the story of many lives lost here, yet this old witch continues to take more lives.

At least Zitha has a good reason, right? Her aunt is evil... she won’t forgive this. Then there’s a man who goes by the name of Tshilidzi Mulaudzi... that one was sent by the devil himself.

“Just drink, you’re wasting my time.” The woman snaps, leering at Zitha.

Gasps sashay into the death room when the door flings open and in strides a man with long dreads, drenched in anger. Zitha’s eyes bulge from their

sockets. Why is he here? How did he find her? It is him, those dreadlocks, the black clothes and that tallness. The bastard has finally shown his face.

The cup in her hand is snatched and tossed against the wall, he grabs Zitha's arm with pitiless pressure.

"Ouch," she squelches at the harsh touch. Her feet are forced up, she's being dragged towards the door against her will by this man towering over her.

"My money," the old woman's words fall on deaf ears.

*

*

*©

A/N: Sharing is caring, can we please share our food with other kids or tag them if that's doable. THANK YOU in advance.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-

ZITHA-

The heat from his body surrounds me slowly as he pushes me to the wall and the warmth of his breath sends chills up my spine as he steps over standard boundaries, towering over me. I lose my breathing pattern and the ability to control my now trembling body.

Gosh, it's in the way he smells. How is it I have never paid attention to how other men smell?

"Did you drink it?" I've heard the sound of his voice many times before, I didn't catch how throaty it is.

"What?"

"The poison," impatience lain in his tone, he spews the verses out. "Did you drink it?"

“It wasn’t poison, it was...” His brows arch over dark eyes that could go from easy-going to shadowy depending on his frame of mind.

“Don’t patronise me, Zithobile.” Lord, my taste in men eludes me. Or are all men this... this... darn it, he can’t be another control freak.

“No because somebody snatched the cup from me before I could even taste that disgusting thing.”

He doesn’t say anything for a while, he’s staring... a penetrating stare as his eyes kiss every inch of my face. I’m thinking he’s going to draw back because he’s too close, trapping me against the wall and left no space for me to slither out.

Zitha you freak... there goes my mind wandering off to places it shouldn’t. My bed in hell must be bigger than my aunt’s, I must be the devil’s favourite sinner.

The man’s warm breath falls in a warm, even rhythm on my face, his lips are tempting to the eye I could snip a peck. The raised brows are lined with a dozen questions.

“You must be insane or you have a death wish.” The flat pronunciation clicks me back to the streets of Hillbrow, where I found myself after choosing to get rid of the baby. The decision was not a spare of the moment thing, I thought long and hard about it. No way in hell am I having Tshilidzi’s baby.

“Get off me,” My shaky hands land on his incredibly strong chest as I push him off, yet he doesn’t move an inch. I can feel his muscular body with implausible strength. “I said get off me.”

His gaze follows my mouth, lingering for a second.

“What were you thinking? Are you stupid or what?” He doesn’t shout, but I am intimidated to my wits.

“Sir, if you don’t let go, I swear to God I will scream.” I’m angry, more than angry. How dare he?

My body relaxes when he steps back, eyes still impenetrable... unmoving. I want to scream and tell him how much he makes me angry, how his

disappearing acts annoy the shit out of me.

“It must be nice, hey?” My question pulls his brows up. “You’re like a WhatsApp stokvel, one minute you’re here and the next your gone. Without working tirelessly, you give me hope and when you feel you’ve collected enough profit, you disappear.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The audacity to say this to me.

“Oh really?” He nods, folding his arms on his chest. Bystanders are staring, who wouldn’t stare at a man and woman having a fallout in the middle of a busy street? People are always looking for something to talk about.

“Then I don’t know you, stay the hell away from me.”

I don’t mean it and I don’t want to walk away from him, I have not felt this safe in anyone’s presence till date. Nevertheless, staying would be setting myself

up for disappointment, this man does not seem like the dependable type.

The streets are overly crowded, people bustling about. Vendors on every corner still hoping to make that extra buck, I should be ashamed of myself.

These people are the real definition of hustlers, while people like me choose to prostitute themselves for money.

I can't go back to that old woman, she made my skin crawl, anyway. I will have to find another way to get rid of this monster inside me. I flag a quantum and it stops, in honest truth, I don't want to go home.

"Zithobile!" A mannish voice calls, as I slide the door open. I turn to find him erect in the crowd of people, about six feet from me.

I hear the door shut, my taxi is gone.

Great!

My arms fold across my chest, as I prepare to carpet the man. His tall self is sauntering towards me, I don't want to stare, but my eyes keep flicking to him.

His attire is discernible from this view. Like I predicated, he is decked in black. His stubble looking shabby, one could tell he hasn't shaved in days. His dreadlocks are richly black, seeping down his broad shoulders and neatly hanging around his face.

"I can help you," he starts as soon as he's standing too close for comfort.

"Help me with what?"

"Whatever it is you wanted to do in there." Okay, maybe he is my manner from heaven.

"You don't know what you're talking about, you know nothing about me." I want to see how far he's gone to investigate me, his perfect timing cannot be a coincidence.

"I know you're pregnant and you want to get rid of

the baby.” It’s how he is so informed about my life that annoys me most, he annoys me with his superhero tendencies.

“I’m not a damsel in distress, I don’t need rescuing.”

He moves with me when I take a step back, eyes unrelenting. His lips slowly part, “Let me help you,” he offers.

“If you know someone who can do a clean job, then fine. I want to get rid of this thing without losing my life in the process.” My chest clogs, it’s the pending emotions pushing up my chest with the mission to burst out of my mouth and render me weak. I can’t allow it, I can’t breakdown in front of him. As much as this sucks, I can’t allow myself to get attached to him.

“How did you find me?” I question him when he stares without saying a damn thing. “How are you always finding me? Are you stalking me?”

Under the night lights, I see his lashes flap once... the quizzical stare as if I have hit him with nothing

but rhetorical questions. “Actually, how do you know so much about me?”

“I will answer your questions, just come with me first.” I’m not happy about his reply.

He takes in my body with a single sweep, grips my hand and pulls me with him to the all prominent black vehicle. My mother must be turning in her grave, her only daughter is following a man. Wonders shall never end.

LIYANA-

It is said promises are meant to be broken... that’s part of the circle of life. Liyana doesn’t seem to think so, he called for her and here she is, in his house yet again. The two are snuggled on the couch, discussing Liyana’s terrible mess of a life and wanting to play hero, Zwelethu has come up with a

bunch of solutions that have substantiated his level of stupidity.

One last sip of the coffee he made for her an hour ago when she arrived, it's now cold. She spits it back into the mug. He doesn't mind, come on, they exchange saliva at every chance they get.

Time does not love her, she should head back before her parents come home. Little Kwame is home alone with the maid, the fear she saw in his eyes before she stepped out of the house has her troubled.

"I have to go, my parents will be home soon." She places the cup on the wooden table and stands, Zwelethu stands with her.

"Marry me, Liya," he says it so easily with no thought to his deadly words. Liyana is left flabbergasted, mind vacuumed as she tries to decipher what this man she loves just uttered out of his mouth. He

ropes his Mkhize arms around the daughter of the Okolies.

“Yebo sthandwa sam’, we can get married and they will never bother you again. My ancestors will protect you, you will be an Mkhize.”

“Are you crazy? That is not how it works. I’m not stupid Zwelethu.” What did he think, she’ll say yes and move to the village with his mother to play the perfect makoti? (Bride.)

“Don’t you want to be my wife?” The question is meant to instil guilt in her, it would work if she were not Randall’s daughter.

“Of course I do...” her words falter, she has to think hard about this. Life is not as simple as Zwelethu paints it to be. “One day maybe, when I’m old enough.”

He’s more than disappointed, broken to say the least.

There's a dense certainty that this is the woman he wants to be with, but she's not sailing the same boat.

"Old enough? When I'm forty?"

Nice try Zweli, wrong address though.

Liyana suddenly feels uncomfortable in his arms, she peels herself off and stands to find her shoes. His panicky eyes follow her, she can't leave like this. They have to get to the bottom of this, he invades her space yet again, his arms enfold around her waist without asking. Of course, the guy was given permission the first day they exchanged lips.

"I'm sorry if I came on too strong Liya," he turns her around so she's looking at him. "But I need you to understand me, I love you Liyana and I don't want to lose you."

Sure his words would touch her and if they are lies, Liyana would not be the first woman to fall victim to

that other gender's charms. The smile he's been expecting appears on her face, it's soft and faint. Not fully out as it holds on to confusion and despair.

"I know you love me, Zweli and I trust that you want the best for us. But I also need you to know that I am not just anybody. My ancestors have claimed me, I belong to them. My life is not my own."

Yes. Yes. She told her father she wants to change her last name, she mentally threw curses at the Okolie surname and all of that was before Bambindlovu opened her eyes. Love can be blind, but Liyana can't be that gullible to help this man stab her father to death.

Zwelethu is in disbelief, it shows in his eyes, his body language and the way he's regarding her. The look would make anyone feel small and wanting to shy away... Have I mentioned that this girl has the Okolie blood seeping through her veins? And oh! It's royal blood.

“Are you kidding me? You’re talking about the same people who won’t let you have a life.” Too late to take the words back, they are on their way down Liyana’s heart and if he’s lucky, she won’t take offense. “They don’t care about you, Liyana.”

His voice is a little loud, she’s heard the saying ‘there’s a first time for everything’ more than once and now she’s living to see the words come to life.

“All they do is dictate your life and make you do things you don’t want.”

You are talking to a princess, lower your voice sir please and thank you.

Liyana stares, stumped, her heart is beating slower by the minute instead of picking up. A burning sensation ripples through her veins, she can’t listen to Zwelethu’s insults anymore.

You guessed it, he’s still talking.

Uttering slurs against her ancestors, an insult to them is an insult to her. She is who is she because of them, they made her. It was them before her and she would not be standing here had it not been for them.

“Stop,” she is not a screamer, her voice hardly ever rises, her grandfather lives in her and that old man is a peaceful spirit unless you start a fire. He doesn’t diminish it, but throws down balls of fire.

“That’s enough, I’m going to pretend that you didn’t say any of this to me.” A dam of waterworks splashes her expanded eyes, a single blink brings them out. They run down her cheeks, but she swipes them away as tenacious as they are.

A look is said between them, Zwelethu’s mind is filled with fear of losing her. He has to keep this girl with him no matter what and Liyana... Liyana wants to be done. Dammit, she has too much to deal with already, a childish, big-headed boyfriend is the last

thing she wants to add to her plate.

Her feet are slow when she turns, facing the door. Her bag is close, she snatches it. Without turning around to bid the man she claims to love goodbye, Liyana struts down the vast passage leading to the exit, anger visible in her movements. Deep down, she wants him to stop her.

“He killed your mother.” She’s not hearing things, this she knows. That’s Zwelethu’s voice, he didn’t say ‘please don’t go.’ but something that will change her life forever. Liyana turns back to find him still standing on the spot, the man has not shuffled one bit. That expression lain on his face though can be mistaken for possessiveness or maybe fear or maybe... Argh, forget it, the man is strange in his ways.

“What did you say?” She questions him, stupefied.

“Your real mother died Liyana and your father is the one who killed her.”

“No. No!” Her eyes fall and rise back up. It can never be her father, he might be many things but a murderer. “My mother moved to Europe when I was a child.”

“Is that what he told you?” The sinister drawing on his lips could be mistaken for psychopathy, or is Zweli enjoying this sad... sad moment?

“She moved to Europe with her lover, Papa to...” she struggles to continue.

Her mother was not an angel, it's no secret. She chose a man over her daughter and Liyana had to live with that from the time she was sixteen. That was the time she became curious, wanting to know where her mother had gone.

“It's a lie, he killed her. He killed your mother and disposed of her body as if she were a dog...”

She can't hear this, nothing can be said against her father in her presence. She covers her ears, trying to

clog out his annoying voice. It's not always been annoying though, she loved it the most when he would whisper sweet nothings to her and call her mama. But now, now she wishes he was mute.

"Stop saying that, do you know who you're talking about? Randall Okolie is a king, a king, Zwelethu."

Zweli is nice, it's always glazed with love and smarties. However Zwelethu stings, since when does she call him by his government name? Her voice burns with resentment, it shows in just the way she's shouting at him. Yep, I said shout.

"A king who thinks he's a god? He killed your mother Liyana and you still stand up for him?"

"He's my father, he doesn't have blood in his hands. I refuse to believe that, I refuse to believe you."

Her difference of opinion sounds abominable, and stand strong like a first brick. Her body though is losing strength by the second, but the Okolie

princess is not about to show that.

“Don’t be stupid Liyana, do you think your father would tell you he killed your mother?”

“That’s enough, Zwelethu.” She yells, clutching her handbag under her wing. “You have said enough.”

He doesn’t seem to think so, he’s closing in on her yet again. Big hands cover her face, a lenient, tender touch. It should calm her, but she cringes and escapes his touch.

“I think we should take a break,” Liyana hammers his heart, definitely something he did not expect.

“Don’t do this, Liyana.”

“I can’t be with you, Zwelethu. Not like this, not when you hate my father this much.”

An exhalation of many emotions flounces out of his barely open mouth, his eyes show the depth of the hurt she has caused him. He would cry had he been a weakling.

“Fine, ask him if you don’t believe me and look into his eyes when you do.” He keeps his tone soft, but can’t stop his voice from cracking. “I will never lie to you, I love you.”

She doesn’t care about that, not now at least. Liyana shakes her head, she’s disappointed in him. The second time around, Zwelethu watches her walk away from him. He’s not sure if she will ever come back to him, all he can do is hope.

KWAME-

“Kwame!” The erogenous whisper brings his eyes open, he’s covered in cold sweat, body shaking. Not knowing how to respond to what he dreamt, he shoots up from the bed, running, heart thrumming hard against his ribcage.

His mind is quick to bring him back to life and he stops right at the door, his chest is wheezing as if his lungs have forgotten how to pump air. He looks around the room, suspicious and paranoid that the

horror might have followed him here. He swallows a breath at the clear cost, his hands rest on his eyes and he attempts to rub away the fear.

“You’re okay R.J, you’re safe.”

The whisper is to calm himself, but it’s all in vain. Fear still lurks about, teasing yet tormenting him.

“I’ll be home before you go to bed, I promise.”

The words his sister spoke before she left him alone with the maid replay in his head, there’s an itch to run to her room.

But what if she’s not home yet, then he’ll bump into her... the maid. Women terrify him, not all of them, a specific kind. He can still stand his mother and sister, as long as they don’t cross boundaries.

He knows he's not crazy, it can't be in his head, everything is real... the manipulative voices... the adulterated sounds... the feeling of not being able to breathe... the smell... that after taste in his mouth... everything is as real as the fear wrapped around his heart.

Seeking to find comfort, his weak feet take him back to the bed. He takes his phone and cuddles in, there's one person who makes him feel safe.

His number is on speed dial, R.J presses the number on the bright screen and the call is answered at the first ring as if the receiver was waiting for it.

"Dad, come home. I had a bad dream." The boy cries under an unsteady breath.

"I'll be home later son, do you want to tell me what the dream was about?"

The boy's lips hesitate, he can't recite that terrible nightmare.

“No, please come home dad. Why are you not here? I’m scared.” Tears trickle down his face, the desperation in his voice is as loud as his sniffles.

“Okay, I’m on my way, I promise. Wipe your tears, now.” He assures him, with urgency in his voice.

“Where is your sister?”

“I don’t know.”

“Go to her, I’ll be home in a few minutes.” That’s a promise Kwame knows his father will never break.

“O- okay,” he gives in, although he has no plans on stepping out of his room, not until someone he fully trusts comes for him.

*

*

* ©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-One

STYLES-

The last time he saw him was years ago, before he left for China. They had a strong bond, but not as strong as the one he has with Randall. The friendship was never going to work, not with Randall in the picture and like Randall, Styles has known Kenneth for as long as he can remember.

He heard that the man is in town, and sought after him. Finding him chasing after a young girl is something he didn't expect.

From a safe distance, he watches him shut the door. After the girl jumps into the car, Styles ambles toward him, Kenneth spots him immediately and they meet halfway.

"She's too young for you, Kenny boy." Sarcasm in his

voice.

“Your mind still entertains nonsense, I see.” His comeback finds Styles in a cheerful mood, he chortles, adding a headshake.

“I didn’t think you would get over Amara so soon, it’s been what, eight, ten years?”

When last did he hear that name? It’s been too long, and it still affects him. He snorts, trying to hide how affected he is.

“How did you find me?” Kenneth.

“You know me too well to ask me that, Kenny.”

“And you know me too well to know I don’t respond well to the name Kenny,” Styles laughs at the charge.

“Is everything okay?”

“Mkhize is back.” Styles.

“Let me guess, he still wants her?” Kenneth wouldn’t dare take Amara’s name, his mouth hasn’t tasted it in years. “Does he know you’re here?” He means Randall, Styles smirks at how cold Kenneth has

suddenly become.

“Not yet,” Styles answers. “He won’t shoot you this time, just keep your eyes away from his wife.”

What a friend Styles is... laughing at Kenneth like this.

He does not intend to cross paths with Amara nor her maniac of a husband, “I’ll help you, make sure Okolie and I don’t meet. I’ll be the one aiming a gun this time and I won’t miss.”

“Anger does not become you, Kenny. I thought you left the cult.”

“I did and I’m not angry, maybe I want him to bleed as well.” He retorts and turns to leave without so much as a once over, leaving his long lost friend in the company of a chuckle.

AMARA-

“What did R.J say?” I attack him with a question the second he joins me at the table.

Sethu’s birthday celebration is not as big as I thought it would be, she booked a table that accommodates a few friends and family. Most of them have excused themselves for the night, I think Randall and I should head back as well.

“He can’t sleep, I told him we’re on...”

The rest of his statement disappears between his lips, eyes glaring toward the exit. Something is amiss. There is anger in the way he’s frowning. Curiosity has me trailing after his gaze and my entire being freezes as I spot a man gawking at me, probably in his mid-forties, smartly dressed in a dark grey-stripy suit and a matching sun hat.

What terrifies me is his deep stare, which I find very uncomfortable.

The mysterious man looks familiar, I swear I’ve seen

him somewhere. But where?

Me: "Who is that, and why is he looking at me?"

"No one." Such a blatant lie. He turns to order me around, "Go home to R.J, I'll follow in a while."

Go home? How? Basically, I am being dismissed again, like a child.

He stands, I stand with him. Something is happening here and I want to know what, "What's going on, Randall?"

"Dammit Amara," the tone he produces says he's done with my defiance. The grabbing of my arm proves it, it's not so dramatic that it turns heads, about a few notice me being hauled out like a wheelbarrow.

The mysterious man is no longer there, I missed him while demanding answers from Randall. There are questionable men in black though, men who seem too familiar with Randall. I say because one of them nods at him as we near them and he acknowledges

it.

I didn't say goodbye to Sethu, come to think of it, the last time I saw her was when she went to check on the dessert.

Randall opens the door to the car, hands me the keys and says, "Hurry home, our son is waiting." And with this instruction, he shuts the door. There he goes marching under the blanket of stars, back to the restaurant. Randall can be annoying sometimes.

Shit! I left my bag inside... it won't take me a minute to dash in and grab it. I just have to avoid the dragon when in there.

Upon my arrival, I'm met by a sudden loud tumult that turns curious heads. Sounds like someone dropped a pile of dishes, a scream of a woman invades the vast restaurant.

My eyes chase the noise and before I could register anything, gunshots fill the eatery, panic hits the inhabitants like a tsunami. Chairs and tables are flipped over as terrified people run around like

headless chickens.

Lord, where is Randall? I can't think of anything but him, my eyes desperately search for him, what if he's been shot and... and... no, I can't think like that. He's fine, he has to be fine.

I'm in the midst of a stampede when a tight grip on my arm startles me, a scream for help breaks forth from my mouth as I'm roughly turned around.

Randall!

My heart takes a breather for a while. He's glaring, usual puckered brow.

"What are you still doing here? I told you to go home." He says, furiously, the look in his eyes is intense, chiding me like I'm a rebellious teenager.

I guess I'm still in shock when my body collides against his, he holds me back just as tight... face nestled on the crook of my neck. I feel him direct our bodies across the room, the gunshots have halted.

Nonetheless, no one cares, people are still screaming and fighting to leave the restaurant.

“Why are you still here, Amara?” I hate it when he sounds cold when talking to me. “Can’t you listen for once?”

More gunshots resonate, too close that the blasts ring in my ears, I flinch. His hand pushes me down, sending me to the floor with a thud. It hurts, but I don’t give it attention as I sit on my legs and shield my head with my hands. A familiar hand touches my shoulder, he’s sheltered under the table with me, eyes searching the place.

“What’s going on Randall?” I’m a coward, although I’ve encountered death a million times.

“I have to get you out of here.” He’s still fuming, I know I will never hear the end of this.

“Randall, I’ve got you covered.” A wheezing Styles

declares.

He's crouching beside Randall. I don't know when he got here, he's got a gun gripped in his hand. My gaze follows Randall's hand, he has one too. How did I not notice this?

Randall nods at Styles.

I'm pulled towards a flight of panicky people, we're all trying to dodge bullets, it's hard not to notice the ones laying on the floor. There's blood everywhere my eyes fall, I think I'm going to throw up. These people are dead, dear God.

"Styles." That sounds like Sethu's brother, Nkomo. My head switches direction to see Styles on the floor.

Oh my God, they killed him. He's not moving... Randall hasn't seen anything, he's focused on getting me out of here. The outside is the same, chaos and rackets.

The car is not parked far from the entrance, Randall

waits for me to jump in.

No words are said as he starts the vehicle, anger on his face.

“Shit. Shit!” He shouts, banging a fist on the steering wheel.

“Randall, Styles is...” I can’t bring myself to saying it.

“No,” his utterance is rapid. “He’s fine, nothing has happened to him.”

“What happened back there? What was the shooting about?” I’m answered with a scowl, as if I said nothing, the man continues to drive like a drunkard. This is so tiring, must I always dig him like a dry blister?

“Randall, will you tell me what’s going on? I need to know, I almost died, Styles could be...”

“Amara please, be quiet. I’m trying to think here.”
Bloody...

I understand he’s worried about his friend, but that does not justify him coming at me.

“You know I will do anything to protect you right?”
Now he wants to talk?

“So you say.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“That is not fair, everything I do is for you, Amara. I need you to trust me.” He wasn’t away from his firm tone for too long, he’s back at it.

Of all the men in the world I just had to fall for this one?

“Even when you don’t tell me what is going on?” The brief look he regards me with is that of unhappiness.

“You don’t need to know everything.” That’s what he thinks? Really?

“I’m not a baby, I can take care of myself.” I’m riled up and it shows in the way I have just addressed him.

“You’re so stubborn Amara, can’t you just listen to me for once?” His loud and angry voice makes me jump a bit. This is one moody man.

Randall sucks in a deep breath, it speaks of exhaustion and I know I’m the cause. I should’ve

gone home like he said, this argument wouldn't be happening.

"I'm sorry, me hemma."

That's all? No explanation as to what's going on. If I say I'll ever get used to his indifference, I would be lying to myself. His moods change like the weather, he is so unpredictable, you never know what he might do or say next.

As much as he loves me and I love him, probably even more. There is that part of me that's always going to be afraid of him.

Maybe I am obsessed with him, this is the man who loved me when I didn't love myself, when I had no one. He became everything to me, I have become so dependent on him that I don't know what I'll do when he's not with me. This is what my life has turned into, I have become so lost in Randall and everything he is.

We're not far ahead when his phone rings, I'm told to

answer and put it on loud speaker.

“We’re in deep shit.” The voice says.

KENNETH-

The drive to my house was fairly long that she succumbed to slumber, I want to be her empathy rock, care for her and make her feel wanted. I know how abandonment feels, it is the worst feeling on earth.

Zithobile is here, back in my bed. This is where I led her when we got home, her words were that she will sleep for a few minutes because she has to go back home.

This young woman is reckless, daring. What has made her bold, clumsy and true to herself? Perhaps I am attracted to her, I’m not sure.

The one I never had still exists in my heart, I'm not ready to let her go and when Styles brought her up, a deep craving to catch a glimpse of her took over my entire being... I can't though, she's okay here... in my heart and in my thoughts. It's what the universe has offered me, giving me no choice but to accept the dreadful reality.

Somehow Zithobile's presence makes me forget, it soothes this dark heart of mine.

"When will she wake up, bhuti." She's been sitting with me, watching over Zithobile. Isisa is convinced that something is wrong with her, I gave up trying to convince her that Zithobile is physically and mentally tired. Who wouldn't be, with the life the world has forced on her?

"She'll wake up, don't worry. She's needs to rest, her body is tired."

"But her aunt, she has to be home before morning." Isisa stresses.

“It’s late now, I’ll take her back in the morning.”

“Aunt is home.” Isisa says when we hear a knock on my bedroom door, a room MaMkhize is not allowed to enter, yet she continues to defy me.

“Why is everyone gathered here? What’s going on?”

She has barely made it inside when she bombards us with questions. I stand to shift away when she positions herself beside me. Distaste clouds her face as her eyes find Zithobile buried under my covers.

“What is this? Why is she here?” MaMkhize.

“I invited her over aunt, she’s my friend.” Isisa explains, I don’t like her lying.

“Yes, but I don’t understand why your friend is always sleeping in your brother’s bed, we have guest rooms.” My brows crease at her remark, I don’t know what her problem is with Zithobile.

“State what you came here for Fezekile and leave my room.”

This woman clearly came here to dictate our lives and I will not allow it, I’m welcomed by a disgusted look as she turns to face me.

“Kenneth, you can’t keep bringing her to your house.” She throws her hands up as if she’s had it. “Am I the only one who can see this girl’s hidden agenda? She’s from the dumps and looking for a ticket out, I thought you were smarter than this Kenneth.”

“Are you questioning my intelligence, Fezekile?”

Zitha’s eyes snap open, she heard everything. Tears leak from her eyes, I can’t stand it. How much does she have to suffer? Instead of answering my question, MaMkhize takes her attention from me and gives it to the girl sprawled in my bed.

“You need to send her back to Orange Farm, she

doesn't belong here. She's a gold digger."

Her statement seems to make Zithobile depressed as more tears pour out of her eyes. She brings her body to a sitting position, hides her face in the palms of her hands and sobs.

It's the final straw, I brought her here so she can have peace, even if it's for a few hours. In a second I have MaMkhize's upper arm gripped in my hand, she gasps in shock as I drag her in the direction of the exit door.

Isisa's amplified eyes follow us, she's shaken a bit but gathers herself at the look I give her. I don't want her following us.

"Kenneth, what are you doing?" MaMkhize yells at me dragging her disrespectful ass down the passage to her bedroom, the woman stumbles, almost kissing the floor after I shove her in.

The sound of her disbelieving gasp and the crack of

the key are seconds apart. I turn to her and she starts trembling, quavering mouth ajar and eyes piled up with fear but I don't care.

"K- Kenny... what... what's goi..." She swallows the rest of her words as I grab her by the neck and pin her on the wall.

She tries to speak but my hand is clasped around her neck, wanting to be freed, MaMkhize attempts to release the tight grip and gains no profit, her eyes turn bloodshot. Tears pool behind her pupils, they rush to stream down her face. I know she can't breathe, that's the plan after all.

"You dare challenge me, woman? You dare insult that girl in my presence? How many times do I have to tell you to keep your mouth shut, huh?"

I don't plan on letting her go, she means nothing to me and killing her would be so easy.

"I swear Fezekile, this is the last time you will open

your big mouth. If that girl sheds tears once again because of you, you will wish you kept your distance from us. This will be nothing compared to what I will do to you.”

“Bhuti.” Banging and Isisa’s voice echo from the other side of the door. “Bhuti open the door please.” She’s crying, dammit.

“Don’t try me, MaMkhize. I’m not that little boy who used to run behind you anymore, news flash, I grew up the day I killed your useless brother.”

I let her go and she drops to the floor, coughing hysterically. My sister leers at me as I pop the door open, face soaked to the skin. Her wet eyes sprint to MaMkhize then back to me, the look screams hate...

I don’t have time for this, I have to check on Zithobile. I manoeuvre past her to make my way back to my bedroom.

“Aw hello mama ka Zithobile.’

Musuk'lila le nhlupheko isazo ndlula'

Mama ka Zithobile'

Musuk'lila le nhlupheko isazondlula'

Mama Ka Zithobile, Zithobile.'

'Zithobile's mother, do not grieve this affliction will pass.

,

This I did not expect, I'm taken aback by her loud singing and strange dance moves.

*

*

*©

A/N: Not proofread, my apologies for any errors you found.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-two

BAMBINDLOVU-

“Yeah, night walker. Mthakathi... ukhumbulekhaya?”
(Witch, you remembered home.)

The man does not usually scare easily, for his heart to jump to his throat at the sight of his sister standing at the door, in the dark is new. This is what he gets home to after a long day of “hustling”...

A demon who won't give him a moment's peace, she sure is using her role as a little sister pretty well.

“What are you doing in the dark, Sindi?” He locks the door, switches on the light in the passage and she's still here, arms across her chest and eyes narrowed inquisitively.

She's not about to reveal that she couldn't sleep

without knowing where he was, they share a mother, she's bound to worry about him.

"Where have you been, Ndlovu? If your mother was pregnant, she would have gone into early labour because of you." He frowns at her statement and who said men don't roll their eyes.

"What? Why would you even say that?" Confusion knows him best, it's laced over his fatigued face.

"Tell me, I'm lying. I dare you." The boldness in her voice...

"You dare me? Yey, stupid. I'm not your age mate, you're forgetting that I beat." His finger is pointed at the unbothered short person audaciously standing before him.

"Not when Thandikela is still breathing, you will not touch a strand of hair on my head."

He takes the dare and grabs her dishevelled hair, she flinches and whines under the tight grip.

“What were you saying sbotho?”

“Ouch, Ndlovu you’re hurting me,” the child whines, trying by all means not to make noise.

“Who is Ndlovu?” No way will he ever accept this name.

“Uncle-bhuti, I’m sorry.” A shriek this time, as she squirms under the painful hold. Bambindlovu smirks at the plea.

“I can’t hear you, say it louder.”

“I’m sorry uncle-bhuti, now let me go, please.” He does so and the girl frowns the second she tastes freedom, arms folded.

“You’re not going to get away with what you just did, Ndlovu. You better sleep with one eye open.” The threat sounds real, “And your mother will hear about this, mark my words.”

“Voetsek!” He charges at her...

“Mama,” she yelps and runs back to her mother’s room.

Perhaps this is what he needs to clear his mind, a whiney brat getting on his nerves. Worry has been clinging on to him since he met up with Liyana, she had called him wanting to vent. When he arrived at the designated place, she didn't say anything; just sat in utter silence for a while. Surely he was bound to ask what the problem was, and when she didn't provide an answer he figured that maybe... she wanted to be in the presence of someone.

Liyana muttered a 'thank you' before jumping into her car to drive back home.

"Sokalisa," the smooth voice behind him throws him into a puddle of comfort. He closes Maki's fridge and slowly turns to find his mother and sister standing in the narrow doorway. "Are you okay?"

He nods at her question, her eyes run to the pot on the stove, something is simmering there. It smells like milk, her son is not a milk lover.

“Tea with milk?” Her eyebrows raise in worry. “You don’t drink tea with milk, unless you’re troubled.”

“I’m a man MaOlady, there’s nothing I can’t handle.”

“You’re still my son and I worry about you.”

Thandikela.

“Mama.” The whisper belongs to the little person clinging on to her nightgown, she elbows her mother’s hip, reminding her of what they spoke about before they left the bedroom.

“You need to stop fighting with your sister Sokalisa.”

Sindisiwe sticks her tongue out, it’s directed at her brother who is stabbing daggers at her.

“Tell her to stop being annoying, maybe I’ll have mercy.” His reply.

“She’s your little sister, if she doesn’t annoy you, then who will?” Thandikela reminds him. “Hug it out,” and that’s an order.

“Eeww mama.” Sindisiwe.

“I’m not touching her.” His face crinkles.

“Me too, mama. What happened to practising social distancing?” Sindisiwe adds.

“Sindi is right, I’m not trying to catch the virus.” Bambindlovu says, leaning against the kitchen counter with folded arms, but his sister is not okay with what he said. Confusion paints her face as she tries to register what her brother just uttered. Her eyes widen, bottom lip quavers before her facial features turn sour.

“Mama,” she cries, hugging her mother’s waist.

“Ndlovu says I have corona.” Shame, her innocent heart is broken.

“Vele.” He argues, the eye roll takes place again. The child is now sobbing, face buried in her mother’s hip. (Yes)

Mothers must have it hard, frustration washes over Thandikela. “Sokalisa stop it and come hug your sister.” Her voice is firm and authoritative, so is the look she gives him.

There are grumbles, dragged feet and sounds of disgust before the two siblings engage in a hug. One second... two seconds... they rip apart with such speed that the small one almost falls.

“Gosh, my life is ruined. I can’t believe I just touched you.” Sindisiwe’s tears are long gone.

“That was the longest hour of my life.” Babindlovu.

He’s as traumatised.

“It was a second, sir.” The brat drops in her comment.

“It felt like an hour to me,” he disputes.

Thandikela sees a hopeless case, she shakes her head and goes back to her room.

“I should have my hands sanitized,” the brother states, digs into his pocket and comes out with a hand sanitizer.

“I want some too, my hands touched you.” Standing at a safe distance, the little sister extends her hands toward him. “I will need to burn my clothes as well.”

Bambindlovu squeezes some into her hands and gets a slimy grin as a thank you.

“I want a new brother,” her request as she strides out of the kitchen.

“Idiot.” His reply is hushed.

He goes back to making tea, it’ll be hard to sleep without taking a few sips.

AMARA-

“Are you on speaker?” That’s what Nkomo says over the phone. Randall looks me straight in the eye and answers him.

“Yes, go ahead.” His focus goes back to the road.

“Are you sure?” Nkomo checks.

Whatever he wants to say sounds big, it’s clearly something I should not hear.

“Go ahead.” Randall repeats.

“It’s all over social media and news stations; Olivia’s disappearance, a video of you torturing her and her death.” Nkomo reveals.

Suddenly my heartbeat increases at the shocking revelation, my stomach twists and what feels like an explosion bursts within me. This is completely new, I thought she abandoned her child. Unable to comprehend what I’m hearing, I squeeze my eyelids shut in the hope that this is only a dream.

“How is Styles?” What? Is he serious?

“Did you hear what I said Randall?” Nkomo.

“How is Styles, Nkomo?” His unresponsiveness is shocking, honestly.

“That idiot will be fine, he got a fright and fainted” Nkomo must be joking. “He’s interrogating one of the attackers, no one is willing to talk.”

“And Balungile?” Randall.

Who is that?

“My uncle ran like the coward he is, I don’t blame him. He is Mkhize’s cousin.” Nkomo’s mention punches me in the face, they must be talking about the man who was staring at me. I knew he looked familiar, he’s Bangizwe Mkhize’s brother. Lord, don’t tell me the man is after my life again.

“Your father is too much of a coward to take his own life, he’s plainly asking me to kill him.” Randall proclaims.

It’s crazy how I am used to this nonsense, we have children for Pete’s sake. This war has to stop, the killing and creating enemies.

“Do what you must, Randy. I hope you have a plan on how to get yourself out of this mess, or start thinking of a prison name because those bastards are going to play house with you.” Nkomo.

Why would he say that?

“No, Randall is not going to jail, no one is going to jail.” I butt in looking at the man driving like the world is not crumbling before him. “You’ve gotten away with it before, you will do it again, right?”

My irregular breathing and watery eyes remain for quite some time, as I wait for him to acknowledge me with an answer. I'm unmoving, eyes on him. The phone has gone quiet, I think Nkomo hung up.

"Tell me, you're not going to jail." My voice cracks, he's not saying anything. "Oh God, what am I going to tell Liyana? R.J will be devastated."

"Please calm down Amara, you're pregnant." I'm married to a bastard.

"Why did you kill her?"

"She fed my daughter drugs and made her watch while she had sex with men in her house, I don't regret what I did."

Shocking! But...

"She was Liyana's mother, you could've gotten her arrested or something, you didn't have to kill her." I know he's killed before and gotten away with it. I supported, and stood by him even when he was

wrong.

“You don’t know anything Amara, so I don’t expect you to understand.” Keep-your-mouth-shut glare, that’s what I’m looking at.

ZITHA-

This is awkward, I didn’t think he would find me celebrating aunty’s punishment.

“My phone rang and the song got stuck in my head, sorry for the noise.” If I was still drunk I would’ve used that as an excuse. He glides in and stands a few feet away from me.

“Why did you bring me here?” We can’t stand here and look into each other’s eyes the whole day, his eyes narrow... an inquisitive look.

“Move in with me.” Maybe I still am drunk, I’m hearing things. This is what I get for drinking cheap wine.

“I’m sorry, can you repeat that?” I ask.

“Move in with me.” He says with the same indifference lain in his voice, how do I take him serious when his demeanour tells me nothing?

“Is there a catch? I will have you know, I am not a prostitute. I don’t even know your name.” He can’t be another Tshilidzi can he?

“There’s no catch, I want to take care of you and call me Kenneth.”

“Okay, Kenneth. Why would you want to take care of a girl you hardly know?” I enquire, making myself comfortable on his bed. His hands find shelter in the pockets of his pants, he’s glowering and I can’t say why.

“I don’t know, I just do.”

I have never heard anything like this in my entire existence.

“Are you in a cult?”

The frown on his face deepens at the question, eyes

suddenly dubious. I knew it, I can read people and my gut told me. “Is this why your house is all black? I’m not a fan of cults, and believe me, I would make a terrible sacrifice. The blood of Jesus runs in my veins.”

“I’m not in a cult, I want to help you, that’s all.” Sincerity in his voice, it has me believing him.

“You said you’ll help me abort this baby, not ask me to move in with you.” I remind him, lest he has forgotten.

“I didn’t say I will help you abort the baby.” He looks offended. “You will die if you...”

“I will not die.” I refuse. “What, are you a doctor now?”

“You can have the baby adopted, we’ll find a family who is willing to take the child in, or take him to the father.”

Yeah right, as if Tshilidzi will accept this baby.

“That coward will never take responsibility.”

“I’ll make him.” He returns.

“Whatever, as long as I don’t get to keep a memory of him. I want nothing to do with him anymore.” I spill the contents of my heart.

We’re stuck in silence suddenly, it’s getting awkward in here. He clears his throat and speaks, “You’ll stay the night, I’ll take you home tomorrow to get your things.”

Whoa!

“I didn’t say yes, I live with an adult who is asking about my whereabouts as we speak.”

Who am I kidding? I’ve always wanted to live a lavish life. Excitement brings me to my feet, they lead me to the man in the middle of the room. His gaze follows me, he’s this type... the staring type.

“Which one is my room? I want a big one like this one, but no black, please.” This is life, we take risks. We rise, we fall and this is my chance to rise.

His mouth twitches, is he trying for a smile? I don't know with this man anymore.

"How old are you?" Oh Mr. Grumpy...

"Nineteen going on twenty." With a smile on my face, I raise my hand to show him the number, he doesn't smile back. I wasted my smile for nothing, does he know the effort it takes to stretch a smile? Stop kidding yourself Zitha, look at those biltong cheeks. They have never stretched into a smile. "I'm counting down to thirty, I hear it is the age to be. I can't wait to be thirty, how old are you Mr. Dreads? Forty five? Fifty?"

I chew the inside of my mouth when he scowls, seemingly intimidated by the question.

"S-Sorry, you must be thirty nine then. You look young though, I swear... ageless."

"Stop talking." The demand is stoic.

"Are you always this talkative?" He asks.

I shake my head. I would do anything to see a smile on that dark face of his, dark skinned people have Colgate teeth, super white. And I want to see his teeth, maybe take a picture as well.

I think he would want me to be comfortable, make myself at home, you know? Does happiness really feel this good? I skip back to the bed to sit on it, I'm exhausted. It must be because I just woke up or the brat inside me. Lord, I'll be using a wheelchair by the time I'm due.

Food does not love me, I gain weight fast if I'm not careful. I really am not looking forward to the weight gain, swollen feet. I hear some dislocate their hands or hips. All that for a child that will talk back when it's grown, I'll pass.

"Do you want a kiddies meal?" I happily ask, how much do I even have left? "I can't use the money I was going to pay that old lady with, I borrowed it from someone, so I have to take it back. I only have R40, I don't mind though. Let me treat you."

“Quiet!”

“Yes daddy.” His eyes widen and I smash my hand on my mouth.

“What did you say?” He questions, voice void of humor.

I can't repeat that, I've embarrassed myself enough. Mommy, I need Jesus. But Lord this man; my mind has packed its bags and gone on vacation.

“Is aunty okay?” I change the topic. “I didn't mean to cause trouble.”

I don't care about her, she hasn't seen the last of me. The drama I pulled earlier was a teaser.

Where do they make these types of people, the ones who are rude enough to ignore a person when spoken to?

He moves and my heart stops, he's coming over here.

What's wrong with me? Why am I suddenly fidgety?
My breathing quickens at his nearness, we're flush
against each other. This has got to be extremely
uncomfortable, but it's not. Mama, why does this
stranger bring me so much peace?

His hand inspects my bruised cheek, I glance up at
him and say the most embarrassing thing I have
ever said, "Are we going to have sex?"

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-Three

AMARA-

“I’ll check on R.J.” He’s my first thought as we enter the house, Randall nods and I leave him to lock up. The tension between us is thick as a winter blanket, I bet you those ones you get from the Pakistan shops in town.

Liyana’s room is the first one, right opposite the stairway. She’s sleeping with the door slightly open. I find R.J’s room locked which is strange, he never sleeps with the door locked.

Not wanting to wake him up, I quickly rush to my room to fetch the extra key. As I enter his room, I find it empty. The bed dishevelled.

Strange!

Am I wrong to quickly fall into a pond of panic? My feet lead me to the bathroom a room away from his, he's not there. I probably must've missed him in Liyana's room, I'm growing anxious as I march back there. She's tucked alone under the covers.

Okay, it is time to panic.

Worry starts to crawl under my skin and ice shoots through my veins. The house is big, he must be around, somewhere. He has to be around...

"Liya, wake up." She opens her eyes and instantly frowns in confusion at my presence.

"What's wrong?" She questions as she sits up and fixes the white doek that's slipping off her head, surrendering to a yawn.

"Your brother is not in his room."

"He's probably in the bathroom." My heart sinks to the soles of my feet at her assumption, I don't want to panic, but my heart is drumming faster by the

second.

“He’s not there,” I squawk. “Go check my room Liyana.” I yell, running out like a crazy person, to have a second look in the bathroom with the hope that I will find him there. It’s still empty, so is his room.

My feet clunk on the wooden floor as I run to MaNtombi’s bedroom... Oh my God, there’s no one in here. Let her answer the phone, please. It sends me straight to voicemail, discomfort suddenly rises in my chest... terror... panic. This is my fault, I should not have left him alone.

“He’s not there, I checked everywhere?” Liyana states, emerging from the hallway, worry plastered all over her face.

“Where is my son?” I shout with everything in me, to no one in particular. In a second Randall’s quick steps boom on the staircase, I’m going crazy with worry as I run to his direction. My tears bearing

witness to the agony engulfed around me.

“What’s wrong?” His question comes with a dazed facial expression, he grips my shoulders while inspecting my wet surface.

“He’s not here, my son is not in the house. The maid too, she took my son Randall. That woman took my son.” This is not happening to me.

“What?” He murmurs under his breath.

I take note of his rounded eyes, raised eyebrows, and slack expression.

“No, that can’t be.” And like a man who has lost his mind, he scatters all over the house calling out to R.J. It feels like yesterday when Liyana had gone missing, now it’s my son.

“I’m sorry Amara, I don’t know how he got out of his room. I left him, in his bed.”

“Don’t blame yourself, my love. It’s not your fault, I had asked Mantombi to look after him. Where did

she go?”

Liyana wipes her persistent tears as she responds with a shrug, before uttering actual words. “She was in her room when I went to bed. I’ll go ask the guards, they must’ve seen something.”

She leaves me in the passageway, I can’t stand here. I have to help look for him. Terrible thoughts invade my head as I dash from one room to the next, desperately calling his name. I hate myself for thinking the worst... the unwanted visuals clouding my head.

The last room I find myself in is his. He’s supposed to be sleeping on that very bed.

A broken Liyana materialises into the room, face stained with tears and hopelessness.

“The only person that went out of the premises is the maid, she had with her a suitcase. They didn’t

care to search because they thought she was moving out.”

Liyana breaks the news and I lose all my senses at the realisation that my baby has been taken. Strength denounces me, bringing me to my knees and I wail like a widow. The only logical thing is to call the police, but my mind is woozy, the only thing it allows in are thoughts of his dead body.

I’ve lost sight of my surroundings, but my ears manage to perk at the feeble sound of movement from under his bed.

With no time wasted, I’m on all fours, with my head dipped under the bed.

He’s here... my baby is hiding, looking bewildered, like he’s not sure if he should come out or not.

“Baby!” I can’t describe what I’m feeling at this moment. “Come out of there.”

“R.J?” Liyana’s disbelieving question follows my

request.

He's not moving, so I lay on my stomach in order to fit under the bed. He doesn't hold me back when I embrace him tightly and shower him with kisses, but squirms in my arms, wanting to be put down. I can't, I want to cherish this moment.

"Are you okay?" Liyana questions, sandwiching the child as she joins in on the hug. He nods in return, he's mumbling things I cannot make out. My arms gently tighten around him, however, his body tenses in my arms, telling me that this is not what he wants.

"Randall, Randall." My voice beams with excitement as I call out to him, he must've been close because he swooshes to the door, looking weary and downhearted. He pauses as his eyes find the boy in my arms.

In a second, my husband falls to his knees, right there in the doorway, opens his arms and R.J slips out and runs to him.

Randall whisks him in his arms, an embrace that brings about tears in his eyes. This man rarely cries, chances are Zero to none. He looks at me, relieved, but guilt also fights for his attention.

“Why were you hiding under the bed, Kwame?” My vocal sound cracks and gets caught in my throat, due to the crying I’ve been doing. R.J ignores me, he’s clinging on to his father for dear life.

His face hidden in Randall shoulder and arms around his neck, he mumbles words barely audible. “I’m tired dad, can I sleep with you in your room?”

“Of course my love.” Randall’s voice is soft, it borders on delicacy, as if it and his heart would break any minute. He stands with the child holding to him.

“Papa, can we talk?” Liyana asks.

“In the morning Liya,” he says and leaves with R.J.

“Is everything okay Liya?”

“Like papa said, we’ll talk in the morning.” She coos with sadness, her heavy feet carrying her out of the room.

ZITHA-

Don’t feed your mid-night cravings, my foot. This baby is eating my intestines, that’s how it feels in there. The clock on the wall tells me that it is 00:18, my phone is off. I had to switch it off to avoid my aunt.

I leave the bed and my new appointed room, to find my way to the kitchen, that’s right, I know my way to the kitchen in this house.

Let’s see what they have in this fridge, I think I like what I’m looking at. My taste buds are screaming for fried chicken livers with white bread and coke, there’s a defrosted pack in here. I grab it and get on with my cooking, the smell spreads throughout. I love it, I can just dance to the sizzling sound.

“Must be nice, is this what you do in people’s houses?” Her slimy voice slithers in and spoils my appetite, my face accepts a frown as I turn to face her.

“I don’t know about people’s houses, but I do it where I live. This is my home too, since Kenneth invited me to move in with him.”

I think I’ve had it with this woman, honestly she’s starting to piss me off.

“Watch your mouth, he’s way older than you little girl. He is Mr. Mkhize to you.” Yawn!

“Looks like someone forgot to take their medication before bed, is that why you’re so snappy, MaMkhize?” The question seems to slap her in the face, she moves in. Oh. Oh... I have made her angry, I see her hand coming for my cheek and block it.

“Not here MaMkhize, I’m not going to be your punching bag.” She appears shocked by my audacity,

these are trials. I haven't begun yet, it's easier this side, there's someone to fight for me. I can be as cocky and no one will stand in my way.

"Kenneth has done it, he has brought a snake into his house." I couldn't agree more.

"You're right, that's exactly what I thought when I first saw you. Poor Kenneth, I feel sorry for him." My sally is delivered through bites of the delicious chicken livers.

"Do you know Nokzola Hlubi? She's my aunt, you too must have been conjoined twins." There's no doubt in my mind, she reminds me of my aunt.

"I don't have time for your nonsense, I told you never to come back here."

"Yes," I flash a smile. "I heard you, but I wasn't listening."

I'm going to be her worst nightmare.

"You think you're smart, don't you?" She hisses,

pointing a finger at me.

“Point of correction, I don’t think I’m smart, I know I’m smart.”

A gasp whistles past my lips as she grabs my arm and harshly pulls me off the barstool, I almost trip landing on my feet.

“Listen here...”

This is the part where she tells me all kinds of nonsense that will annoy even my ancestors.

Are those footsteps I hear? God, I will love you forever if the person coming here is Kenneth. I need to teach this lady a lesson. And... there he is, a knot on his forehead as he leans against the doorpost. I have long blocked MaMkhize’s voice, it has become background noise.

Time to act, I close my eyes and bite my lip. Tears listen to me when I do this.

“What’s going on?” Kenneth.

MaMkhize turns with a gasp.

“Kenneth,” her voice cracks.

“Kenny...” I beat her to it, my feet trailing to the man in black sleepwear. “I’m sorry about the mess I made, I only wanted to make food because I was hungry. But aunty didn’t have to insult my family... Because of chicken livers, Kenny? Chicken livers and white bread? Yoh!”

I deserve to be on TV, darn it, I was born for this.

“What?” She yells, it’s good that she does so. The more she loses her mind, the more Kenneth sees the evil in her.

She may be older, but I’m more experienced in this game. “She’s lying Kenneth, I...”

“Why would I lie aunty? I have no reason to.” My gaze turns to Kenneth, I can’t say what he’s thinking... his face is blank.

“Thank you for everything, but I have to go home now. I’d rather have my family treat me like trash, not a stranger. Must a person die because of chicken livers?”

I lean up to kiss his cheek... this kiss will score me some points. As I turn to walk toward the exit door, Kenneth grabs my arm and pulls me back to his side.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.” I reply, squirming with an added spicy drama.

“With what?” This tone tells me that I have a place in this house and in his life. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not here to destroy his family. Is it wrong of me to seek security?

“I’ll walk.” I tell him.

Yes, the plan is to be as dramatic as possible.

“Don’t be stupid Zithobile, go eat your food.” I love you Kenny.

“But aunt said...”

“Sit and eat your food.” It’s the soft, yet authoritative

tone he uses that has me melting.

"Okay because I'm hungry, I will eat."

Here I was thinking I have bad luck, turns out I'm the luckiest woman in the world.

"Told you, I'm smart." I whisper to the aunt as I walk past her to finish off my mouth-watering chicken livers.

*

*

*©

A/N: Apologies for not posting yesterday, my mind was looted.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-Four

AMARA-

Sleep has not called my name yet, Liyana's plea has me by the lashes, forcing my eyes wide open. Could she have seen the news about her mother? I doubt Randall is ready or will ever be; to face her with answers.

How does a father tell his child that he killed their mother?

He's not sleeping, he's been sitting on the bench by the window since he put R.J to sleep. I can feel the weight of his eyes on me and I have been wanting to turn around and ask him to come to bed, but I know it will be a waste of time. He never listens to anyone.

His phone rings, the sound is muted in a jiffy.

“Talk to me,” he murmurs.

The lengthy silence is enough to sit me up and turn on the side lamp.

“Who is it?”

“Go back to sleep, I’ll check.” He says, stepping out of the room, he should know by now that I don’t stay put when he tells me.

I’m chided with a glare as I follow behind him down to the lounge, it’s not like I ever listen to him anyway, so why start now?

Something is wrong, I can feel it. My heart thumps hard on my chest as he turns the light on and peeps out the window. He turns to look at me.

“Remember when I told you there’s a storm coming?” I don’t like where this is going and I don’t like what I’m seeing on his face. “That things are going to change for the worst?”

“What’s going on Randall?” My eyes are wide with

unknown fear.

“The police are here.” He says, frowning. Then again, he’s always frowning.

Did I see this coming? No, he’s gotten away with murder before and not one person of the law has been brought to our doorstep.

“No, baby.” I enfold my arms around him, giving in to tears. “Don’t open the door, please.”

“If I don’t, they will surround this place. Our children are sleeping, I don’t want them to see their father dragged away like a criminal. Let me keep my dignity, Amara. I’m sorry that I have to let them take me.”

He’s making sense, but how can I let him go to jail?

My head is graced with a soft kiss, his hands gliding up and down my spine.

“Protect my baby from the truth, don’t let her find out what her mother did to her. It will crush her, I will explain to Liyana when the right time comes.” I nod, face nestled in his chest.

The knock on the door startles me, the least they could do is knock like civilised people. Randall detaches my arms from him, he slightly pushes me back and opens the door to three men. Two are in police uniform and one in formal clothing. He introduces himself as a detective, and shows us an ID as proof. It's happening, they are going to take my husband away.

“An arrest warrant has been issued against you for the disappearance and possible murder of Olivia Botha.”

I curse this night.

“Baby please,” one more try. He's a smart man and perhaps he will think of a way out of this, deny the allegations if possible.

“I'll be fine, call Styles.” His hand glides up my cheek, he's looking into my eyes. Is this the last time I will feel his touch? I can't help it as I cage him in my arms

“Sisi, let us do our job.” One of the policemen grabs my shoulder, pulling me off Randall.

“Don’t touch her.” He pushes the man and he stumbles backwards, his colleague manages to catch him.

“You’re assaulting an officer of the law, Mr. Okolie.” He can’t speak clearly, the tremble in his voice won’t let him.

“You don’t touch my wife.” Randall hisses, activating his emotional indifference, eyes threatening like a drawn sword. I remember this deadly expression lain on his face.

“This man is disrespectful mphathi wam, let’s show him what we do to prisoners.”

The same stupid policeman dares to say such nonsense in my house while poking his finger on Randall’s forehead. Randall does not react to the assault, he soldiers up, standing at attention like the

leader I know him to be, head held high. The detective reprimands the policeman with a headshake and scolding glare. I'm not sure if it's a warning.

"Cuff him." He gives the order that brings my world to a standstill. I want to shelter my husband in my arms, hide him from the law. I have failed as a wife, what will I tell his children? His granduncle?

"Randall Okolie, you are under arrest for the possible murder of Olivia Botha, you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can or will be used against you in the court of law..."

As the detective recites his rights and the dumb policeman cuffs him, Randall is looking at me all the while, tight jaw... yet calm eyes. My stubbornness pushes me to the brink, compelling me to hold his hand. Eyes pleading, though I know it is fruitless.

"I'm sorry, take care of our kids and yourself. Don't starve the baby, remember you're eating for two now." His last words to me as they take him away,

our hands slowly pulling apart. How are we going to fix this mess?

LIYANA-

Her stepmother is not the only one who couldn't sleep, she too had been in the company of insomnia for hours. A hard knock on the door got her out of bed, she followed the sound that led her to her biggest nightmare.

The police had come in the wee hours of the morning to take her father away, her protector. The only man she trusts blindly... or trusted rather.

She's been listening and watching everything from the corridor, her heart is broken beyond repair. Mixed feelings have made her head a playground, it hurt seeing her father treated like a bad man. But there is a bit of anger seeping through her bones, he killed her mother and lied to her about it. Can she ever

forgive that?

The phone in her hand beeps, it's a message from Bambindlovu.

IT HAS BEGUN.

The text reads, Liyana doesn't know what to make of it which explains the frown on her face. One last look at Amara who is stationery at the door, silently sobbing, before she rushes to her room to call her acquaintance.

On her way there, she takes a peek in her parent's room. Thank the heavens her brother is sleeping soundly.

"It has begun." Is this how phones are answered lately?

A frown claims her features again, with everything in her, liyana swallows the lump in her throat. Her emotions are raging like peanuts on a hot pan.

“What are you talking about?” Sometimes he doesn’t make sense when he speaks, the companionship is new, but she has found traits on him that annoy her.

“That’s the message I got, I was told to relay it to you.” He’s still not making sense. Liyana gives up cracking her brain and decides to share her burdens with him.

“My father has been arrested.” She scoots back on the bed to lean against the headboard.

Normal people offer their deepest sincere apologies, but this one is silent. Not that Liyana is expecting a response from him.

“Can I see you?” She asks.

It’s crazy yeah, considering that it’s in the early hours of the morning. The man lives in Hillbrow, criminals are bred there.

“Now?” He sounds worried, his African mother will have a stroke if she were to see him leave the house

at this time.

“Please!”

Yeah neh! The joys of living in a high-gated community that is clear of hooligans and people who use brooms as means of transport...

“How about a video call for now? We can meet in the morning, when the sun is out. We’re black Lili, we don’t do unnecessary things like night drives. You live your house on your feet and come back in a coffin. My mother would surely bring me back to life with just a slap in the face.”

He doesn’t expect her to laugh and he wasn’t trying to make her laugh, but oh well. The sound is soothing, music to his ears.

“Video call?” He asks, amusement in his voice.

A video call is better than nothing, she needs someone to talk to and this stranger appears to be one consistent stranger.

NKOMOMO-

It was when he witnessed his father kill his mother that he cut ties with him. At a tender age, he became fatherless by choice. His childhood years were spent moving from one uncle to another, trying his all to avoid crossing paths with Bangizwe Mkhize; his father.

The pages of his life were clean, until he turned sixteen and met Styles and Randall.

They came and filled his empty life, for the first time in years he had people to claim as his own. They treated him like a brother, though Randall and Styles had an unbreakable bond, Nkomo could still fit in.

The trio's brotherhood has been tested throughout the years, with Nkomo and Randall at daggers drawn after a "misunderstanding" with Amara. However, Nkomo sought after the brother he loved, he proved himself worthy of his trust. It took time for Randall to let Nkomo into his circle once again.

There's a woman in his house, tied up to a chair. He's not doing this to prove himself this time, but for the love he has for his brother. It's the witch hour, some wake up to pray, others... well, let's just say evil does not sleep.

He gets up from the sleeping couch at the sound of a knock on the door, Styles and Kenneth walk in.

"Where is she?" An impatient Styles speaks, standing in the lounge.

"Locked up like you ordered." Nkomo replies.

The tone he chooses tells them he's not interested in doing this. "Have you spoken to him?" Nkomo.

"Not yet, I'll go and see him later." Just a few more hours, the sun will kiss the sky ginger, igniting a new dawn, bringing a choir of birds and Styles will be on his way to see the brethren he's worried about.

Styles had ran to the police station after receiving a phone call from a distraught Amara. He's been

making calls, trying to get his brother out.

“Okolie in an orange uniform,” how does this man know how to chuckle? “Take a picture for me, will you?”

Behave Kenneth, a king was arrested.

Styles pays him no attention, they are here for something different.

“I thought you lacked humour Kenneth, but you chose the wrong time to be a comedian.”

Sensitive much, Nkomo?

Kenneth shows no care at all, perhaps he won't have to shoot Randall anymore. Having him spend time in jail is more than enough, nothing personal. They just happen to love the same woman, come on now.

Nkomo and Kenneth trail after Styles who is sauntering to the room where their suspect is held,

one twist on the doorknob and it opens with a crack. No one uses this room, that's why it's empty and because of the emptiness, voices echo when they speak.

The woman is awake, face smudged with mascara due to the tears she has been shedding.

Following men you've only just met is not a wise thing to do.

She was found by Kenneth, after Styles told him about her and how she had supposedly seduced Randall and sent the wife explicit pictures of them in bed together.

Nkomo's task was to lead the woman on, bring her to his house for a supposed one nightstand. Zulu men and their pants-dropping charms... the lady was smitten by the strange man she met at a local bar that she was willing to go home with him and ride him like a horse.

For someone who is held against her will, she sure looks audacious. She boldly stares back at the three men stabbing glares at her.

No one has said a word, Styles walks forward, crouches in front of her and removes the gag in her mouth.

Worming on the wooden chair, she gulps a deep breath, pursuing her inhalation. The movement is getting on his nerves, so he cups her cheeks, eyes narrowed at her. It must be the gentle touch that gets her to stop.

“I’m disappointed in you, Nkomo.” He starts, voice cold as ice. “This is not how you treat a woman.”

He fixes her loose thin braids and ties them into a ponytail using one of the strands, the woman seems to relax in his touch.

“Shit,” reality has hit Nkomo. Styles can be Ruthless, and this kind gesture of his can’t be a good sign.

“What’s your name?” He asks, stepping back from

the confused woman.

“Nandipha.” The calm response is expected since she is being caressed like a queen.

A ghost of a smile graces Styles' face, he huffs and shakes his head. “Thembelihle Shezi.” Now this is the name printed in her identity document and birth certificate.

“Haibo! Shukulas’, Mnomiya, dlud’owadli’mihlambi yamadoda, wadl’izinkomo zamandebele.” Kenneth takes an unexpected turn by calling out her clan names.

Her eyes find him, he’s not looking at her rather through her. Like her head is transparent and he’s fascinated by an object inches from behind her skull. His impassive face turns her stomach every bit as badly as meeting a stranger after dark.

The lady shies away from the stern look, Styles is okay, he’s not creepy like that man in black.

“Who are you people?” She still has a voice, we’re off to a great start.

“Does your husband know you sleep with men for money?” Styles.

Living a double was a secret she was going to take to her grave... people approach her, place money on the table and she gives them what they want.

“Leave my husband out of this, do you know who you’re dealing with? My people are searching for me.” She’s become restless, since her little secret is out in the open.

Things are not going according to plan so far, she was supposed to sing like a bird before he decides her fate. Now he has to drag the truth out of her.

Anticipation sits on the throne of the woman’s mind when Styles pulls out a phone from his pocket. Some say when an angel passes by, utter silence takes over, even nature submits to it. But she is

surrounded by men who have nothing but bad intentions and she sees no angel amongst them.

A video starts to play on Styles' phone, there are no words but what sounds like a man groaning in pain and soft sniffles of a child. He tilts the phone to her direction, her eyes widen with shock. There, her husband and ten year old son held captive in a room with three men guarding them.

“Unfortunately Thembelihle, I cannot leave your husband and son out of this. You went after my family, it’s only fair I go after yours.” Styles says. “I have them under my custody but don’t worry, they will be safe as long as you and I get along.”

“Please, don’t hurt them. They don’t know anything.” She struggles in the wooden chair, praying that the ropes break and set her free.

“Start talking and I will spare you and your family.” Styles says, firmly.

“What do you want to know?”

“Who paid you to drug Randall?”

At the mention of Randall, her eyes drop as if shame has called her by name.

“I don’t know anyone by that name.” She’s a fierce one.

Styles is losing his patience, but he doesn’t show it.

He places the phone on his ears, “Now.” An order is given to someone over the phone and in a split second a scream of a little boy erupts through the gadget’s speaker. She recognises the scream hence her own while humping on the chair as if her body has become a meal to deadly termites.

“What are you doing to him?” She’s screaming, thrashing with a desperate need to get to her son.

“Stop it, please tell them to stop. I’ll tell you everything you need to know.”

Styles whispers something inaudible over the phone, the bloodcurdling screams stop.

“Make my day, maybe I will spare your life and you get to go home to your useless husband.” Not that it’s negotiable.

“A man approached me, but I never saw his face. He asked me to drug Mr. Okolie and sleep with him. That’s all I know.”

“That’s half the truth.” Kenneth has been silently observing everything from the corner of the room, He wants this to be over so he can go and check on Zithobile. She’s so unpredictable, he might find her gone if he doesn’t hurry back.

Thembelihle’s face instantly turns ice cold at the sound of Kenneth’s remark.

“You people have no idea who you’re dealing with,” her voice is low, smells of hatred. “They are going to destroy all of you one by one, starting with that ugly woman Amara. None of you are safe from them.”

Them? Nothing is being given here. Styles frowns,

he's not a man who appreciates threats thrown at him.

"Are you talking about Mkhize?" This is getting frustrating, she doesn't answer his question, though his smart brain picks something from the vague twitch in her eyes...

"I'm dead, they are going to kill me for speaking to you. Those people are baying for blood, they are thirsty and will stop at nothing until they bring you and your friend down. Your families, included."

She laughs like her statement was taken out of a comedy book. "The funniest thing about all of this, is that you won't see them coming."

Oh! That's what she's laughing about.

He's getting nothing from this woman, and it's annoying the hell out of him, threatening his family is a mistake she shouldn't have made. Styles carries his hands on his back and bends over so he's

looking into her eyes.

“I like you, Thembelihle, of all the people I have killed in my entire existence. You stand out, you’re my favourite.”

His sinister plan is starting to come to light, Nkomo sees it, hence the look he gives Kenneth who does not blink a wink. He stands confident, unflinching, and perhaps he likes what is about to unfold.

“You said you won’t kill me,” she’s pleading for her life.

“I also promised my daughter I will stay with her till morning, life is a bitch.” Styles’ brain comes fully online and flashes an electric smirk. In this smirk is a proclamation that his humanity has abandoned him, only evil remains.

He kicks the chair with such force that it brings the woman down with it, sending her straight to her demise the moment the back of her head harshly bangs against the concrete floor.

May her soul... Oh! Too soon...

“Great, just fucking great.” Nkomo does not like this one bit, a person dying in his house means a restless soul will lurk about the walls of his humble abode until her family comes to collect her spirit. Which is something that will never happen in this case.

“What’s wrong?” Either Styles does not get it or he’s plain stupid.

“He’s afraid of ghosts.” Kenneth disinterestedly sheds light, he knows about the ritual of fetching the soul of a dead person from the place of death and taking it home where it is allowed to rest in peace. But what has happened just now means nothing to him.

“Have you ever lived in a house where you hear sounds at night?” The question is directed to these ignorant men who don’t answer. “Then shut your

mouths, I don't care what you do Styles, I want her spirit out of my house."

"There's no such thing, relax. She's probably on her way to..."

"Don't patronize me, Sishi. We're black, you know how these things work. This woman's soul will not rest in peace, not until her family fetches her."

They say money can buy you everything, but this seems too priceless.

"I'll call you, Styles." A frustrated Kenneth says and leaves the house.

"You can move in with me in the meantime, until we sort this out."

Really Styles? He's a grown ass man who probably has a woman who wants to lay on his chest every night.

"Piss off, and get this body out of my house." He sputters, trudging away from the crime scene.

"Where are you going?" Styles yells after him, tone

swirling in humour.

“Where I won’t have to see your face and that dead woman.”

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-Five

ZITHA-

“I’ll request an Uber.” As if I have money...

He’s in my room, offering to take me home.

One knock got him in, uninvited... People and their houses.

My stomach growls and I don’t understand it, I just ate thirty minutes ago. This baby is suddenly driving me insane. I didn’t consume this much food when I wasn’t aware that there is a thing growing inside me, a thing that will one day cry for my breast the second it enters the world. I am not ready.

“I said I’ll take you home.” Why is he speaking so softly?

“You’ve done enough, Kenneth. I can’t expect you to hold me up whenever I need a crutch.” Acting polite

is too much work, I can't wait to get used to him and be myself. I love fancy things and being spoiled, and treated like I walk on water, and Kenneth must know.

"Did you hear me complaining Zithobile?"

"No," I stand after tying my shoelaces to find a penetrating stare. "You're so kind, thank you for everything."

"Don't thank me, it feels like I'm doing you a favour and that's not the case." He says, his voice has a deep timbre.

"Then... what is it that you're doing? Are you looking for a wife?" A ghost of a smile twitches over his mouth, I expect him to shy away from my eyes. He doesn't.

"You're nineteen." He speaks like it's a life threatening disease.

"I'm legal enough to marry a sixty year old." Eat that...

"Isisa is seventeen."

"So?" I happen to find his answers very offensive. He

blinks and rubs his hands together, his head turns to the side. He's checking the entrance, probably for the nosy aunt who does not know how to knock.

"You're like a niece to me." Oh hell no...

"What does that mean?" My hands move to my hips as I step closer, he gulps and takes a step back.

"You're... young..."

"I'm not your niece Kenneth, I am an Mthombeni. My ancestors and yours have never shared a cup of tea. What am I doing here?"

"I told you..." When?

"No, you didn't. I have no idea what's going on here, all I know is that you have been appearing where I am. Which is something I should be freaked out about."

"I want to keep you safe Zithobile." He holds my hand, the touch is soft, however I claim it back and try to control the frown that's threatening to take over my face.

“I don’t need a super hero, life is not a fairy tale.” I try to be as polite as I can, keeping in mind that I need a place to stay if I will leave my aunt’s house. “Look at me, I’m living proof.”

My life can be better, it will be.

“What if I want us to date?” I don’t know why such things are coming out of my mouth.

“I don’t do relationships.” Wow.

“Is this your way of turning me down gently?” I ask, stepping away from him. I think now I know how Jesus felt when he was rejected by the jews.

“Turning you down?” A gentle rub on his forehead, I’m making him uncomfortable. I drop my eyes, what I’m doing is not ladylike. I might want to try him out for a reason I’m not entirely sure of and the only thing I can vouch for is that he is my peace. When I don’t get an answer from him but a deep stare, I grab my bag from the bed and let my feet lead me

towards the door.

“Let’s go... uncle Kenneth. I’m ready.”

“Uncle?” The sound of his concerned voice follows me down the passage, along with his footsteps.

“You said you see me as your niece, so you’re my uncle.” I don’t look at him as I answer.

“I’m not your uncle, Zithobile.” Nothing tastes bitter, than your own medicine.

“It’s only fair I call you, malume, if you see me as your niece. I don’t call my uncles by name, it’s an abomination where I come from.”

A hand grips my arm and jolts me back, my body crashes against his. He’s looking down at me with a wrinkly brow.

“What are you doing?” I question his actions... his closeness and can’t seem to escape his searching eyes, they dawdle mostly on my lips.

“I hope you’re not planning on kissing your niece.”
My tongue must be possessed, I bite it at the stare
down he regards me with.

“Why are you like this, Zithobile?” He murmurs.

He’s close, too close. My heart is excited, I think it is.
Either that or I’m nervous. Okay, breathe Zitha.

“Like what, Kenneth?”

“This... daring... confident.” He lowers the tone of his
voice, and I am trying hard not to shudder.

His warm breath whiffs my face, he’s leaning in and I
am ready to taste his lips. He smells like a man, a
man who knows how to open the tap of water in the
bathroom and fill it with expensive foam baths.

The nearness is provoking, I want to let my hands
wander all over him but it would be inappropriate
because he is not mine to touch, he’s not mine to
hold.

“Either you’re driving me crazy or I’m losing my
mind.” The pitch in his voice resounding in my ear
causes me to shiver this time around.

His strong big arm grips my waist, he slides it to the small of my back. There goes my breathing running at a fast pace

“You said... we’re related.” A soft whisper escapes my mouth.

“I’m not your uncle, don’t call me uncle.” He says softly, eyes undisciplined as they continue to chase after my mouth. “Don’t call me uncle, Zithobile.”

His voice is now engraved in my memory and my heart, no matter where I go, I know I can never forget it.

“I’m not your niece either.”

I love this right here. His arm around my waist and his body pressed against mine. When did I get here? I don’t even know this man, I just know that I have been longing for him and now that he’s here and holding me, I don’t want it to end.

Kenneth blinks, seemingly knocking himself back to reality, he steps back with a clearing of a throat. He

looks unflustered, as his hands hide in his pockets.

“Let’s go.” He relays, turning towards the door.

“Yebo malume,” at my remark, the man stops and swivels to me. I could scowl at him or flare my nose, however, I’m at his mercy. But this I can do, he sighs a little as I walk on ignoring the stare down.

“What did I say about calling me that?” Is what he says after, he gets into the car. I’m buckled up and not ready to go home.

“I don’t remember, all I remember is you referring to me as your niece. Your niece Kenneth, of all things I can be to you, you go for niece. Friend zoning me would have been better.”

“Okay.” He shakes his head and repeats. “Okay.”

Sounds like a warning, I’m not deterred. With a bit of luck, he doesn’t mind me playing music. Silence makes me nervous, my mind wanders off without a leash.

*

*

My aunt, Nokzola Hlubi was married off to the Hlubi family at the age of 18, it was an arranged marriage orchestrated by her father.

He was a struggling mechanic who had bills to pay and ten children to nurture, not counting the ones scattered all over the country. Solomon Hlubi a village boy from a wealthy family saw her and wanted her for himself. She wasn't ready, she wanted to be independent, but my grandfather was a strict man as much as he was a man whore.

Solomon disappeared 10 years ago, he ran with an eighteen year old girl whom he knocked up. No one knows where they are. He is still legally married to my aunt, the coward is not even brave enough to send divorce papers.

Nokzola is the seventh child of the ten, four have died, my mother included, leaving me with four uncles and two aunts.

This must be where her rage comes from and I will

surely be a victim of it the second I step into her house. I was warned about sleeping out, yet the dog keeps going back to lick its vomit.

“Zithobile.” A warm touch on my hand slurps me from the land of imagination, the car has stopped. He’s looking at me, furrowed brow depicting worry. No one, but my mother has ever had that expression directed at me before.

“I’ve been calling out to you, we’re here.” He says as he points at the gate with his eyes. He is smart enough to know that he should not park right at the gate.

“What’s wrong?” He squeezes my hand gently, suddenly I’m nervous and my heart is doing funny things. He’s looking into my eyes, waiting for an answer.

“I’m fine.” God forgive me for this lie, I won’t do it again.

“Call me when you’re done, I’ll come and get you.” He takes my phone from my lap and punches in his number... I’m putting a password after this. Like my hair, no one touches my phone.

“Thank you, I’ll see you later.” Or never, there is no certainty that my aunt will let me move out.

I’m out of the car before he could say anything and watch the him drive off, now I can finally breathe. Ulwazi is standing outside her grandmother’s gate, naturally, I wave at her. She shakes her head and strides back into the house. What is her problem? I’ll deal with her later, right now, I have bigger sharks to face.

I brace myself before walking through the premises, as I push the door open, I’m welcomed by six sets of judgemental eyes. Shame cloaks the entirety of my being, they make me feel like I have been fornicating where I was.

“Malume, aunty.” The salutation is directed to the fifty eight year old man and middle-aged woman

seated on the couch across my aunt. Gatsha Mthombeni is my maternal uncle, the woman perched up on his side, looking at me with so much condemnation welled up in her eyes is his wife Malindi.

My gesture is snubbed.

“When did you come?” Who is looking after the goats and chickens in Nongoma if they are here? My uncle huffs and claps once, something is not right. My eyes find Nokzola, she fires an evil glare the moment our eyes meet.

“Is this how you speak to your elders now, Zithobile?” What is he talking about? “You’re going to speak to us while standing? This is the highest level of disrespect, Zola was right. You have changed since your mother died.”

My aunt never misses a chance to gossip about me. I clear my throat and find a seat, the only one available unfortunately, is next to my aunt.

“Are you pregnant, Zitha?”

Everything around me spins at the question, this is not how I wanted her to find out. Or them, although it's none of their business.

“Aunty?” I say this because I'm shocked.

“I asked if you're pregnant.” She has become snippy, she throws a file at me. It has the name of the hospital I was admitted to and my name right at the bottom.

How can I be so careless? I was in a rush to go and abort the baby that I left my belongings on the bed. I answer her question with a sigh and a head nod.

Suddenly sitting next to her seems like a bad idea, I fall back on the couch as the back of her hand crashes against my cheek.

“Aunty?” I'm rubbing the pain away, trying hard not to let her see the pain she's inflicted on me.

“After everything I have done for you, Zithobile. I bring you into my house and feed you and this is the thanks I get? A plate full of shit? You disrespect me

like this?" She's on her feet shouting her lungs out.

"It was a mistake..."

"A mistake? What are you, a child?" Uncle Gatsha says, he's as angry as his sister. I don't justify his question with an answer, frankly, I have nothing to say to him.

"Who is he?" Her hands are on her waist while tapping her foot on the floor,

How do I tell her that a man old enough to be my father made me pregnant? Where do I even begin explaining my shame? I don't even want this baby.

"He's no one." I'm the only one who hears the answer, afraid to be too loud and get another slap.

"Who is the father of this baby, Zithobile?" My uncle should shut up, he was never here when my mother was sick. Now he wants to play the perfect "malume."

"You know what? I don't care. Pack your bags, you

are going to KZN with your uncle. They are here for you.” She says and my heart has been racing from the moment she mentioned packing my bags.

“KwaNongoma aunty?” I ask and she frowns.

“Where else will you go? I’m struggling to put food on the table and I can’t feed you and that thing you’re carrying.”

“I found a place to live, I’m moving out.”

“What?” Uncle Gatsha has no say in my life, why the sudden bark? I have no care in who he is. He can’t tell me how to live my life.

“Yes, my friend invited me to move in with them.” Concealing the pronoun is very important when talking to ancient people like these ones.

“You’re not going anywhere, your mother left you in our care. You’re coming with us end of story.” He’s too loud for a man.

“Your uncle is right, they need help back home. Your cousin is in a wheelchair and can’t do things on his own, they need your help.” She can’t be serious.

“Why should I be the one to look after him? He’s their son, not mine. Malindi is unemployed, she does nothing in the house but sit and gossip with her friends.” I’m not going to take their shit, hell no.

“ZITHOBILE!” He charges at me and I shoot up and run towards the door, but my aunt blocks it before locking it. The look in her eyes is that of evil and the extra hatred she’s been withholding in her heart. An unexpected force grips my hair and pulls me, forcing me to stagger back. I’m turned around and met with another hard slap on my face, it brings me to my knees with a throbbing headache.

I don’t usually do this, I don’t usually cry. But now, now I’m unable to curb them. Every bit of me hurts, my heart feeling the most excruciating pain. He’s standing in front of me, shouting as loud as he can. I don’t recall my mother being this loud... like these people.

“Your mother fell pregnant at your age, I gave her

money for an abortion, lest she brought shame into the family. She didn't listen to me and here you are. I didn't think the same bastard child she fought to keep alive would repeat her mistakes... bring the equivalent shame into the Mthombeni family. You don't sleep at home, you jump in and out of expensive cars. You are your mother's child Zithobile, a total disgrace."

What does he want me to do with this information? I know they don't love me, it's nothing new.

"Yebo malume, I am my mother's daughter." The audacity I have to look him in the eye from down here will get me killed, I stand to face him as tall as he is.

"I am my mother's daughter and I am damn proud of it. You people should be honoured to call her your sister because unlike you, she was pure... untainted."

"You still talk back wengane?" Malindi yells.

What say does she have in this family? Her job is to sing praises to her useless husband and jump when

he barks.

"How can I not talk back aunt Malindi? I am tired, must I always be reminded that you people don't love me? My mother died like an orphan, while her brothers and sisters were alive. Her father's children. You watched and probably laughed at her predicament. Not one of you ever gave me a single cent for her medical bills, no one ever asked how she was and I had to bury her single handedly. I'm only a child, but you expected me to pay for the funeral. Do you know the trauma you put me through, the burdens I had to carry and the sacrifices I made?"

The anger in me has me shouting at elders.

"Oh please, no one owed her anything, she brought the sickness upon herself. That's what happens when you sleep around with married men." I hate this man.

"Mind your words malume," I shout. "That is my mother you're talking about. You might not have cared about her, but she meant the world to me. I loved and cared for her more than any of you ever

cared to try."

"Is this how you see it, Zithobile?" My aunt was bound to say something after this, she would bag the trophy for the loudest voice. "You and your delinquent mother lived in my house for years, ate my food and you say I did nothing for her?"

"So what if we did? Was she not your sister? I'm your niece aunty, if not you then, who else was going to take us in?"

"That's it?" Uncle says, walking towards the couch I was seated on. He grabs my bag, I'm a little dazed a minute, trying to decipher what is going through his head.

"Malume that's my phone." My aunt stops me from running to him, I would fight her if she wasn't bigger than me. The squirming I do is a joke.

"You're coming with us, Sbongiseni needs someone to look after him." He tells me and crosses his arms. "Zola go pack her bags, I will not be governed by a child."

My aunt nods, serves me a tongue click before rushing to my room.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty- Six

STYLES-

He has always stayed clear of this place, since his break up with his ex-girlfriend of four years, Khethukuthula Dladla... it was the only way to avoid bumping into her.

Her father is a “respected” police detective who never misses a day at work and when Styles woke up this morning, did his a.m. mundane and kissed his wife and daughter goodbye; thoughts of Khethu were forcing their way into his head.

Clogging them became inevitable.

There has to be a way to visit Randall without bumping into Detective Dladla.

The man has been wanting to bring him down since he broke his delusional daughter's heart many years ago by falling for Sethu and eventually leaving her.

Dladla was never this bad, he was a peacemaker compared to his wife Nobayeni. But after having his daughter thrown into a looney bin, he went ballistic with rage and bitterness.

"One day, just one day Sishi will fall. He will pay for destroying my baby."

He would repeat these words every day when talking to his wife during their late night talks.

Styles doesn't deserve the life fate has given him, a soft life while his precious gem has to live with the scars of the past. He's not a depraved person, just a dirty cop who has everything to lose if he sleeps with both eyes closed at night.

Dladla has no business being here, he should be at Booyens Police station certifying documents with a cup of Frisco and two fat cakes on his table.

“Sishi.” He’s never liked him, not one bit and the feeling is mutual. All Styles wanted back then was to love his Khethu without her nosy parents trying to tell him how to love a woman, as if he were a child who knew nothing but to suck his thumb.

“Dladla.” Styles returns. “What, you need to add a few more zeros to your provident fund? Don’t you think it’s time to retire?”

Dladla is the least bothered, he knows time is not on his side. But who cares what Styles thinks.

“I see you’re still hiding behind expensive suits and perfumes, how is blood money treating you?” Dladla has a big mouth for an old man.

“I should ask you the same, I’m surprised you managed to play good cop and fool Cele.” Styles retorts.

This one slaps hard, sometimes he forgets that he accepts bribes from criminals as it has become his second job.

“I have always hated this condescending attitude of yours, Okolie is no different from you. You both think the power of life and death lies in your hands. You played in the streets of Joburg, my territory, breaking everything you can and leaving nothing but havoc behind.”

“Oh come Dladla, this place was never yours to begin with. You were never man enough to hold it in just the palm of your hand.” Styles is frowning at the old man, the windows to his soul judging him. “Excuse me.”

He manoeuvres past him, but Dladla is not about to lose to Sishi. Not again.

“He’s never getting out, you know?” The statement is powerful enough to stop the all-daunting Styles, he turns to find hatred on the face painted with wrinkles and dark circles.

“Don’t celebrate too soon, Dladla, I wouldn’t underestimate me just yet.” That’s all... Randall is waiting for him, entertaining an old man will eat up

his time.

Styles turns back around and starts his path down the dark corridors of Johannesburg Sun City prison, a warden leading the way towards the holding cells.

“Dad, was that Styles.” Like dust in August, her voice chases him and reaches him before he could hide.

He stops and tries to control the beating of his heart. It wants to do funny things and he’s not a man who is fond of things he doesn’t understand.

He doesn’t respond well to them. Then again, that woman back there used to be his weakness. If it were not for his friends Randall and Neo, he would probably still be with her, living under her control. Not even Sethu has had that kind of power over him.

Sethu... his wife. Rationality beats the name into his stupid brain, he blinks, scratches the back of his head and continues walking without turning back.

Good boy...

He's brought into a room where there are people waiting to see their wretched crimi... I mean their loved ones.

The jailer points at a man in orange, seated at a far corner of the room. Hands joined together and head bowed as if he's having a conversation with the Almighty.

Styles breathes, it's not out of relief, but concern. Never did he think he would see this day, his brother draped in a prison uniform.

"Don't tell me, you've become a pastor in just a few hours." These are his first words, Randall lifts his head. He looks strong, like the Randall he knows. "For what it's worth, orange looks good on you."

Randall acknowledges his statement with a faint smile, just at the corner of the left side of his mouth.

"I should take a picture for your wife, she's never seen you in anything but black."

Uh! Styles! Limit please. You've crossed the bridge...

The smile he worked hard to see vanishes, Randall's eyes follow him as he takes a seat.

"How is she?" Naturally, she is his first thought. Don't blame the man, he's obsessed with his wife.

"Do you want me to answer that?" Yep, it's that bad.

"My children, how are my children?" Yes! His pride and joy, he would choose them over anything.

"Amara hasn't told them, I saw Kwame. He didn't jump at me like he usually does, the boy sat on the kitchen table and played with his food."

Randall nods, he noted the change in his son last night and it's something he was wanting to look into the following morning.

Not only is Karma a b!tch, but fate wants to play tag team with it.

"My boy is not okay Styles, I need you to call my brother. Tell him that my family is falling apart." This is not what he would usually do, but it's time he

swallows his pride and ask for help.

“I don’t have to, Nqaba is on his way home. He called me fuming last night, asking how I let this happen.” Styles tells him, shaking his head in the process. It is so like Nqaba to want his twin babysat in his absence.

He did not mean to throw the blame card at Styles, he couldn’t control his rage after watching the news on line. He wanted to take it out on someone, his wife being off the list, the first person he called seemed like a good target.

“Please tell him to see me the second he steps foot in the country, something is going on with Kwame.”

Randall recites last night’s events to a flabbergasted Styles.

“He looked so uncomfortable in Amara’s arms, he insisted on sleeping on the far end of the bed and I had to be in the middle.”

“That’s strange, Amara would never hurt him.” Styles

concludes what he knows to be a fact.

“I know. He’ll open up to Nqaba, I know he will.” At least he hopes. “I hate that I’m here and away from my boy.”

More than that, he’s frustrated.

“I will get you out.” Styles.

“I know, I trust you.” Look at these two... “The one I don’t trust is that lawyer you got.”

“Lerumo is out of town, she’s his assistant.” Styles explains.

“I doubt she knows what she’s doing, I don’t want to spend a week in this place Styles.”

“Did I not say I’ll get you out?” The look in Styles’ eyes is genuine, Randall has no choice but to take it and go with it.

Visiting hours are over, the visitors are told to wrap it up. The brothers bid their farewells and go their separate ways.

“Dladla wants to see you.” The guard who led him says as they walk down the same hallway, bringing a frown to Styles’s face.

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

That’s strange, Dladla doesn’t want him anywhere near his precious Khethu, this he knows for sure.

“Who is he with?”

“I believe alone, I saw him walk his daughter out. Are you two friends? Maybe you can put in a good word for me, I really like his daughter. But she’s very unapproachable, her father makes it worse. He’s always prowling around her.” Styles glowers at the guard and the sincerity lain in his voice.

He shakes his head, remembering the nightmare he lived with that woman. It’s not that he didn’t love her, she was... well... her brain lived in a different dimension.

“I don’t have any relations with Dladla or his

daughter.” He says and walks past the prison officer, leaving the poor man disappointed.

ZITHA-

“Don’t give me that look, wengane. Do you think I will let you do as you please?” Gatsha is one son of a b!tch.

I’ve been trying to get back my phone since we left the house, Malindi has not left my side. The woman watches me like I would disappear in the blink of an eye. I’m sandwiched by these two animals, with no way to slip out and ask someone in this stuffy bus to lend me their phone.

“I need to pee, malume.” It’s been long since we boarded the bus, I had no choice but to follow them. There’s nothing I could’ve done, he took everything that’s mine. Including the money I had borrowed from Ulwazi’s gangster looking brother.

I’m praying he haunts me down and when he finds

me, I will risk it all and escape with him.

“Hold it, the driver will stop at a garage and we’re far from one.” Drop dead.

“I’m a woman, a pregnant woman. You can’t be serious.” I tell him.

I’m not sure where we are, it’s in the middle of nowhere. We’ve been on the road for a while now.

“Sorry driver, please stop the bus.” These two think I will be their puppet.

Grumbles fill the motor vehicle, before I’m regarded with cold and mean looks. Black people and complaining...

“Driver please stop” The second time my voice peaks. “I need to pee.”

More complaints.

“Thula wena, you’re embarrassing me.” Gatsha sputters, nudging me with his thick elbow. I stand, a hand pulls me back down. The act only aggravates me, causing me to shout at the roof top.

“Driver stop the damn bus, there is a pregnant woman who needs to pee. Unless you want me to do it in here.”

The bus stops instantly, much to the passenger’s annoyance. My uncle is going to explode any second now. His eyes are red with wrath, his bottom lip is quivering with unsaid words.

All eyes are on me, angry eyes I couldn’t care less about.

“You better hurry.” He seethes a whisper, gripping my biceps with a threat. I don’t acknowledge his nonsense and stand to leave the bus, eyes follow me as I walk down the aisle towards the door.

There’s also a heavy presence behind me, it’s Malindi. The witch...

“I’m not going to run if that’s what you think.” Do I look suspicious, I’m as innocent as a virgin.

She doesn’t answer, but slightly pushes me forward. Believe me when I say no one saw it, this fox will

burn.

“Do it behind the bus,” she’s crazy.

“And risk being seen? Never.”

“No one is going to see you here, I’ll cover you.” Yeah right!

“I’m sorry, but our relationship has not reached that level yet. It’s too soon, maybe... never” I pop malice.

“I’m not your friend Zithobile, I will smack that baby out of you.”

The woman is stupid, her words attest to it.

“Does Gatsha also surrender to boredom when you speak to him?” I fake a yawn and push her aside headed for the forest. She follows me still... Satan take your daughter. How am I going to put my plan into action with her following me like a damn dog?

There has to be a way to escape this woman.

“I’m going to do it behind that big tree.” I say pointing

at a tree a few feet from us. "Wait here."

She cackles at my words, "You city girls think village girls are dumb. I see right through you, Zithobile, your uncle said not to leave your side even if you're taking a shit."

"Wena, a girl? You can't be serious, Malindi, your time is up." She frowns and narrows her eyes at me, meanwhile mine are searching for something to get rid of her. I can't see the bus from here, it's hidden behind the big trees.

"Continue Zithobile and I will send you to your mother."

This is going to be my life basically, having my mother's memory thrown in my face. I don't have time to answer her, I've found the perfect weapon to deal with this woman. The big rock between my feet won't do much damage to her empty brain, it will just put her to sleep.

She scowls when I crouch in front of her after unzipping my pants to make it look real.

“Turn around Malindi, this is so uncomfortable.
Jeez”

I sizzle and add a tongue click, the huge age gape between us means nothing to me. Respect is earned not taken. I grab the rock, slowly stand up straight and smash it on the back of her head. She falls head first... a second passes, she's not moving. This is a favour I don't do for just anyone, her empty brain will work after this.

“You'll thank me later, grizza.”

My feet move in their own accord, leading me deep into the unearthly forest. The plan is to hide in it until they give up searching for me and leave, I'll then hitch hike back to Kenneth's place.

Someone is ought to stop for a girl like me, I'm not bad looking.

I'm not far ahead when a figure appears behind the trees I'm headed for, it's him. The ugly old fool.

He was hiding all this while. Quick on my thinking, I

swivel to my left. But a strange man appears from there. He looks ready to slaughter me, it's a teeth-gritting experience, I bite my tongue with nervousness and the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth.

What the fuck is going on? Was my uncle watching me the whole time? I'm not stopping for anyone, there won't be a way out if I make it to Nongoma.

"Grab her." Gatsha orders and like a predator, the man charges at me.

My feet take on a life of its own, they lead me to a different direction. I'm weaving through nature's hearty trees, and musty air that makes it difficult for me breathe.

They are right behind me, probably running faster. I knew skipping sports at school was going to come back to bite me, a donkey can run faster than me.

A scream erupts from my lungs and escapes through my mouth when big hands grab my waist from behind. I know it's not Gatsha, he's not that fit

to outrun me and he damn well knows it, hence he brought this bastard with him.

“Bring her here.” That’s my uncle’s voice shouting from a distance.

“No, let me go.” I kick and fight for freedom, his arms are tightly wrapped around my waist and the fight I have put on is nothing.

Gatsha nears us, working extra hard to pump air into his useless lungs. More people approach... black people like things. What is happening here is none of their business.

“You see, I told you she’s mentally ill.” The stupid uncle says, turning to face the few rubbernecks who have come to witness my failure. “You all saw my wife, she did that to her. She almost killed her.”

“What are you talking about?” I shout.

“I say we call the police on her.” There’s woman here, while others are in the bus feasting on pies and

streetwise two. She has the audacity to want me thrown in prison without hearing my side of the story.

“No, don’t call the police. She’s mentally unstable, we’re taking her back to the village, where my wife and I will look after her. She won’t survive jail.” He smirks at me, his eyes hinting at something sinister.

“Are you crazy malume? I am not mentally disturbed.”

“Zithobile, don’t embarrass me any further. These people already feel sorry for us, I hate being pitied by strangers.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, you bastard?” I’m screaming and thrashing about, the man gripping my waist refuses to let go and I can’t breathe... it’s getting harder to catch each breathe I’m entitled to.

“Let me go, you piece of shit.” He doesn’t heed my cry.

Gatsha steps closer, his eyes holding me hostage like this stranger’s arms.

“Nothing can beat the power of persuasion. While you left to release yourself, I took the chance to convince these people that you are mentally ill and they believed me. To save yourself, you have to play along, or they will kill you for what you did to my wife.”

He’s whispering this shit into my ears, the man eventually releases me at my uncle’s gesture.

“I’m not crazy, this man and his wife have forced me to go with them, against my will.”

I’m talking to myself here, these people are looking at me with pity in their eyes. They believe him, they believe Gatsha.

“Stop it Zithobile,” he shouts. “Stop embarrassing yourself, it’s enough now. Your aunt and I are trying to help you. Why can’t you see that?”

I ignore him and run to the only woman who followed men into a forest. Stupidity is not a respecter of persons.

“Please believe me, ma. I swear I’m telling the truth. I don’t want to go with them, they forced me, and I am not crazy.” She looks well in her early forties, with the most arrogant facial expression on her face.

“You need help sisi, let your uncle help you. This new generation thinks...”

“Please, spare me, I’m not interested.” I articulate, cutting her mid-sentence. Today is not my day to win.

I’m pulled aside by Gatsha, he grabs my chin and brings my head up, so my eyes are looking into his soulless eyes.

“I’m an old man, Zithobile. Which means I’m more experienced in this life thing. You can scream all you want, but none of these people will believe a girl who attacked a defenceless woman, over a respected old man. Don’t try me, little girl. I can be your worst nightmare, I wasn’t able to put a leash on your mother. I will rectify my mistakes with her daughter.”

His voice is kept low, I push his slimy hand off me. The disgusting bastard is challenging me.

“You think you can trap me, weGatsha? You’re not

that smart, that's why you're a sore loser. I will only be trapped as long as I want to stay, before you can blink, I will be free from your shackles and you will not see it coming."

I lift my head as frail as I am, weakness is something I refuse to bow down to. He makes sure to grab my hand and drags me back to the bus, Malindi is still out of it. They sat her on one of the seats. She better have a headache from hell when she wakes up.

Gatsha sits next to me, he leans in to whisper, "Wait till we get home, I will show you what I do to unruly kids."

"I'm not afraid of you, Gatsha and I hope you have all your knives hidden because I will strike back." His eyes widen at my comeback, my mother might have let them do as they pleased. Not me...

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-Seven

RANDALL-

Years ago...

He could've stayed home and comforted his daughter, perhaps look up numbers of a professional psychologist who would help her. Hypnosis is said to be the best therapy if not writing. Then again Randall is the type of man who acts now and thinks later.

The poor child had been subjected to watching live porn, her highly intoxicated mother having sex with her boyfriend on the couch. She went as far as adding the drugs she enjoyed in her daughter's food,

Randall's rage sky rocketed after hearing that. He rushed to his car and called Styles on his way to Boksburg to end a life that was not his to end.

Like usual his friend tried to talk him out of it, but Randall's anger was compared to that of a serial killer's urge to kill, he wasn't going to be satisfied until he watched Olivia fight for her life and succumbing to the claws of death.

"Don't kill her Randall, how will you explain this to Liya when she starts asking for her mother?" Styles said, adding coal to his friend's blazing fury. Randall put down the phone on him.

There was no way he was going to back down, a thought came to mind. Why not torture her till she begs for intimacy with death? That way he will not be implicated in her murder.

The plan was perfect, a perfect murder he would get away with.

You want your precious Olivia alive, get a defibrillator delivered to this address.

He sent the text to Styles who didn't question him, as long as Olivia was going to live.

It had been days since she was locked up in her house, strange men she didn't trust guarding every corner. When Randall arrived, Olivia was shocked as always. She was never going to get used to his visits, solely because they came with evil intentions. A premeditated murder that was due any time.

A few minutes after his arrival, the door opened and one of the men he hired walked in uninvited. He carried with him a small package.

"Boss, your package has arrived." He announced while standing behind him, Randall tilted his head to the side to leer at the man. As always, Styles delivered.

He slowly turned back to Olivia and acknowledged her with a bone-chilling smirk.

“Perfect, we can begin.” Randall coldly stated, excitement surging through his veins.

He took a rope from the coffee table, handed it to the man who tied it into a noose.

Frightened and anxious, she turned and started running, headed to the kitchen. An arm roughly encircled around her waist and pulled her back.

“Class is not over Olivia, I don’t remember dismissing you either. Where are you going?”

The lady would be less afraid if he were to shout and if his anger showed on his face. That quietness of his was the scariest thing she’d ever known.

“Please, don’t kill me.” She pleaded as he lugged her back to the living room.

“Who said anything about killing? I am not going to kill you.”

The announcement was scarier than the thought of dying, she shot a glare at him as he stood

condescending and unflinching with both hands in his pockets. The posture was demeaning, hinting at the highest level of disrespect.

“T- Then, what is the rope for?” The syllables cracked as they left her mouth

“Illustrations.” Randall answered.

Her eyes widened with shock and horror, it can't be good. “What do you mean?” Was her next question. Only to receive an eerie grin from him.

“I love this teacher- student relationship. You ask questions and I answer.” Cold, unsettling chills rushed through her, at his reply. Her eyes zipped back to the man who had tied the rope over the wooden beam on the ceiling and placed a chair under it.

“Randall please, tell me what I did, so I can ask for forgiveness.”

“What you did cannot be forgiven, Olivia.”

He was starting to annoy her with his calm

demeanour.

“Randall, I have been locked up in my house, and I didn’t do anything.”

“Oh really? What about feeding drugs to a 10 year old and having sex in front of her?”

Silence.

“What happened? You can’t speak now?”

“Why do you keep listening to Liya, Randall? She’s a child, she can’t tell the truth from a lie.”

Rage veiled his features, “Don’t fuck with me, Olivia. Children only speak the truth, Liyana doesn’t know the difference between right and wrong.”

“She’s a problematic child Randall, you’ll see for yourself.”

“Woman, you better stop lying. You’re further pissing me off.”

“I’m not lying.”

The comeback thundered into the living room, Olivia

gripped her hair in frustration, desperate for Randall to hear her out.

“Fuck you, Olivia. Not once has that child asked for you. Why is that? Children are close with their mothers, Liya’s story is different. She never talks about you or ask for you. I thought it was because Chioma had filled that void but, no. She has no connection with you, you fucking abused my baby.”

He gritted his teeth, eyes red and full of fury.

“I’m sorry Randall, I’m sorry.” Seeing no way out of her lies, Olivia went for an apology.

“The person you should be apologising to is not here. I swear, I will make sure that she forgets you ever existed. I will wipe out every memory she has of you.”

“You can’t do that, I mothered her. She’s my baby.”

“Please, don’t disgrace real mothers.”

He glanced at the man guarding the rope and sent a

gesture, the man went after her, she tried to run but, her feet were too slow. He had her pinned on the wall, Olivia fought for her life as he tied her hands from the back, before dragging her to the trap they had laid for her.

“Randall, I’m sorry.”

Screaming was a waste of breath, Randall’s heart had grown cold in that moment. The only thing that would satisfy him was seeing Olivia suffer.

Is this man aware that he is about to commit a grave sin?

He remembered the instructions as they were given to him by Randall. He lifted Olivia up and forced her to stand on the chair, she wriggled herself back to the ground.

“We can do this the whole night, Olivia, I have time.” Watching from the couch, Randall delivered impassively.

“Please, I’m sorry.” The number of apologies she offered had not changed her fate and by the looks of it, the father of her baby had made up his mind and Randall does not play with his words.

“I don’t want to die.”

Tears.

The man placed her back on top of the chair and put the hangman’s knot over her head down to her neck. Desperation and tears pooled in her eyes as she stared at Randall.

“Randy please, don’t do this. You said you won’t kill me.”

Feeling he’d wasted too much time, Randall stood, took the box from the table, ripped it open and pulled out a defibrillator. Olivia watched in horror as her mind failed to grasp what he planned to do with that.

His gaze found his employee who was constraining Olivia and gave him a head nod. Before she knew it,

the chair was kicked aside leaving Olivia's hanging body without support but the knot around her collar.

She dangled in the air, as the rope tightened by the second.

The absence of breath is akin to drowning, there is no option to swim up and that was the case with Olivia. Lack of breath was felt through her body, that feeling of tiredness and lassitude. Her lungs refused to give up on her, they worked hard to pump the needed oxygen. It was pointless as she felt as if she were drowning in the air.

The fast rate of her heart slackened in beat.... A slip-away took place in her body as her sight started to give up on her.

She blacked out.

Betrayal is a conscious choice for cold indifference, to take a personal gain instead of a loss that would have saved the other.

Unbeknownst to Randall, the kitchen window was slightly open and right there, a man stood with a phone directed at the gruesome scene in the living room. Recording everything that will one day send the king to a place he never thought he would enter; jail.

PRESENT DAY-

STYLES-

The guard tells him to wait in the office before assuring him that Dladla will be with him soon. The second the door is shut, his brain goes on detective mode although he's far from being one. Why does Dladla have an office in Sun City anyway?

He finds nothing useful in the cabinets, the stack of files on the desk catch his attention. He pages through a few, there's a brown file written UNSOLVED MURDER CASES.

Interesting!

He flips it open, there are pictures of women in it. The three women whose bodies were discovered buried in shallow graves. Okay... this is not what he's looking for.

He's here for his brother, Dladla was so confident back there. He had the confidence of a man who wears the victor's crown.

Styles closes the file and tosses it aside only to page through a few other files. Nothing grips his interest, maybe Dladla doesn't have anything.

His phone rings and baby shark comes on, Sihle was playing with his mobile again. Isn't she too old to be listening to baby shark? The caller ID displays his wife's name and picture. Instead of answering, he finds himself staring at the image.

Why does it feel like he saw this picture moments ago? A light bulb goes on in his head.

He doesn't take the call, she's probably fuming where she is, but he'll deal with her later. He's now looking at the file with the three women.

"Dammit." He whispers to himself. "Dammit."

It's louder the second time.

Taking the file with him is a risk he's willing to take, Dladla is old, he will probably think he misplaced the damn thing. He hides it in his jacket, and leaves the office.

There's no way he'll leave the premises without being searched, his eyes browse the place in search of someone who is desperate enough to make a quick buck.

Khethu's crush-ee.

The jailer spots him and rushes to him. The man must be smelling money on Sishi, he's like a puppy that wants to play.

"What would you do with R2000?" That's the best he could offer for now, he knows the man will come

back for more.

“Sho sho ngamla.” (boss)

R2000 would go a long way added to his salary. Mr. Risk-taker slides the file out and stealthily gives it to the guard, he's quick to catch what's happening and hides the file inside his oversized shirt.

“Meet me outside, you'll see a white Bentley.” Styles doesn't say anything more, he leaves hoping he won't bump into Dladla.

KWAME-

Waking up without his father next to him was darn near-close to the nightmares he is subjected to each time he gives in to sleep. He's been asking for him the whole day and no one is willing to give him answers.

First his sister said she had to go out, she will explain when she gets back. The day is almost over

and she's not home like she said she would. His mother took the day off, leave to be precise. These are trying times.

She has to be home with her kids. Kwame is oblivious to what is happening, like every child out there he is kept in the dark and he hates it. He needs his father, he doesn't feel safe without him in the house.

The news of his arrest has spread throughout the country, along the lines of him being a murderer, the fact that he is a king was brought up. It was a shock to Amara, if the news hits Ghana, Randall's grandfather will kill someone.

His mother walks in, she grimaces upon seeing the full plate in front of him. He feels her presence but doesn't look up.

"Why aren't you eating your food?" She's worried, he's different. The boy is a foodie like his father, he's as bubbly as his aunt Ifeanyi. This attitude is new

and it worries her. “Kwame...”

“Don’t call me that.” For the first time in his life he snaps at his mother, he grabs the plate of food and smashes it on the floor, it cracks and shatters into pieces.

“Kwame!” She’s shocked, so is he, tears rush to his eyes.

Amara sees it, instead of chiding the child for his impudence, she draws closer to inspect if he’s not hurt. But Kwame jolts up from the chair with such speed that he steps on broken glass.

“Be careful.” Amara yells and Grabs his hand to move him away from the shards, he winces in pain but takes it like a little man.

“Baby, I told you never to walk barefoot in the house, you’ve hurt yourself now.”

She sits him on top of the table and hurries to the kitchen to get a first aid kit. The blood doesn’t gush in a constant flow, but in time with the beating of his

heart... thick and sturdy, oozing out of his tiny feet. He's mesmerised by the crimson blood and so he starts swinging his legs in the air, drops splatter several inches from where he's seated.

Somehow the pain helps him forget. It casts out the thoughts and images tormenting him. His face has an unhealthy look to it, he woke up like this. His mother thinks it's caused by lack of sleep.

Amara is back before he could inspect the throbbing pain calling for his attention on the soles of his feet.

"Let me look at that." She says, taking his leg to clean it up. He whimpers at her touch and his eyes become hard, they stare into nothingness as if his soul has been ripped out of his body. His legs are not swinging in the carefree way they were anymore.

"Are you okay?" She cradles his cheek, wanting to make sure before cleaning up the wound.

He scoots further back in the table, he's quiet and still for a moment, frowning at his mother.

Days ago he was able to tolerate her touch, she made him feel safe. But now he's terrified by the sight of a woman.

“Kwame...” Comes out almost like a syringe plunged into his skin. Kwame jumps from the table, escaping his mother’s touch. The act brings confusion to Amara’s face.

“Baby...” He doesn’t respond as he runs out of the dining room leaving blood trails behind.

On his way to his room, his phone vibrates. He stops, his heart imitates his actions.

OPEN IT!!!

Pops up on the screen, last time he got into trouble for not opening the message, the punishment was severe. He can’t let that happen again and the only way to avoid it is to be a good boy.

Disgust courses through his veins as his eyes

behold the sight on the screen. The person in the video is unclothed... face hidden... touching themselves in places a child should not see. He's horrified by the sight, what terrifies him the most is how his name erotically sways out of that person's mouth.

His bleeding miniature feet scurry him to his room, he locks the door... throws the phone against the wall. He grabs a blanket from the bed, runs to lay on the corner of the room, taking up a fetal position and hides beneath it.

"What are you doing curled up on the floor? You look so stupid, get up from there and come here, Kwame." The voice in his head sarcastically and sharply demands. It's a familiar voice, one that capes him with fear.

"NO!" A shout from him as he covers his ears.

A sudden knock at the door adds to his delusion, until he hears him.

“Kwame, ngubaba. Vula mfana wami.” (It’s uncle, open my boy.)

That voice, it takes all the fear away.

The boy jumps up and runs to unlock the door, the same man who gives him the peace his father does is standing in front of him. Concern etched on his face, usually the little boy would attack him with a hug.

He waits to be told what to do, but Nqaba lifts him up, enwrapping him in his arms. Kwame tightens his arms around his uncle’s neck.

“It’s okay, my boy. I’m here now.”

The words are comforting, not more than his voice.

The boy snuffles and under his breath cries, “Make the voices stop uncle, they are in my head. Make them go away.”

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-Eight

KENNETH-

Is it too soon to call her his Zithobile? Whether, whatever there is between them is platonic or a brewing desire for each other, she is his something and he can't deny it.

He's done with his meetings, this gives him time to try her phone once more. For the umpteenth time, the white man tells him the number he has dialled is not available and that sends him off. There is one thing left to do and that is to drive to her house, if it means knocking at the door, then so be it.

He's never waited for a girl before, for anyone actually. People always follow him, so he is not familiar with the frustrations that come with waiting for someone.

An hour has gone by while parked two houses from her house and no sign of her, the confusion exceeds the anger he feels. He blames himself for expecting too much from her... that she would follow him, only for him to do the following.

Never did he think he would find himself in a situation where he's trailing behind a woman he hardly knows, Amara herself was never pursued like this.

Maybe because her destiny was tied with someone else, the path to her heart was occupied, leaving no way for him to tread on. Zithobile is way too different from the young innocent Amara he once knew, their comparison would be that of a lioness and a lamb... Zitha being the lioness.

That woman is driving him insane and he can't take it. There is no turning back now, he needs to know where she is. For a man who is not afraid of anything, his heart is surely acting up.

He knocks once and steps away from the doorway, it

swings open revealing a teenage girl who ogles without a word.

Staring is rude...

“Hello.”

He clears his throat but gets no response, his dubious eyes briefly take a glimpse into the house hoping for a sign of the woman he came for.

A smile marks the girl’s face, “Can I help you?”

“Is Zithobile here?” This is a risk he’s willing to take, probably because she’s about to move out and this shameful act ought to be pardoned.

“Zithobile?” She asks.

Confusion crashes over her, the smile she had offered him vanishes.

“She lives here, right?” Of course she does, he very well knows that.

“Yes but she’s not around at the moment. Are you her sugar daddy?”

Who has a belt? An unruly teenager has been spotted.

“Who’s at the door, Sizakele?” A much older feminine voice calls out from inside the house, a woman reveals herself from behind the door.

“It’s an old man, mama, he’s here for Zitha.”

“I’m her aunt, can I help you?”

Now is the time, he could take out a weapon and end her right here, but the right time does not necessarily provide the right place.

“I’m here for Zithobile.” Kenneth denies them a smile, his eyes are cold and stance that of a man you’d think twice of approaching.

“Who are you and why are you looking for my niece?”

The aunt tries for a firm glare, Kenneth’s indifference has her disconcerted. There’s something dark and heavy hovering around the stranger, drilling a bit of fear in her.

“He’s her sugar daddy, mama.” Sizakele articulates

and her aunt's eyes expand at the revelation... and Kenneth... well, the declaration is not a shocker. He knows these two to be toxic.

"Sizakele, go inside."

The girl obeys her mother.

Kenneth is growing excessively impatient, he doesn't usually associate with so many people. The ones he feels are worthy of his time are given attention.

"What do you want with Zitha?"

He finds no reason to give her an answer, hence the glare and folded arms. Now he's convinced that Zithobile is not home, that's all he needed to know. Either than that, he has no business being here.

"Zithobile is taking care of her sick cousin, she's not here."

Strange!

He doesn't believe her, however, he refuses to entertain her with more questions or call her out on her lies. He can find Zithobile on his own.

Kenneth pushes his hands into his pockets and begins his journey back to the car, no thank you or anything. His phone rings just in time.

“Sipho, talk to me.”

“She was seen boarding a bus to KZN.”

Sigh!

“Give me something I can work with Sipho, KZN is big.” We won’t blame him for snapping at his friend, it’s the frustration buzzing around him.

“I’m on it Kenneth, I’ll call you.”

The assurance from Sipho should put him at ease, but he’s too restless to take a breather. The car takes off in full speed, KZN might be big but he’ll make a plan when he gets there.

BAMBINDLOVU-

Time is not on his side, he’s meeting up with her again, like he promised when they spoke over the

phone. They seem to be spending too much time together, not that he's complaining.

He's got friends of course, a man of many words like him has to have someone to prattle with. However, she is different from his friends, firstly she's not a guy and secondly he enjoys her presence more than he would like to confess.

The smell of Ingrams follows him from the bathroom after the fifteen minute bath, he dresses in the bathroom for the sake of privacy.

The TV is loud, too loud the tenants should be complaining, but thanks to him, no one dares to question his mother. He shuts the door, briefly looks at the television, then his mother who is engrossed on the screen. She's watching the news, something about a murder... an arrest... a king... Ghana is mentioned somewhere in between.

"Rich people," she doesn't give any further detail, her son has to understand what she means which he does.

Thandikela is not a fan of the wealthy, it was never like that. Her husband whom she married despite the holes in his pockets, attained wealthy at a later stage in life. She believes that is what led him to infidelity. Basically, money took her husband away from her.

“Please turn that off, it’s upsetting you and I don’t like it.” He tells her and doesn’t wait for her to answer but slips into his side of the room to grab his wallet and car keys.

Television is a scam to keep the poor entertained while the rich make money, that’s what Bambindlovu would tell you. His ears have learned to block out any sounds coming from it, a skill he’s become proficient at over the years.

His mother has not blinked since the news started, it can’t be right, can it?

An elegant young woman appears on the TV screen, she’s surrounded by news reporters, bombarding her with questions. She is said to be the wife of the

murderer.

“No comment.” That’s all she keeps saying while rushing to get away from the choir of reporters.

Thandikela’s eyes are suddenly wide, she has seen her before on this very news channel. However, her son was never close by, her life would be over if he sees the young woman.

She doesn’t know much about her, except that she hit the jackpot when she married a rich man. When she appears on the screen to read the news, Thandikela would shed a tear, or two.

The young woman looks exactly like him, it is said girls resemble their fathers and she is a splitting image of him.

“I’m going out, don’t dish up for me.” Her son snaps her out of wherever her mind had taken her.

As he steps closer to give her a R100 note, her heart skids to the core of her stomach. With Shifty eyes, she grabs the remote and switches the TV off. His

response is a frown.

“What are you hiding?”

He’s inspecting her hesitant eyes and gets a headshake in return. If he were one to give in to paranoia, he would demand that she switches the TV back on.

“Going out with who?”

Thandikela finds a way out of her son’s probing gaze, she stashes the money inside her bra.

“With friends, MaOlady and that money is for Sindi. She’s been annoying me with her cravings, don’t let her go out. It’s already dark outside, there’s an app on her phone. She’ll show you how it’s done. Where is she, anyway?”

That’s a mouthful.

“Playing next door.”

Someone is at the door, they exchange final words before he’s given a curfew which he chortles at. He ambles out of the room to attend to the cautious

knock.

“Lili?” He’s shocked to see her. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d surprise you.” She sounds happy.

This is definitely a surprise, he wants to rebuke her, but that smile captures him. He finds himself drawn to her without a valid explanation, they are faithful in spending time with each other, as if it’s compulsory.

“Surprise? I thought we were taking things slow, you’re going full speed Lili and I might just run.” It’s a joke, she accepts it with slight dab on his shoulder. “I thought we were meeting at the spot.”

“Does it matter that I’m here? Let’s go.” She says, impatiently.

“Don’t tell me, you climbed those stairs. You should’ve called me and I would’ve have waited for you downstairs and you shouldn’t be here Lili, Hillbrow is not a safe place for a girl like you.”

He talks too much and it has her briefly rolling her

eyes.

“How is your father? Have you been to see him?” He mentally smacks himself, the question seems to have ruined her mood. Her face has turned hard, this is not what she is here for. Okay, it’s not a banger that she needs someone to talk and he’s just the right person. But, can she talk about her problems without actually talking about her problems?

Liyana frowns when his tall figure stands in front of her and hunches a smidgeon.

“And then?” Her question.

He can be random and unpredictable.

“Hop on.” Yep! That’s what he means.

“What? Why should I do that?” She really is confused as this is a casual thing to do.

“I’m giving you a piggyback ride, mfethu, I don’t do this for all my friends. You’re lucky you know, that?” Hop on Liyana, a least it’s not a donkey.

“Your ego is on another level, Bam-Bam.” It’s not a

complaint... it's not a compliment either. He side eyes her, showing her a contagious smile.

"Are you taking the free ride or not?" Amusement plays in his voice.

They are disturbed by her ringing phone, she pulls it out and sighs at the name on display.

"I have to take this." One would seek privacy when talking to their person over the phone, but not Liyana, Bambindlovu doesn't move either. He's gawking at her, anticipating the end of the call.

"I can't come." It's the first thing she has said since she took the call. Boredom lies in her face, the way her words leave her mouth and those arched bushy eyebrows.

"I can't see you right now, Zweli. I already made plans, surely you can't expect me to cancel them."

Poor Zwelethu... he calls back after Liyana disconnects the call.

Is Bambindlovu allowed to let frustration embrace

him? This is his time and Zwelethu is snatching it from him, so... I guess he is. Liyana does the unexpected and switches off her phone.

The ride is still on offer, Liyana jumps on his back.

“Yoh, mfethu. Don’t break my spine, I’ll force you to push me around if you put me in a wheelchair.”

Yes, he said it... She’s heavy. Her response is a hearty laughter, too close to his ear. He loves it.

His energy vibrations are in harmony with hers, he feels comfortable in her presence and they share more, than usual.

KWAME-

He let his uncle bath him, put him in an onesie and dress his wounds. He feels a bit better now that he’s here.

“Would you like me to read you a story?” He

remembers Kwame liking those, he was about six then. The child shakes his head. He's settled on the bed, Indian Style... glossy eyes riveted on Nqaba.

"I want my dad, please tell... my dad to come home." The declaration breaks the grown man's heart.

"I will tell him, son." It's a promise. "Do you want to tell me about the voices in your head?"

Nqaba sits on the edge of the bed.

Money bought him a ticket to see his brother after visiting hours. That's when Randall told him about his son and the strange behaviour he's been harbouring.

Nqaba and Randall found each other at a later stage in life, in their thirties. The twins were born in South Africa and separated at birth by their mother and aunt.

While Randall grew up in the royal house, in Ghana with a silver spoon in his mouth, his aunt disguising herself as his mother... Nqaba had to play a

Shepherd's role, herding cows in a village in KZN. He was raised by their mother and her husband Duma Biyase, oblivious to his true identity. The Okolie blood runs in his veins.

Fate seemed to bring the twins together through Neo, they became friends and two years later it was revealed that the two men are fraternal twins. The revelation strengthened their bond, they grew to love each other more. They never say it, but they know they would die for each other.

"They'll take me away if I don't behave, but I'm not a bad boy, uncle."

"Who will take you away?"

Kwame drops his eyes, clearly there is something in his chest and he's afraid to share it.

"Who will take you away? Is someone making you do things you don't want?"

Silence.

"Hey, look at me." A desperate plea from Nqaba, he

brings the boy's head up to get a look into his eyes. Maybe this way he will find the answers he's looking for.

"Am I not your father?"

"You are."

"Good and you know you can tell me anything, right?"

Kwame replies with a faint head nod, his eyes fall to his crossed legs.

"Is someone hurting you, Kwame?"

It's this name that has him frantically polishing his eyes, it's blemished and he hates it. Fear overwhelms him once again that he jumps on his uncle's lap and hides his face on his chest.

"Ple... please don't call me that." A cranky boy cries, whimpering.

Stunned by the youngster's defence, Nqaba gathers him into his arms, a frown claiming his features.

"But it is your name." He reminds him, not because he's forcing the name down on him but there's a secret behind this retort.

“I don’t want it, she calls me that, I hate it...I hate it.”
He’s shouting now, clenching his miniscule arms around Nqaba’s torso.

“Who? Your mother? Liyana?”

Kwame gives him a hysterical headshake.

“She said she loves my name, but I hate it, she doesn’t love me like she said. She— She makes me do things... I don’t want.”

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s okay R.J.”

The sobs get to him, his heart breaks when his children cry. Pushing it further will only upset the child, maybe they can continue tomorrow. Nqaba brings Kwame to his chest and rocks him back and forth. The plan is to put him to sleep.

It doesn’t take long for Kwame to fall into a slumber, Nqaba drapes a blanket over him. His wife should understand if he spends the night, there is a drowning child who needs to be rescued. His brother’s child.

When he's finally asleep, Nqaba stands to leave the room. But something grips his attention, he sees it through his outlying vision.

The little boy's cell phone abandoned on the floor, he picks it up and what he sees after unlocking it shocks him to his deepest core. Rage sizzles through him, disbelief trailing not far behind.

He falls into a state of panic at the terrible discovery... he's always been a strong being. But today, his body throws in the towel. His back hits the wall as he covers his mouth to stop himself from crying, however his tears are too determined, they stream down his face like a broken dam.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Thirty-Nine

He had to spend a few more minutes in his room, silently watching the young man tossing and turning under his blankets. Not once did he attempt to wake him up, afraid of looking him in the eye. He failed him, as his second father, he failed this little boy.

Parents are meant to protect their children from all evil, but this... this is an atrocity.

A tickle on the door and a worried Amara walks in, "Nqaba."

How can he face her after what he what saw; after what her child has been exposed to?

"How is he?" She asks.

A sniff is heard, he's crying... head dropped and fists clenched.

Amara hears the sniffles and peeks over, Nqaba

slightly tilts his head to the side, hiding his tears.

“What’s going on?” She’s talking to herself here, why is he not saying anything?

He leaves the room, she looks at her son one more time and follows her brother-in law to the lounge. Impatience resides in her quick steps, she finds him gulping down a glass of scotch or is it whiskey.

“What did Kwame tell you?” She’s angry, without a reason.

“Who is Chala?” His eyes still refuse to look at her, Amara frowns upon hearing the question. Why is he bringing up Kwame’s teacher?

“She’s Kwame’s class teacher.” Amara tells him, she’s growing weary. The wait is killing her.

“Kwame?” He chuckles, it’s cold and inexpressive.

“Did you know she’s been molesting your son?”

It can’t be... the look in her eyes says so.

“What did you say?” She heard him, alright. “Nqaba, what did you just say to me?”

She’s screaming and grabbing the collar of his shirt, like she has the right to.

“What am I going to tell my brother? How will I explain what happened to his son?” The questions are directed to no one, though he seeks for answers.

Amara’s eyes pop open, tears flow down her cheeks. Like Nqaba, failure taps her and swamps the entirety of her being. Her hands start trembling, she's unable to control herself.

“Not my son, Nqaba.” This is no time to grieve.

“She’s been sending him images and videos of herself naked and...” He clamps his teeth as the adulterated clips flash in his head. It’s disturbing and disgusting to think Kwame saw all of that.

“I want to see it.”

He can’t show her such filth, not after what she went through in her childhood.

“Where is the phone?” Amara.

“I can’t let you see that Amara, you won’t be able to take it.” Nqaba grunts, shaking his head in disapproval.

He’s trying to clog his tears.

“I want her arrested Nqaba, I want that woman behind bars.”

Oh dear Amara, are you sure you want her behind bars?

Nqaba doesn’t speak, nor does he look at her. He heaves a sigh and leaves the house. She knows how her family works, they are not saints, Nqaba can be excused, perhaps he’s gotten his hands dirty before, she might never know.

“Oh Randall, what has happened to our son?” She’s speaking to herself as she finds her way to Kwame’s room.

He’s still sleeping, brows crinkled as if he’s fighting

demons in his dreams. She tucks him in, sits on the bed and browses on her phone. If she remembers correctly, Chala was once a Mayor. Her address must be somewhere on Google, she types in her full name; Lerato Chala and... give Google a round of applause.

Amara copies the address and sends it to her brother in-law. Eyes squinted and jaw clamped she sends a deadly message, one that will taint her good girl image.

I WANT HER GONE!!!

The message is read, the receiver doesn't give a reply. She deletes it, locks her phone and goes back to watching her baby.

STYLES-

Neo insisted on a video call after hearing about Randall's arrest.

"I didn't tell him about the woman, he has too much on his plate."

"You still treat Uze like a baby, Stylos? I think you should tell him that you found the woman and killed her." There's judgement in Neo's voice.

This is exactly what had him running for his life, the killing, living your life on the edge and having to look over your shoulder every single second.

"I'll get him out of jail first, then I'll tell him. That woman was definitely sent by mkhize, I have no doubt about it." Styles.

"So, the old man has the balls to get even. I have always known Mkhize to be stupid, his sons are just like him. Baa tsoana. Speaking of his sons, you won't believe what I saw. His youngest is chowing your god-daughter."

Neo, it is better you stay where you are. We don't

light fires here anymore, at least they are trying not to.

“What are you saying?”

So much for staying away from trouble, Neo has made a blunder all the way from Nigeria.

“Liyana has a private account where she posts pictures of her le ntwana ea Nkomo.” (And Nkomo’s little brother.)

“Neo, are you sure of what you’re saying?”

“Ke tseba nko eo, Stylos. It belongs to the Mkhizes, they all have it le vrou ea hau.” (Your wife included.)

This is no joke, Neo is not fond of the Mkhizes, they have always given him weird vibes.

Styles drags a heavy breath as anger plunges through his bones, he loves Liyana like he loves Sihle. To have an Mkhize touching her inappropriately does not sit well with him.

“I’m going to kill him.” He bubbles, suddenly restless from the gnawing news. “That son of a bitch is using Liyana, he’s using her to get to Randall.”

“Remember how Mkhize was obsessed with young girls? What if this is his plan, his perfect revenge?” Neo and his active brain...

“I’m not going to let it happen, Mkhize will not hurt my brother, Neo. I’m going to kill him.”

The word kill is hated by the man living in Nigeria, it’s never a first option for him. Styles and Randall might not mind spilling blood, but he's different although he wants the Mkhize clan wiped out.

Neo is needed by his demanding wife, he sends his farewell to Styles with the promise to dig more information on Mkhize and his pest of a son.

*

*

It’s not a thing to watch her sleeping, tonight he can’t

help it. Could it be that he has taken his wife for granted?

His phone rings, it's his brother in law Nkomo. His chest heaves as he emanates a deep breath of exhaustion.

"I'm outside." Nkomo is usually polite enough to greet.

He carefully shuts the door lest he wakes his wife, he rushes to open and is met by a sweltering man who strides in like he has a drawer of his belongings somewhere in the house.

"Styles is it true?" Nkomo asks as Styles closes the door. "Is my sister's life in danger?"

"I won't let anything happen to her." It is a pledge he intends to keep. He sits down on a couch and crosses his legs. He's frustrating Nkomo, how can he look so calm at a time like this?

"So it's true? Those three women found resemble Sethu?" Nkomo is not going to sit until he's given the

answers he came here for.

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean someone is after her.”
Styles replies.

It couldn’t be a coincidence that all three of them had Sethu’s features.

“Don’t try to cover this up with lies, Styles, Neo told me everything and that another girl has gone missing.” Finally Nkomo takes a seat. “Sethu told me that someone has been following her.”

“What?” Shock pushes him to his feet, Sethu has never said anything to him. How could she keep such a thing? “Since when?”

A huff is what he gets from Nkomo, his friend has never been this ignorant. He grimaces.

“I’m not surprised that you’re in the dark about this, you have neglected your wife while trying to help Randall.” Okay, that hit home.

“I would know if my family was in danger,”

“Like you knew that there’s someone following my

sister?” Nkomo returns, yes, they are friends. But not where his sister is concerned. He came here as a brother not a friend. Styles sighs, gawking at a fuming Nkomo from across the table.

“Fair enough, don’t worry about my wife. I will protect her.” Off course he will, he loves her.

“I won’t stop worrying about my sister,” Nkomo’s comeback has Styles clenching his jaws. He’s not one to be told what to do in his household.

“Goodnight, Nkomo.” He bids, dismissing him and the conversation. The men engage in a staring contest, there’s suddenly an elephant in the room. Nkomo stands and walks out without another word uttered.

ZITHOBILE-

There are four rondavels in this compound, three being bedrooms and one a kitchen/eating place. As expected, I’m given the smallest rondavel. Nothing

hurts anymore, I am sure I was born in a different era. How does life reject one in such a cruel manner? Unfortunately, my door does not have a lock, that's why people like Sbongiseni wheel in as they please.

"What are you doing here?" I stand from the mattress.

Sbongiseni gives me the creeps, his parents want me to babysit a twenty eight-year-old man who looks at me like I'm about to give him a strip show. I will pass.

"Did my mother tell you, that you separate my clothes by colour when you wash them?" Heee!

"What does that have to do with me?" I'm glancing down at his arrogant face... like father like son.

"Aren't you here to look after me?" Haibo! The world might as well end now.

"I'm not here at all Sbongseni, just pretend that you can't see me and you and I will get along well." He snorts, I must've said something stupid for him to give me this attitude.

“This is funny, you know? Ubaba told me about your macho man tendencies. Not here sis wam, you will learn discipline in this house. I’m not trying to fight you, I just want us to get along. We’re family, are we not?”

“We’re family only when it’s convenient for you?” I still don’t understand why he’s in my room, it’s after 9:00pm. This is the rurals, the moon is high in the sky and witches are climbing trees where they gather for meetings.

He shrugs, condescendingly. I’m not comfortable with the look he’s giving me, he smiles and runs his tongue over his bottom lip.

“Please leave, I want to sleep.”

I know he won’t leave on his own accord, as I reach for the wheelchair to push him out, he snatches my hand and with one jolt pulls me to his lap.

Damn, I thought his hands aren’t working.

“Shit.” I cuss, trying to get up from his lap. But his

arms tightly hold me down, my blood boils.

“Let me go weSbongiseni.” I shout in Zulu, a language his stupid brain will understand.

“I can’t do that.” He’s sniffing my neck, I whimper with disgust when he licks my nape.

“Let me go you bastard, I’m going to kill you.” Is he crazy? We’re fucking cousins.

“You see Zithobile, I’ve been stuck in this wheelchair and this damn village my whole life. I fell into depression and attempted to take my life countless times, my father couldn’t watch his only beloved son lose to death.”

“What does that have to do with me?” Dammit, is he supposed to be this strong. I’m disgusted by his matchstick poking me and his slimy tongue grazing down my neck. I hate that I’m so weak, and can't fight him.

“Didn’t he tell you that you’re here for me, to cater to my needs?” He grabs my breasts and I lose it. I pull out a knife from my bra and thrust it on his thigh. He screams and this gives me a chance to escape his

hold. The door opens and Gatsha walks in, eyes wild with curiosity.

“What the fuck did you just do to my son?” He yells and darts to the idiot.

“Let him touch me again and I will amputate his legs and castrate that matchstick he calls a d!ck.” I told these people not to play with me. Sbongiseni is crying like a child.

“Baba take this knife out, it hurts.” He yells, tears flooding down his face. Gatsha was never gentle, look at him, even his structure looks rough. He grabs the knife and it sends his son on a screaming marathon.

“Baba, baba stop.” Meet the Mthombenis, a family of loud mouths. How was I born into this godforsaken family?

“Where is the man who was rubbing his vienna on my ass?” They glare at me, eyes stabbing.

“I hate you, Zithobile.” Sbongiseni yells.

Jesus fix this mess. I’m tired of these fights, my mother can’t be resting in peace. Not when her child’s life is this chaotic.

“I hate you too, all of you. I’m not afraid of anything. I have nothing to lose, if jail calls me, I will answer. Try me, Gatsha. Please try me.”

“Shut up, shut up Zithobile. Sbongiseni is very fragile, my son is in pain and you’re not sorry about what you did.” I thought Gatsha said he’s smart... What is this now?

“Oh please, it’s not a big deal. He’ll be fine, it’s not like he made use of the leg. Maybe he can join the Paralympics instead of being a pervert lusting after his own cousin. Now get out, I want to sleep.”

I slipped a hand under my pillow, their jaws drop when I flash another knife in the air.

“Do you still want to play malume?” He clicks his tongue before pushing his son out.

*

*

*

A/N: Not edited and proofread...

THANK YOU FOR 16000 FOLLOWERS

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-

This chapter contains explicit scenes, reader's discretion advised.

Zitha-

I'm woken up by the door being opened as it drags over the concrete floor, I shoot up to a sitting position at the sight of two silhouettes standing in my doorway.

The room is dim, I can barely make out who they are, as I blink the wooziness away, the door is slammed shut. A scream gushes from my mouth, the first thought is survival, it has me fishing for the knife under the pillow, my world crumbles to pieces as I realise that it's gone.

I have to fight for my life, so I jump from the bed and what feels like a punch to my face sends me back. A horrific scream echoes in the room, it surfaces from

the depths of my stomach.

As I attempt to jump from the mattress and run towards the door, a tall figure stands in front of me, blocking my path.

“Let’s see what your bravery will do for you this time.” The man says.

“Sbongiseni?” I yell, I’m not shocked that he’s in my room again, the fool is so predictable. But the fact that he’s standing before me, cloaking his secret with darkness like a demon. His body is slumped to the side as if his leg refuses to join forces with the other.

“Grab her, ndodana.” Gatsha’s voice orders from behind. Instinctively, I turn and large arms grab my waist from the back.

“NO! SBONGISENI, NO!”

I screech, kicking and flogging my arms in defence. It’s not fair that women get to be weak. God has left us in the mercy of men, they take advantage of their

power and do as they please.

He throws me on the bed, kicking and screaming as I am. He pins me down with his body, and presses his hand against my mouth. I'm fighting to free myself from him, but he's too strong. How am I so unlucky, twice in a night?

"Hurry up, Sbongiseni. This child is disrespectful, we're getting rid of that baby when you're done." Gatsha murmurs, hastily. His voice hinting at immorality.

"I'm trying, baba. She won't let me."

He's trying to rip my pyjama top open. I scratch his face and he groans in pain, jolting away from me to sit up and nurse his face. I use this opportunity to plunge a finger into the wound on his knee, I remember where I had stabbed him. It sends him screaming like the bitch he is, I kick him and he falls to the floor.

"Sbongiseni!" Gatsha shouts with urgency in his voice, running to his pig of a son,

I don't stay to find out if he faints due to pain but take off into the dark night, my body slams against something hard the moment I step outside.

"Come back here." I hear my uncle shout from behind me, but I'm not there, it's these pair of arms enfolded around me that have me screaming in terror. I pull out of the person's arms just in time for him to say, "Hey, it's me."

Relief surges through me at the sight of him, his face is a little clear under the moonlight. I attack him with a hug, wrapping my arms around him.

"You... you found me." I'm too emotional that I fail to stop myself from crying. Tears have their way with me when I feel his arms encircle around me. "What took you so long, Kenneth? I've been through so much and I'm so tired."

"You're going to be okay, I'm here now." He assures me and I trust him.

"Zithobile!"

I cling on to Kenneth as my uncle calls my name.

“Go to the car, I’ll be there now.” Kenneth demands.

“Come with me, please.” At this point, I don’t care if I look weak. I am terrified to my wits. Kenneth shreds me out of his arms, he looks down at me.

“I promise I will be there now.” He warmly reassures me, cupping my cheek. I ignore my uncle and cousin calling out to me as I rush to the car that’s parked outside the premises. I don’t know what Kenneth is going to do and I don’t care. I’m done with those people.

It doesn’t take long for him to join me in the car, he doesn’t look at me nor does he say anything. He’s driving us away from this godforsaken place, I am never coming back here and I won’t ask what he did back there.

*

*

*

I can't sleep, I keep seeing my uncle and his son ambushing me. It's a bad dream I can't escape.

Kenneth is somewhere in the house, he wouldn't tell me whose house this is, only that I'll be safe here, with him and we're going back to Johannesburg in the morning.

There are three bedrooms, a kitchen, living room and bathroom.

His room is not locked, there he is, sleeping on the bed, a blanket covering him waist down. The bedside lamp is on, making it easy for me to amble without having to be cautious.

No one makes me feel safe like he does, I know this is where I'm meant to be. With him, by his side. I tiptoe towards the bed and sleep beside him, scooting closer, so we're flush against each other. He opens his eyes probably when he feels the mattress shift under my movement.

"Zithobile?" He's shocked.

“I can’t sleep, my room is cold and I can’t stop thinking about my uncle and cousin.” I place my head on his chest and drape my hand over his torso, his body tenses.

“What are you doing here? Why are you not in your room?” Maybe he didn’t hear me the first time.

“Told you, I can’t sleep... Don’t chase me out please, Kenneth. Every time I close my eyes, all I see is my uncle and his crook of a son. Can you believe that idiot can walk?” He doesn’t care and he’s soundless.

I shuffle against his body, to get more comfortable.

“This is the part where your arms go around me. Must I teach you everything?” I say.

He’s too quiet, all I hear is his breathing, running away from him. One day he will hold me like I want him to, if only that one day could be today.

Seconds pass, they turn into minutes. His body is starting to relax.

“Kenny.”

“Hm?” He hums, seemingly sleepy. I thought he was uncomfortable.

“Thank you for everything, I don’t know how you managed to find me every time I got myself into trouble. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me, so far.”

He’s silent for a moment, I look up to meet his eyes.

“It’s not that you get yourself into trouble, it seems to find you.” I’m not going to argue with that. He sighs deeply and closes his eyes.

“Sleep.” He tells me.

I don’t oblige, instead stare at him. He is quiet a beautiful man at this range, ageing like fine wine.

“It’s late Zithobile, sleep.” He repeats, without parting his eyes open.

My lips turn up in a smile as I lay down to rest my head on his chest.

“I want to kiss you.” My witless mind spills the beans and compels me to lift my head up to find him staring back. His eyes are curious.

“What did you say?” He asks.

“Sondela ngithi manqa.” (Come close so I can give you a kiss.)

Shifting to lay on top of him, my hands find his cheeks, he freezes, holding his breath.

“Zithob...” To shut him up, I dip down and capture his mouth in a tender kiss. It doesn’t take long for him to sigh contentedly, he clutches his hands on my hips... there is no way I’m stopping, not when he makes me feel so good.

Gradually, I move our lips together. His hands rub my back, ever so lightly, holding me close to him.

“Won’t you remove my clothes?” I toss a question at him.

His eyebrows elevate and eyes narrow in the most seductive way that piques my interest. “That’s how they do it on TV, right?”

“I wouldn’t know and we shouldn’t be doing this.”
He’s lying, I know he wants me just as much.

“Are you a virgin?” I gaze down at him waiting for an answer, confusion masks his face.

“No.” His response is quick, profound. Men and their ego.

“Then, let’s do it. We’re both adults Kenneth and...”

“Zithobile, you’re...”

I press my lips against his and start grinding my hips down on him, making him release a low groan. I can feel his growing erection pressed against me. To stop my movement, he slides his strong hands down to my hips, holding me firm. I shudder at the tight grip and pull out of the kiss to glance into his half-lidded eyes.

They are full of lust, desire... need. It’s different, I have never been looked at like this, he makes me feel wanted although his words contradict with all of him.

“Don’t say I’m too young, please. Can’t I be yours for tonight? Just tonight Kenneth.”

“Dammit, Zithobile.” He grunts and flicks us over so

I'm beneath him, I love the grip of his hands on my waist. "Why are you bent on driving me insane?"

He mutters lowly in my ear, shivers ripple through me at the feeling of his warm breath against my ear. He brings his head up in time for me to give him a small smile, I look at him expectantly.

"Please," I breathe, chest heaving. My clitoris is calling out for attention and I will blow up if I don't answer. "Make me feel good."

He leans in, attaching our lips in an affectionate kiss. Warmth spreads all through me at the feeling of his lips on mine, he's kissing me like I matter, like I'm human. He stops, looks into my eyes.

"You're beautiful." Like he knows this is what I wanted to hear, the assurance in his eyes has me believing his words. His eyes are connecting something on my face, it dawns on me what he's looking at and Tshilidzi's words plunge into my head. "No man will ever love you when you look like this." Tshilidzi would say.

My eyes drop, insecurity kicks in.

“Every inch of you is beautiful.” The declaration from Kenneth almost reduces me to tears.

I wrap my hands around the back of his head and press a soft kiss to his lips.

“Do you want me?” I need to be sure, so I enjoy him fully.

“I do,” he doesn’t hesitate. He presses his hardened length against me for emphasis, I whimper under him. Almost losing all my senses.

He tattoos open-mouthed kisses along my shoulder, his warm breath drawing against my skin.

He uses a leg to spread mine open, and fits his big self in between my thighs. Our lips crash back together, the kiss is frenzied this time.

Kenneth finds his way down to my nether regions, leaving behind kisses I would probably feel after all of this is over.

My heart drops, I’m not entirely confident with how I

look down there and having vitiligo spread down to my inner thighs made me more cautious. No man has ever seen my sacred place.

Tshilidzi was more about pleasuring himself than exploring my body, he would thrust his pinky-finger of a pen!s inside me and start a one man marathon.

This is different, Kenneth is different, he's here, down there. Eyes wild with curiosity, he seems to like what he's seeing.

He presses his hand under my thigh, pushing my leg towards my chest.

"The baby," I bite my tongue after the complaint has escaped my mouth. Where did that come from? He stops, sudden worry stamped over his face.

"Did I hurt the baby?"

I shake my head at his question, it's not like the belly is big.

"No, just a warning." I bite my lip, my eyes searching his face momentarily. "You better not be thinking what I'm thinking."

He's frowning nervously.

"Maybe we should stop." He suggests.

Kenneth must not bore me.

"No," I jump in quicker than I should have. "The pot is boiling, you might as well add white star and cook the pap."

"What?" He asks, somewhat mystified by my response.

"What?" I answer with a question, looking like a grilled chicken in a hot oven at Checkers. He's down there, between my legs, glancing up at me as if all of this is normal. Is it possible to fall in love with a man's ability to ease into anything handed to him?

I'm there, I'm here, I'm in and there is no turning back at this point.

"You said something about boiling water and cooking pap." Did I say that? The anticipated orgasm must be clouding my mind, making me speak gibberish.

"I meant let's finish what we started, the baby is

fine.” I tell him.

No doubt whatsoever, he has picked up the desperation in my tone.

“Will it make a difference if I say I’ve been wanting to get into your pants since day one?” I ask.

It’s an honest question and this is my chance.

Kenneth ogles, mouth ajar, his eyes contracted in a way that has me squirmy and needy.

It must be raining outside, the man is silently laughing, head dropped and shoulders convulsing. It’s contagious, I want to laugh as well, but I’m horny and I need him inside me, now!

“Can we laugh later? I’m tired of holding my leg open.” I ask and reveal. He brings his head up, thank God his eyes are still lustful. The smirk gracing his lips is faint.

He straightens my legs and hovers over my build, kissing his way up to my face. The open-mouthed kisses drive me insane, my hands explore every inch

of his dark chocolate skin. I could cum, just from the way he touches me.

His dark eyes gleam, there's so much fire and desire bathing in them. My body is engulfed with heat under his intense gaze, he takes my lips into a tantalising kiss. My hands go in search of his head, I slip them into his dreads and untie the ponytail.

His dreadlocks fall between his face, covering his chiselled cheeks and jawline.

Having a man worship my innermost being is so fucking hot. God, if I ever doubted your existence. I must have been drunk that day.

Our garments are being hurriedly torn off our bodies and flung wildly around the room. The need to feel his bare skin on mine has become undeniable.

I nip at his jawline and throat, sprawling my lips towards his mouth. I guess he's impatient because he reaches for my mouth with his and confines my lips. His tongue stops dancing with mine as he pulls out of the kiss and looks at me, eyes red rimmed

and breath rapid.

“Shit!” He rasps.

His penis better be working, so help me God.

“What is it?”

“I don’t have a condom.”

What man walks around without a condom? Now I must miss out on fun because of a condom? Life never loved me.

“You must have one somewhere in your pockets, or in the car.” I’m pleading now.

“I don’t,” the audacity to tell me this.

“Kenneth, what do men buy when they make a stop at a petrol station? Don’t you guys go there to buy condoms and cigarettes?” This thing of his of raising his eyebrows, he looks shocked by my question.

“I don’t know about some men, but my car does not run on condoms, it runs on petrol. So that’s what I buy at a petrol station.” He replies, I’m unable to pick up anything from the tone of his voice.

This is not what I want to hear...

“Maybe you have one under your car seat.” He grimaces at my suggestion as if a can of baked beans was dropped on my head when I was a baby, at least I’m coming up with something. Both of us need to get laid, but I seem to be the only one coming up with a solution.

“Fine...” Surrendering is the only option, but... “I want to reach orgasm Kenny and you’re going to make me cum or no one is getting any sleep tonight because I’m going to be cranky the entire night.”

His eyes darken further with desire, his lips part as he releases a sensual breath. I moan with pleasure when his hands grip my hips, and the intense look in his eyes has me shifting as my clit jumps with excitement.

“I don’t know where you came from, but I am never letting you go after this.” He speaks. His expression is tailed by a ravenous kiss, his tongue plunges into

my mouth in search for mine. He's grinding his erection against my vagina while kissing me like I've never been kissed.

He leaves my lips throbbing and crying out for more of his kisses when he hides his face on the curve of my neck and starts trailing kisses down my body.

He parts my thighs, opening them to fit his big build as he slithers back down, leaving wet kisses. My hand finds his dreads, I grip them to push his head down to my nether regions while my hips buck with need.

He presses a palm to my lower abdomen, pushing me back down, his eyes find my frowning face.

"Let me take care of you." The tone of his voice causes my body to shudder pleasurably, I don't let go of his hair when he licks me.

"You taste nice," Did he just say I'm delectable? I doubt I am, but if he thinks so, then I guess I taste nice.

"You smell nice too, everything I see here looks and feels nice." Is he serious? Whose son is he?

Khabazela, come get your lad. He can't be real.

The corners of my eyes burn with hot tears, I swallow them back.

"I will forever cherish this moment Kenneth." I tell him, earnestly. He looks up at me and a ghost of a smile pulls up at the corner of his mouth.

"You're bravery and honesty is attractive, perhaps this is the pull that always brings me to you." The man is boosting my confidence.

He doesn't give me a chance to respond, his fingers cascade over my thighs like a pianist would skilfully trace the natural notes and sharps of his instrument.

I gasp when he flicks his tongue on my clitoris in a way that makes me moan the loudest and tighten my grip on his hair. His tongue is warm, wet and thoroughly curious. He's sucking and licking all my most sensitive spots, it's slow and soft, the wetness is the best part of all of this. I raise my head to find

his shoulders moving in a sensual way, the man is grinding on air and it's so fucking sexy.

He spends time on my clitoris, then at the opening of my vagina.

I'm suddenly overwhelmed by a ticklish sensation, it feels like a wet, soft, but powerful force is touching me in the most vulnerable way.

Thrusting his tongue in and out of me, not forgetting my clit, the most important part... Kenneth brings his two fingers up to my mouth and commands me to open, the order sends me on high, I almost lose it and cum.

Excitement calls upon my name as my lips part and he slithers his fingers into my mouth, I spin my tongue around his fingers allowing them to fuck my mouth.

"Kenneth..." I breathe and moan louder, gripping his hair tighter as I feel myself getting closer to my release. His focus is on my clitoris, he's flicking his tongue, giving me unmodified pleasure.

I'm close to bursting, but I feel it's too soon, so I try

to hold off, my breathing picks up. He ups the pace, throwing me over the edge and denying me the chance to let my whole being linger in this fantastical moment.

Knowing he's enjoying me sort of sets the bar for an overall sexual encounter, despite my insecurities.

I come undone as I release, his tongue continues to drive me nuts as he plunges it in and out of me and erotically harassing my clit in the process. My hand involuntarily pulls his dreads from overstimulation, I grip the bed sheet with the other, my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

My body intensely shudders as I let out a loud cry, I'm hunting my breath due to the impact of my orgasm.

Kenneth finds his way back to me, he buries his face on my neck before flipping us over so I'm lain on his chest. He wraps his arms around me, crushing me in a hug and covers us with a blanket.

I don't know what this means, the men I've been with

have never cuddled me after sex, well probably because I never let them. But this... this feels amazing.

“Kenny.” He doesn’t respond, but I know he heard me.
“What are we?”

I sound like a desperate whore.

“Not just for tonight, you’re mine forever Zithobile.”
He assures me, reminding me that I had asked him to make me his.

“Can you take me to church on Sunday?” My chin resting on his chest, I look up at him. His eyebrows are knitted in confusion.

“Church?”

I give him a nod.

“I want to thank God for you.” He smiles, it’s gone in a second. “I usually bath for ten minutes, Sunday morning I’m going to add an extra five minutes. It’s going to be a special day.”

Is that a smile I see on his face?

“How are you this crazy?” He queries.

Should I be offended by this question? I don't answer because I don't have one, so I rest my head back on his chest.

"You're really here, Zithobile. In my arms and in my bed." I don't know if it's a question or he's making sure.

"You're not dreaming in case you're wondering." I convince him.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-One

LIYANA-

She's always found it hard to open up to people, mainly her parents. They love her like nothing on earth and that she knows pretty well, but this love they have for her has led them to commit stupid mistakes.

She's never been an unruly child, missing classes, sleeping out, coming home late from wherever her paths had led on that particular day. Talking back to her stepmother or completely snubbing her.

She's hurting and mostly confused. She needs answers and the only person who has them is locked up.

The news about the arrest has spread like wild fire, her friends look at her with nothing but pity hence distancing herself from them. Zwelethu keeps

singing the “I told you so” song, Zitha is too busy fitting into her new secret life and Bambindlovu... well he’s here, beside her and has no plans of leaving. He’s gone to extents of not sleeping at home, one thing his mother truly hates. “No child of mine sleeps out when they have a bed at home.” Thandikela would say.

He has never defied his mother, especially for a girl, but this one is different. He can’t deny her even when everything in him tells him to.

“We’re going back home today.” He tells her, settling down on the edge of the bed. She looks at him and doesn’t say anything, he knows she’s not ready, but you can’t run away from your problems.

“Liyana, we’ve been in Mpumalanga for two days. Your family is worried about you, how long are you willing to hide?”

Mpumalanga is the last place they thought they would find themselves in, Liyana had asked him to

accompany her for a drive and two hours later, they found themselves in Emalahleni. It was too late and dark to drive back home, Liyana had said and suggested they book a guesthouse and stay for the night. One night turned to two, her reason being that she's not ready to go back home.

"I don't want to be there, they lied to me my whole life Bam-Bam. How was my father okay with me thinking my own mother hated me enough to choose a man over me?" She's leaning back against the headboard, arms folded on her chest, anger residing on her soft features.

"Maybe you should visit him, talk to him..." he's about to continue, but the headshake from her stops him.

"I don't ever want to see him, I hate him." She can't mean that... that man is her life.

"Anger makes us say things we would later regret, don't use your words carelessly Lili. Trust me, you don't want to be in the presence of regret." He would know because he's had the honour once upon a time.

“It’s been a week since he was arrested, since I found out the truth. My anger has long jumped ship, I’m demented with rage, Bam-bam. The only difference here is that I haven’t acted on it. I will never be able to look at my father and not see my mother’s blood on him.” She angrily pours her heart out, tears are not that familiar with her, however they are close, she blinks them away.

Bambindlovu frowns, Liyana has different sides to her. This one he’s never seen... the Liyana who gives in to anger.

“I grew up without a father, he chose another woman over my mother.” He introduces.

That’s what he was told, he doesn’t hold the memories to prove this statement. What he remembers about him is how his father loved him.

“I’m not allowed to meet my father’s family, maolady would disown me in a heartbeat and I can’t have that. You don’t know how much I crave to know them.

You're lucky Lili, you're lucky that you have a father. Hear him out. Don't take what you think you know and crucify him."

"I'm sorry, I've been so selfish and..."

"No," he clogs the rest of her words as he places a finger on her lips. "I like the selfish you, you know what else I like?" A mischievous smile plays at his lips.

"No, but you're going to tell me anyway." She predicts, the gloomy atmosphere is suddenly out the window.

"I like that you're selfish with me." He teases with a grin.

"No I'm not." Liyana argues, she's bashful all of a sudden. His eyebrows skyrocket, he knows she loves having him around, although she hasn't confessed to it.

"I haven't seen my mother in two days because someone didn't want me to go back home."

He's right, she's been clingy as well. When they got

to the guesthouse, Liyana insisted they share a room. Bambindlovu dismissed the idea, he wanted to stay with her but he's a man. Sure a man and a woman can be friends without anything sexual to it, but... his head has been entertaining things that could possibly hurt him in the long run.

Liyana shifts to latch her arms around his neck, he's taken off guard by the hug, but securely wraps his arms around her.

"Thank you for staying, you're a good person Sokalisa." She tells him in a soft voice. He hums in thought as he pulls out of the embrace, but her hand rubs the back of his neck before she places a soft kiss on his lips.

"Liyana?" This was unexpected.

A call interrupts them, Bambindlovu finds an opportunity to escape.

"I'm going to take a shower, attend to your call." He closes the door behind him, regret courses through her. She's not sure why she did that, maybe she's

become too needy.

She looks at Amara's call and rejects it.

Amara has been calling her since she left home, Liyana doesn't care. She's not ready to face her. Her stepmother tried to put her foot down, but Liyana is too hurt to listen to people who have lied to her, her entire life.

Amara is calling again, her stubbornness must be at play and Liyana knows she can't ignore her forever.

"Yes." That's how she answers her mother's call now.

"When are you coming home, Liya?" Her eyes chase the closed door, worry won't let her focus on this call. Kissing her friend was a mistake, she wants to go after him and offer an apology.

"I'm busy Amara."

Lies.

"Liyana don't shut me out please, I need to know if you're okay. R.J needs you around, he's going through a lot."

She has her own demons to fight, but she doesn't raise the issue. Although her brother is her life, she has no clue how to be there for him. There were red flags, his mood swings, staying home from school and having a password on his phone, he said a friend had put it there.

The child is nine and Liyana found it very inappropriate for him to have a secret code on his phone. The next time she spoke to him, she asked if he was hiding anything and when he said no she told him to remove it.

"I have to go." She throws the phone on the bed and grunts as worry engulfs her.

NQABA-

Unlike his twin brother, he doesn't act in a hurry. He's been stalking his prey for a week, waiting to strike when she least expects it.

He's outside the Chala residence, despite being a

teacher, the woman is living large. Gated community, high walls, electric gate. Cars are parked outside the house, today one of her sons is getting married. He knows because he investigated her with the help of his close friend Styles. He knows this would be a great opportunity to attack.

His phone rings, it's the call he's been expecting.

"Styles." He answers, not taking his eyes from the house.

"Thirty six year old, Lerato Debakiso Chala was born in the East Rand. Her parents moved to the states when she was ten, growing up, she was a problem child. Was in and out of jail throughout her teenage years. Guess what the felony was."

"Tell me."

"Child molestation. At sixteen, she worked as a child minder. The children she picked were all boys under the ages of nine. At eighteen, she was arrested for molesting a six year old. She was registered as a child offender at nineteen."

Styles really did his homework, Nqaba nods

impressed by the information given to him. It states that Mrs. Chala is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

"There's more," Styles introduces. "She's not qualified to be a teacher, she used fake documents to get the job."

"Do you have any clips for me?" Nqaba.

"Open your emails, everything is there. Don't mess this up Mzi." Styles says. "I still say let me put a bullet through her skull." He adds.

Wrong brother, Styles.

"No," Nqaba disagrees with a headshake. "Death will be an easy way out, I'm going to destroy her slowly."

"Do you, just don't get your hands dirty. Your wife won't be happy about it." It's all a joke to Styles, Nqaba shakes his head at the humour in his friend's voice.

“My son was molested Styles.” Anger finds its way back to him, he clenches his teeth and takes a deep breath.

“I know Mzi, and his father should know about this.” Styles means Randall.

Nqaba has been stalling, telling his brother that Kwame refuses to open up.

“I will tell him myself, let me first deal with this pedophile.”

“You know Randall won’t be happy about this, right?” Styles.

Nqaba’s phone beeps, it’s a call from his wife probably asking about his whereabouts.

“I have an incoming call, I’ll call you if I need anything.”

He thinks twice about taking Thandiwe’s call, but that means he will have to dig another lie.

BAMBINDLOVU-

“We'll talk.” He's dismissing her, the tone is enough to let her know that he doesn't want to be followed. He doesn't give her a look, he jumps out of the car without bidding Liyana goodbye. He's running into the flat like a mad person, his mother's distressed voice echoing in his head.

“MaOlady, MaOlady.” He shouts as he storms into the apartment, a tenant bumps into him on the corridor. There's no time to be polite, he finds his mother seated on the bed, chin resting on her palm and face wet with endless tears.

“Mama.” It's been forever since he called her that, her sullen face rises and tears seem to see that her pillar of strength has arrived. A heart wrenching sob emerges from her mouth, he would comfort her, but he's too worried about his sister.

“What happened mama?” She drops her eyes, unable to look at him. It happened in her care, she's never been so careless in all her life. Except that one time;

years ago when she let anger take the steering wheel and her life spiralled out of control.

“Where is my sister mama?” He expects an answer this time.

“They took your sister Sokalisa, they took my daughter from me.”

This is what she had said over the phone, she was too hysterical to explain.

“Who?” The question pulls a sigh out of Thandikela’s chest, she looks like she’s about to have a heart attack or fake one like she’s always done when her son interrogates her and she’s not ready to reveal her shame.

“Who took Sindisiwe, mama?” It’s not a norm that he raises his voice at her, he loves this woman for Pete’s sake. Thandikela is shaking in her boots, her lower lip quavering as she looks up at her son.

“Her father, he was here with his uncles. They said she belongs to them.”

“I knew it,” Bambindlovu hisses, anger surging through him. “Giving her the Vilakati surname was a mistake maOlady. I told you to change it, but no you were too in love with that fool Sambulo to listen to me.”

Too late to take the words back or the slap Thandikela just rewarded him for being impudent. She’s standing in front of him, fuming like lava. They hardly ever fight, maybe a few misunderstandings.

“Don’t you ever talk to me like that Sokalisa, yes I have made mistakes in my life, mistakes I am not proud of but...”

“Like keeping me away from my father’s family?”

What happened to not letting anger take over your emotions?

Thandikela’s eyes drop, this is the one topic she refuses to speak about. The woman is not proud of her past, however she’s trying and having her son victimise her sets her ten steps back.

Bambindlovu flips the curtain and dashes into his room, he doesn't expect his mother to follow him.

"How dare you Sokalisa? How dare you bring that thing into my house?"

He's got a gun which she knew nothing about, her voice becomes back ground noise because he knows she will complain until she has no words left to say. He flips the mattress over, pulls out a jacket and throws it on.

"Don't do this, Sokalisa please." Her son is not listening to her and it's not a good sign, he always listens to her.

"What are you going to do with that gun?" She questions.

Her footfalls resound behind him as he hurries towards the door, if he walks through that door, there is a possibility that she will never see him again.

"You are just like your father," she yells. Maybe this

is the only way to stop him. She lost her man all those years ago, she can't lose her son too. He stops and turns to his weeping—fragile looking mother.

“I told him not to go, I begged him not to go. But he didn't listen to me, he left.” Her voice trembles. “He chose her over me, over me and you. Even after giving him a son, I could never meet her standards.”

If she could rewind and erase this moment she would.

“You make it sound like you used me to trap my father.”

His words keep stinging, Thandikela's feebleness has her sobbing. Her eyes fall to her feet, she has said too much.

“Call the police please, let them handle this. I don't want to lose you, you're my only son.” Only a desperate brother can ignore a mother's plea.

“For all we know, Sambulo is half way to Swaziland

with Sindi. I am not going to lose my sister.” His final words and he’s out the door in a flash.

“Sokalisa, unгахambi. Oh Nkosi yami” (Don’t go.)

The tenants leave their room to inspect the noise, she’s on the floor weeping like a mother who has lost her son.

Bambindlovu is her life, sure she loves her kids equally. But there’s something about him that ties her to the past, a past she’s fighting to keep hidden, as wrong as it is, she would choose him over his sister.

“I can’t lose my son.” Thandikela mumbles to herself, she doesn’t know if he will come back home. What will she do without him?

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-two

Sponsored by: Neli Sane KaMyalezwa

AMARA-

It's a week after my husband's arrest and the police are on my doorstep flashing a search warrant.

There's sudden chaos as the police rush into my house, pushing past me and like bees they scatter all over the house, turning it upside down.

"You can't do this, it's trespassing." I holler at the chubby tall guy, he's too focused on that bloody lollipop to pay me any attention.

Through the chaos my son's voice echoes from the stairway, "Mom."

His eyes are wild and fearful, gazing at me. He

doesn't move when I gesture that he comes to me, I step closer and he takes a step back. It hurts me that he won't let me touch him, how do I take care of him when he won't let me.

"What's going on?" He questions as he folds his arms and leans against the stair rail.

He doesn't know about his father's arrest yet, it's easier to hide it from him when he's always at home. I pulled my son out of that school, as for Chala, Nqaba says he's got it under control. The matter has not been reported yet.

Going out has become impossible, there are crowds of reporters surrounding the premises.

"Baby..." I call out, my heart aching for him.

"Mashenge." Oh great!

I have managed to avoid aunt Petunia since Randall's arrest, now she's here with her husband

and brother in-law. They are standing at the wide opened door, waiting for me to invite them in, I don't like the look on Jonas' face.

"What's going on, Mashenge?" Uncle Jonas yells over the disorderly shouting and bustling in the house.

"Come in," I invite them in while tilting my head to the side to look at Kwame. He's still standing at the bottom of the stairs watching his grandparents like they are strangers.

"Grandpa Mhambi is here, baby." I try for a whisper, inching closer. He and Mhambi have a special bond. I think it has to do with the fact that Mhambi looks like my father, I could be wrong. But I've seen how he looks at Kwame, like he would jump in front of a bullet for him. His tender love and care is different from the one uncle Jonas offers.

"Who are these people in your house and why does the boy look fearful?" Petunia asks, standing beside me.

There are people in my house, that's why he looks fearful.

"I don't want to say anything in front of him aunty."

"I'll take him to his room, until these people leave."

She moves closer in attempt to take him but R.J tightly closes his eyes and shakes his head, covering his ears. Everyone is suddenly talking at the same time, while the police are turning my furniture upside down. The chaos is driving me crazy.

"What is this Mashenge? What have you done to the boy?" Can this woman wait?

"I will explain everything later. I need to take care of my son. Can you maybe come back tomorrow?"

"No," uncle Jonas snaps an answer. What the hell was I thinking asking him for a favour?

"Your house is falling apart, your husband is in jail and..." does Jonas sleep meditating on these words?

"Not now malume, please." I snap unintendedly.

"I will take the boy outside, ndodakazi. This place is

too crowded for him.” Uncle Mhambi offers, scooping Kwame up in his arms. He doesn’t flinch.

“Don’t call him Kwame, please. I will explain later.” I send a whisper into his ear, he gives me a strange look but nods still. R.J hides in his chest as uncle Mhambi walks them towards the backyard, where it’s less chaotic.

“Mrs. Okolie.” This detective infuriates me.

“Did you find anything?” I make sure he sees how annoyed I am.

“Would you kindly follow us to the police station, we need to ask you questions regarding...”

“I am not going anywhere with you,” I grunt through clamped teeth.

“Are you hiding something Mrs. Okolie?” The audacity to ask me this after destroying my house.

“Am I under arrest detective?”

“Mashenge.” That’s my uncle ready to tell me, I should not be talking to a man with such disrespect.

“No, uncle. Who do these people think they are? They come to my house and take my husband away without solid proof, now that they are unable to convict him, they decide to turn my house upside down. I have a little boy detective, who cries himself to bed at night because his father is not here to tuck him in.”

“Your husband should’ve thought of that before killing someone.” He ripostes, gazing at me with judgement in his eyes.

“For a person of the law, you should know that he is innocent until proven guilty, that little video you people have spread around means nothing. For all we know it could have been tempered with.” I clap back, I will lie for my husband if I have to.

It’s a good thing uncle Jonas is here, I won’t have to explain much when this cop leaves.

Before he could answer, one of his colleagues calls him and says they are cleared to leave. He stares as if giving me a warning, the police force follow each other out, leaving my house in utter ruin.

STYLES-

If he wasn't trying to fix things with his wife, he wouldn't go to the stupid lunch. He had to rush out of the office after receiving a text from her asking to meet up in Maboneng for lunch.

First he found it strange that she would suggest a place they hardly ever go to.

He finds parking and before jumping out of the car, grabs the red rose he bought at some flower shop. Something about putting a smile on her face.

He locks the car, weaves his way through crowds, searching for this "Rooftop BBQ." That's where the text said he will find her. He's not familiar with the place, so he walks around in circles until the only option left is to ask a bystander for direction.

It takes a few minutes to find the place, he is met by loud music and loud crowds talking above each other.

He stops at the entrance, eyes browsing the

spacious eatery. And there she is, seated on one of the white benches looking the happiest he's ever seen in months.

His eyes trained on his wife, Styles gingerly begins his walk. The faint smile on his face leisurely disperses at the man seated with his wife, Sethu didn't say they would have company. He thought it was going to be just the two of them.

As he nears, his heart clenches at the familiar old man seated with her. Sethu is the first to spot her husband, her demeanour shifts, face grows pale and eyes widen.

"Sethu?" An incredulous whisper as the rose tumbles to the floor.

The man tilts his head, a pompous smile on his face. He stands to meet Styles' height.

"Sishi, we meet again." The old man says, spitefully.

Now Styles hates surprises and Sethu knows that.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Styles would

control his anger, but he doesn't give a shit about what people think.

"I'm having lunch with my daughter." The man answers.

That smile on his face might as well be a weapon, it's stinging Styles in all the wrong places.

"I'm not talking to you, Mkhize." Styles edges closer, shoulders straight, eyes burning with rage.

"Styles no." Finally, the wife intervenes. She stands in the middle of the two men, facing Styles. Basically, the wife is shielding her father.

"What are you doing here Styles?" Really, Sethu?

"Don't play games with me, Sethu. Is this what you called me here for? To see this shit?" Angry eyes point at Mkhize.

"What? No! I— I didn't call you, Styles." She argues, he would pull out his phone and present evidence, but feels he doesn't have to justify his words.

"What are you doing with this man?" Styles hisses, eyes dark and heated.

“I told you Sishi, my daughter and...” Mkhize articulates, it’s the smug look on his face that piques Styles.

“How long has this been going on, Sethu?” Like a hot knife on butter, he cuts through Mkhize’s disdainful speech.

She seems nervous and can’t stop shaking, her mouth hangs open as if words will volunteer to step in and give her a hand. They fail her, leaving her mute and teary eyed. She knows that look on her husband’s face, he hates lies, he doesn’t forgive betrayal.

“I asked you a question Sethu.” His voice rises, it’s the anger clawing at him.

“Styles please, I- I can explain.”

Gosh, she’s crying. Lord have mercy.

“I’m listening.” It would be easier if she wasn’t looking into his eyes, he’s hurt and angry and she

can't stand it.

"He needed help Styles, I couldn't let my father leave under a bridge. He's the closest thing I have to family."

The heated look from Styles' face fades and his expression goes blank.

"The closest thing you have to family? The closest you have to family Sethu?" Styles shouts, the loudness of his voice would turn heads, but the music is lurid, people are drunk, it's a Saturday. There's always a couple arguing and no one cares.

"What about me, what about Sihle? Are we not your family?"

She's pregnant Styles, calm down please.

"That's not what I meant." Her voice cracks. The woman has always been fragile, look at her swimming in her own pool of tears. Mkhize offers hands of comfort by touching her shoulders. That only aggravates Styles further, he pulls his wife to

him. Mkhize pulls her back. And not only do the Mkhizes have big beaks, they have big hard heads too. Words of Neo Maake.

“Don’t touch my wife, you bastard.” Styles seethes, grabbing the collar of his shirt.

“She’s my daughter first Sishi, you should be kissing the ground I walk on. If it were not for me, Sethu would not be in this world.”

The Mkhizes love digging their own graves.

“Fuck you, Mkhize.” Styles throws a punch that sends the poor old man flying across the floor.

I guess I spoke too soon about people minding their own businesses, their necks are as long as a giraffe’s, eyes wide with wonder while some take videos because why not? Everyone wants to start a trend.

“Styles no, what have you done?” The daughter yells at her husband as she runs to help her fossil...

excuse me... as she runs to help her father.

“Let’s go home Sethu.” He hasn’t moved an inch. Sethu is too busy nursing her father’s bleeding nose to hear her husband’s authoritative command.

He marches towards them and Mkhize’s eyes widen with shock, he hides his wrinkled face on Sethu’s shoulder.

“Touch my father again and I will never forgive you.” Sethu threatens, glaring at the man she claims to love. Styles glares back unable to believe that this is his reticent wife, speaking to him in such a way in the presence of his enemy.

“Fuck this shit.” Styles grunts and nearly dashes out of the place in a fit of rage.

ZITHA-

Living with Kenneth has been nothing but blissful, peace tastes like nothing on earth. When we came back from Nongoma, Isisa had gone back to school, Fezekile is said to be visiting family, I'm not entirely sure what her story is and I don't care.

I'm too occupied with thoughts of how to get Kenneth into bed, I thought he would have asked me to move in to his room by now. The man is slow, I need to initiate everything. It's in the afternoon, he said we're going out for lunch in an hour. That gives me enough time to put my plan into action.

The last time I saw him he was in the lounge, I want to see his reaction, so I strip naked and mooch out of the room in search of him. There he is, in the kitchen gulping down a glass of water.

"Kenny."

"Mhh!" It takes him a good second to look at me, I almost rush to help when he starts choking. He's a big man, he'll be fine. His jaw drops and eyes expand

as he glances mesmerised by what he's seeing. He places the glass on the counter and clears his throat.

Mind you it took one night for the man to make me feel comfortable in my own skin, hence the confidence I'm wearing before him. I cross my legs while sending him a seductive smile.

"Is— Is it my birthday?" He stumbles on his words, his voice has suddenly become croaky, he clears his throat again as he notes the change in it.

"It can be your birthday if you want." I hint in a soft tone.

His eyes flicker around my body, his Adam's apple moves. Is it me or is this grown man nervous?

"You should get dressed Zithobile, anyone can walk in." Like I care.

"When am I shagging you, Kenny?"

"You mean when am I shagging you?" He corrects, negatively nodding his head.

I'm ready to give him my heart, maybe after he gives

me a piece of him. I have to know how he tastes before letting myself love him.

“We can shag each other, I don’t mind.”

I keep my voice sensual, sweat is bidding down his neck as his eyes trace every inch of my naked body.

His eyes don’t leave mine for one second as I toddle towards him to trail my hands down his chest to his carved torso. I bite my lower lip as I dip a hand down his pants, he flinches and grabs my waist to whisk me up. He lifts me as if I weigh nothing, sits me on the kitchen counter and stands between my legs, I release the abused flesh when a giggle swooshes past my lips while locking my legs around his waist.

“I want you inside me, Kenny.” He’s looking at me with knitted eyebrows, if he were light in complexion, his face would redden.

I pull his shirt over his head and toss it on the floor before leaning in to press bruising kisses on his chest.

He slightly pushes me back to make room for him to pepper kisses on my throat and collarbone. He

kisses down my chest to suck my hardened nipple, making me release an erotic moan. My back arches in pleasure when he flicks his tongue over my sensitive bud. I dig my fingers into his back and draw them down to the small of his back, savouring in the pleasure he's giving me.

I love being pleased by this man, may this last forever.

“KENNETH!”

Or maybe not... For the love of sex, who the hell is that?

We both freeze, holding our breaths... waiting.

“Kenneth, where are you?” The person calls again, I recognise that slimy voice.

“I thought Fezekile was out of town.” I say to Kenneth, annoyed to my tits. He steps away from me creating some distance between us, I hate this part

right here.

“Hide in the cupboard.” What?

“I’m not going to hide.” Imagine, me... hiding because of a single old woman.

“Zithobile, you’re naked. She can’t see you like this.” He puts me back down, picks up his shirt and wears it. I don’t understand why he’s panicking.

“Your aunt is a cock blocker, I don’t like her.” I protest, crossing my arms and standing ground. Can you believe the woman is still shouting his name? May she go mute, God hear my prayer.

“I know, but I need you to go in there.” He anxiously states.

“No, Kenneth. I’m not going to hide. I’ll tell her I was going to take a bath.”

Okay, that sounds stupid. The look in his eyes confirms my absurdity.

“You’re going to have to shove me in there, I’m not hiding Kenneth.”

His tall-self towers over me, he looks into my eyes... gently cradles my face, his thumbs tentatively massaging my cheek bones.

“I will never force you to do anything you’re not comfortable with.” He murmurs and kisses my forehead. I don’t know how to react to this so I shrug my shoulders, giving him a smile.

“Fine, I will go. But tonight, it’s me and you on your bed. I’m getting my happy ending one way or another.” I’m agreeing to nonsense. “I still hate your aunt.”

His hand on the small of my back, he leads me to the pantry full of eats, gives me an apologetic look before closing the door. This is my life, I have officially become a snack.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-Four

RANDALL-

The prison cell was a hallow cube of concrete, one way in, no windows. In there you could have no idea how much time had passed or even if it was night or day.

I understand Styles not being able to get me out in time, my lawyer was on it as well. Nonetheless, I don't need his services anymore. The charges have been dropped, I don't know what strings granduncle pulled but I'm home.

"Nqaba is here." Amara tells me this when I slip out of the bathroom after a long bath. She hands me a pair of black jeans with a black t-shirt. "He's in the backyard with nana."

I pull her into a hug, letting my hands land on her

baby bump.

“The baby is growing.” I observe in the mirror reflection. Amara agrees with a weak smile.

She tells me that my son is with his uncles, when I ask. She has no clue where Liyana is, I’m not really surprised.

“Please call Liyana, I need to talk to her,” are the words I leave my wife with, when I step out of our room.

I saunter around the large garden until I reach a large tree, its branches and leaves shading half the yard. My brother welcomes me with a hug, I bow my head as I turn to the grumpy looking old man. He’s sitting on a chair facing us.

“What were you thinking?” He exclaims, the question is merely directed to me. However since we found out we are twins, we’re both held accountable for whatever the other does.

“How could you be so careless Uze? When will you grow up? If you had come home like I had told you, this wouldn’t have happened.”

His voice is loud, anger residing in it. I could defend myself and tell him what really happened but I don’t dare to move an inch lest I fuel his anger.

“We’re all going back home, the time for you to sit on the throne has long passed.” The king coldly announces as he stands to his feet, he’s a tad above our height.

“Do I have to go as well?” The twin questions, hints of curiosity flooding in his voice.

“Yes, I refuse to baby bloody forty five year olds. For years we let you choose and decide your own life, draw your own path. If only I knew you were going to mess it up.” After he’s satisfied with the warning, he stands and leaves us in shocked silence.

“Did you see how old your uncle looks?” Nqabayomzi

asks, taking granduncle's seat. I catch the sarcasm laced in his voice.

"He's starting to look more like our grandfather, maybe he's right. Maybe it is time to go back home." I have no choice but to agree with the old man, but I haven't been to Ghana in years, and I am not sure I'm ready to go back.

"Why do I not trust that 'maybe?" He judges me with a look

"I don't trust it either." Nqabayomzi laughs at my response.

"There's something you need to know." He randomly announces when I sit down beside him.

I furrow my brows in confusion and rub my nape at the sudden strange discomfort tearing through me.

"It's about Kwame." He says, rubbing his hands together.

"Firstly, I need you to know that I exposed her in front of her family. Her husband and children

disowned her before the police officers took her away.”

“Who are you talking about and what does this person have anything to do with my son?” I ask prudently, while trying to remain calm.

“Mrs. Chala was Kwame’s teacher.”

“Get to the point Mzi.” I snap.

He stares, as if reading my expression.

Pain lacerates my heart as I listen to Nqabayomzi recite the horror my son went through. Rage creeps up on me as I fight to control my emotions.

I shoot up from the chair, Nqabayomzi follows suit and grabs my hand, halting my feet from striding into the house.

“She’s in jail, Randall, you’re not going to do anything to her.” Is he fucking kidding me?

“That woman molested my son and you expect me to do nothing about it?”

“Am I not Kwame’s uncle? You know I would do anything to keep him safe.”

“I want her dead, Mzi.”

“Chala does not deserve death, let her suffer alone in prison. I made sure her family disowned her, she has nothing now. Leave Chala to me, I’m going to make prison hell for her.” Nqabayomzi says, patting my slumped shoulder

I feel my chest closing in, it’s getting hard to breathe, so I sit back down. I’m handed a glass of water, the cold rush soothes my throat and chest.

“I think it’s time you reconsider, go back to Ghana and rule over your people. Give your family the new start they deserve, you all need it.” He advises, supportively.

Sitting on the throne is the least of my worries, I need to deal with my enemies first. Running away does not mean they will perish.

BAMBINDLOVU-

He didn't cry when his mother told him his father left them for another woman and was never coming back home. He didn't cry when she told him he had passed away.

However, he's crying for Liyana, he found her floating face down in the Vaal Dam somewhere in Vereeniging, she's unconscious. It wouldn't be the case if they were not silent again. After the vision shown to him, he didn't know which way to go. Johannesburg is a pretty damn big place, it took a minute but they finally led him to the right place.

Her car is nowhere in sight, making him wonder how she ended up here.

He places her on the ground to start resuscitating her, they are both soaking wet. He strips umqhele (head band) off his head and throws it aside. His hands are shaky when he tilts her head back to put his index and middle finger on either side of her windpipe.

There's a weak pulse.

The process is foreign to him, he's read about CPR and how to go about it but performing it is new to him. For easy access, he rips her top open. He intertwines his fingers together and centres them on her sternum, level with her nipples.

"Please let this work." He cheers himself on, pressing his hands down as deep as he could until he hears a crack.

His stupid tears won't stop flowing down his face. He doesn't understand them, he can't seem to grasp why he would shed tears over this woman. His ancestors must surely be playing a game with him.

"Come on Liyana." The syllables break along with his voice, there's a huge lump on his throat. He swallows to rid of it, to no avail. He's pumping her chest, praying, reciting the Buthelezi clan names and hoping someone or something up there hears him.

To his relief, Liyana coughs out water.

“That’s it Lili, come back to me.”

The gods must be in a good mood.

Her skin feels ice cold, she’s trembling and looking at him like he just pulled her out of hades. The next logical thing to do is drive her to the nearest hospital. He remembers seeing the sign Sebokeng Hospital on his way here.

The moment Liyana is secure in the back seat, he hops in. The caravan won’t start, it can’t be. It was running perfectly when he got here. He would call for help, but when he jumped into the water to rescue her, he wasn’t sane enough to remember he had a phone in his pocket.

The sun is setting, they are surrounded by vast, contorted trees. He thinks of carrying Liyana to the main road, perhaps they will catch a ride. A Question nudges him. Will she make it? The walk is estimated forty five to fifty minutes, probably less than ten by car.

Frustration licks him, he growls in anger and dashes

out of the car.

“Is this what you brought me here for? My sister is gone, I might never see her again and I am stuck in this goddamn place. Have I not been faithful to you? You’re practically strangers and I don’t owe you anything. It’s not my fault that I’m away from you, why are you punishing me?” He yells out all of his frustrations.

His attention shifts to the woman in the car, she might catch a severe cold if he doesn’t do something fast.

“I’m... freezing... Bam-Bam.” Liyana’s voice sounds. His clothes are wet as well, otherwise he would offer her.

“There’s only one way to keep you warm Lili.” The thought did cross his mind a while ago, but he respects her, her body is sacred. Then again, she will give up the ghost if he doesn’t help her. Bambindlovu jumps to the backseat after removing his wet clothes, leaving on a pair of boxer shorts.

He can hear his heart pounding in his ears as he posts himself next to her and encircles his arms around her naked body. She scoots closer at the tad heat from his body, head resting on his chest. Her pants are soaking wet, so this body heat will not work the way it should.

“Lili,” he calls softly.

“Mmh.” The response is unclear.

“You need to take off your jeans, at this point you’re at a risk of catching pneumonia. Do I have permission to do that?”

Where is Thandikela? There is a young man who deserves a pat on the shoulder. Liyana nods as a response, he positions her on the seat and rolls her pants off. The bra goes as well.

This should be counted as an achievement. Now with their bodies fully pressed together, his arms clip around her waist, rubbing his hands up and down her back to keep her warm.

Two halves of one holy grail.

Is his heart meant to be dancing the way it is? A conversation speeds up time, it's been over thirty minutes. He's telling her about his sister and her useless excuse of a father and how he will kill him one day and get his sister back. Liyana has been listening, she hasn't given anything back. Probably because the sound of her heart beat is fighting for her attention as well.

"How did you get here? Where is your car?" He harks back to when he arrived.

"I don't know what happened, one minute I was driving and the next the car was in the river, dragging me down with it. If it were not for the open window, I would have sank with it."

"So that creature I saw could have been the angel of death." He mumbles under his breath, she doesn't catch anything nor does she ask him to repeat what he said.

In this silent moment, the two are reminded that they are naked in each other's arms. Bambindlovu clears his throat before shifting on the seat to position himself properly.

"You must think I'm rude for not kissing you back." Anything to curb his brain, it's packed its belongings and on its way to god-knows where.

"It's not that I didn't want to kiss you back, I did. It's all I have been thinking about. It took everything in me not to rush back into your room and take you." Bambindlovu.

"Do it." Comes a weak voice with shattering teeth. He would look down at her so she sees the nervous look that has visited his face.

"Now?" He asks.

Of course now.

His bottom lip slides through the seams of his lips, only to release it in a millisecond. Liyana's arms clench around him, her head slightly tilts up. Facing

him now, she waits for the first move.

“Did I not brief you, mfethu? We’re stranded near a dam, it’s dark outside. Anything could be out there, ghosts, witches, devil worshippers.”

He prattles on, nervous as hell. She shuts him up with a peck on his lips. They are soft, warm.

Liyana bestrides him, his hands glide up and down her back. She shudders at the touch.

The two share a kiss, it’s rough and rushed. He’s like a starved sex freak, kissing her unprovoked, his fingers cling to the hem of her underwear and one pull rips it apart. Liyana gasps in shock, there’s something about his rough touches that has her aroused. He’s like a thug in search for something illegal.

Liyana is a princess, this has got to be against her rules... sex in the car?

“I don’t have protection.” Bummer.

“I only need to take the emergency contraceptive

within three days, I'm most certain we'll be home then." She sounds like a desperate virgin ready to give up the cookie for her high school crush.

Liyana waits for a kiss, Zwelethu would always shower her with tender kisses while asking if she's okay, although their sexual encounter is non-existent.

But this one seems like the type who would have sex without kissing her, his mouth is playing far away from hers. She's proven right when his two fingers find her clit, he taps it once... twice... she's ready for him, wet as the dam bearing witness to this moment. Her face hides in the crook of his neck, arms loop around him.

A scream emerges out of her mouth when he slides into her, at least the man is thoughtful enough to slow this one down. Nevertheless, the pain suffocates her whole being. She's holding on to him as if he's her reason for breathing.

He tilts his head back, looks into her eyes. They are

full of tears, his brows knit in confusion.

“Did I break something?” He’s stupid, she tensely laughs at his question. The corner of his mouth twitches a smidgeon, not sure if he should partake in the laughter or continue to worry.

Liyana presses her lips on his, the motion is enough to get him started again.

“Is this the part where you tell me to start the tumble dryer?” Bambindlovu pushes his length farther in, compelling her to wince at the slight pain. More than that it’s pleasurable, nothing she’s ever felt before.

“I’m not a tumble dryer Bam-Bam.” She tells him, breathlessly. She’s up close, he likes it here.

“You just met the tumble dryer, he’s inside you.” Liyana blushes at his answer. “You should know that I’m aromantic, so I’ve been told. I don’t say I love you unless it’s necessary and I mean it, I don’t know what love making is, I fuck and most girls...”

What the hell?

Liyana has to kiss him to stop him from uttering nonsense.

“Don’t talk about other girls when you’re buried inside me, Bam-Bam. What a way to ruin the mood.”
Who said people don’t complain during sex?

Liyana thrust down into him, a smirk visits his features, he tilts his hips up to meet hers. This drives him even deeper into her. It doesn’t take long for the tumble dryer to work. He’s groaning, hissing and moaning while driving her to the brink of insanity. His hands cup her perky breasts when Liyana arches her back at the pleasurable feeling. Head facing up and hands on his shoulders. She’s screaming, his name occasionally gracing her lips.

She has no experience, I guess it comes naturally because Bambindlovu is not complaining. The man is having a time of his life, pursuing an orgasm. This is a one man marathon, each racing to feel that magnificent explosion.

He’s roughly slamming into her, twirling his hips,

hands gripped on her hips to control her movements. The car is filled with erotic sounds, fog from their sweat and heavy breathing. Feeling like she's losing her mind, Liyana's hand slams against the window, as she doesn't know where to place it. Her screams go through the ceiling.

"Keep it down Lili... if someone comes here, they'll think I'm slaughtering you."

His warning goes undetected, she's too loud that it's starting to hurt his ears.

"You sound like a dying goat, am I that good?"
Bambindlovu questions.

Yet the man continues to thrust in and out of her.

Covering her mouth with his hand would be wrong, so he gags her mouth with her torn panties.

Have you ever?

Now he's glancing into her eyes, thrusting. His eyes are red, beads of sweat are dribbling down his shiny

forehead. He looks like a criminal who just got out of parole. His mouth is hanging open, the sound of his breathing can be likened to a hover machine.

Liyana reaches the peak of sexual arousal before him, convulsing like a Nokia 3310 in his arms. He's still running the race. Desperate to finish.

"Dammit!" He grunts, thrusting faster and harder into her. "I can't cum Lili, I need to stretch my legs."

Liyana is on her second wave, not bothered about his complaints.

Look at the Okolie ancestors, the princess is granted another orgasm.

Bmbindlovu is worn out, depleted to say the least.

"That's it, I have failed in life. Sex might as well be banned." the man grumbles, hands slumping to his sides and head falling back on the car seat as Liyana hides her face into his neck. She's breathing him in and seems to be loving the way he smells.

“What are you on about?” She’s still climbing down from her high.

“I didn’t cum, I was basically a blow up doll helping you reach an orgasm. I’ll have to finish this at home.” He replies.

Liyana can’t help but laugh at the enlightenment.

Someone’s son has forgotten he has a sister to find.
Fear sex...

“I can’t believe we just had sex.” Liyana points out, it’s only kicking in now.

“You mean you just had sex.” This man is not happy.

“Come on, Bam-Bam.”

He shakes his head in disagreement.

“Nope, I refuse to accept lies. In this case, you were Caster Semenya and I was Oscar Pistorius without the prosthetic legs.” His complaint comes with puckered lips.

Liyana cups his face, placing a lingering kiss.

“You don’t understand what just happened. I’ve never had sex with a man before.” She honestly tells him. His eyes widen, he’s not entirely sure what’s happening here.

“You’re a lesbian?” He questions, still buried deep inside her.

“No, my ancestors have never allowed me to go to this extent with a man before. What just happened now must mean something.”

Bambindlovu’s mouth drops, brows furrow as he takes on a headshake.

“Okay... I see... so your ancestors have used me to make their daughter cum? Wow! Is this my purpose in life mfethu? Is this what I was born for?”

“Really? You’re not serious?”

He doesn’t get her and she has no clue how to explain.

“Please, I’m not okay.” His hand shoots up in

defence. "I need compensation, imagine using a whole me. How do you sue the underground gang? I will never recover from this." Bambindlovu.

Liyana sees no end to this, a seductive smile takes over her lips as she starts grinding on him.

His arms fold across his chest, "You owe me an orgasm mfethu."

"You owe me multiple kisses, I can't believe you slept with me and didn't even kiss me." Liyana.

"I did kiss you."

"No." She protests.

It's getting hard to ignore the warmth surrounding his erection. Her walls clench and unclench around his length as she slowly twirls her hips.

"You didn't." Liyana continues, she's moaning and can barely keep her eyes open.

"We started with a kiss, sex is like eating McDonald's. You start with the chips, then eat the burger and wash everything down with the cold drink. I haven't

gotten my cold drink, I'm still thirsty." He grips her hips to gain control over her movements, Liyana looks defeated. She knows she will not be getting her kisses.

*

*

*©

A/N: Picture of Bam-Bam...

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-Five

AMARA-

“I don’t understand why she would lie to me, have I not been good to her?” He gulps down an entire glass of beer after the words fall out of his mouth. It’s very rare to see Styles intoxicated, I don’t know which one is better, drinking yourself silly or drowning your lungs in toxic smoke.

“Take the alcohol away from him, Randall.” I whisper to the man seated next to me.

“Let him be, he needs it to numb the pain.”

“He’ll be nursing a terrible headache in the morning,”

“How else will he learn not to drink his problems away? This is why I stick to smoking.” Now he admits he’s a smoker?

“Your granduncle might walk in, Randall. What will you tell him?”

“That a man is heartbroken and only alcohol can make him feel better.” I give up...

He rips his gaze from Styles and turns to look at me.

“Don’t call Sethu,” is what he says to me, as if that’s what I’ll do.

Who am I kidding? I was planning on calling her and telling her off. The audacity to betray us like this.

“You know, I thought she was my friend?” I vent to him, he doesn’t seem to care about this so called friendship that has me bothered. I’m actually talking to myself here.

My eyes snap up to the source of the loud burp, it’s barely 9pm, Styles hasn’t eaten anything, yet he’s turning into a drunken master.

“I agree with Randall, don’t call her.” A very drunk voice stutters, he’s now lazed on the three-seater couch, facing up. “She’s probably with her father, we

wouldn't want to disturb her now, would we?"

"Uze!" An uncompromising-nonchalant voice calls. We turn to find his granduncle standing on the stairway, his eyes are judging Styles and probably everything he is.

"A word?" He growls lowly.

It could be that he's a king, but that man does not have a friendly face.

"Watch over him, I'll be back." Randall gives an order before standing to meet his granduncle. They disappear into one of the rooms, I can only wonder what he wants to talk about.

I need to check on Kwame, Mhambi brought him back a while ago. I'm glad it was him and not the devil's agent, uncle Jonas.

What do I do with Styles?

"Where is Liyana?" Styles randomly asks, still counting the tiles on the ceiling.

“I’m not sure, I believe she’s okay though. I didn’t want to crowd her space so I left her alone.” Maybe it was stupid of me, she didn’t sleep at home for two days. I thought Randall would go crazy with rage, strangely he’s not scrapping walls out of anger.

Styles sits up from the couch, clumsily spreading his legs open like all men do when they sit. His shifty gaze is stuck on me.

“You’re the right person to tell this to, it’s up to you if you want to tell Randall.” He passes his phone over to me, I’m dazed, unable to decipher why I have this gadget in my hand.

“Scroll to the right, twice.”

I do as he tells me, “That’s Liyana and Nkomo’s little brother. They are in a relationship, Randall will probably lose it upon hearing this.” Styles says.

Guardedly, I study the picture. “I’ve seen this man before.”

“Yes, that’s Nkomo’s brother.” Styles answers, I barely noticed the remark escape my mouth.

“No, that’s not it, Styles.” I’m on my feet, scanning the picture with my eyes. There’s a collective silence when I close my eyes and let down the mental barrier I had up since I’ve been trying to heal without going to therapy. Immediately, my head pounds with memoirs of that night in the hotel.

“This is him.” I exclaim, my voice and face filled with unforeseen tears. “This is him Styles, this is the man from that night.”

“Are you sure?” Styles asks, he stands, abruptly looking sober. He takes the phone back, his brows furrow as he leers down at the picture of Liyana and the man he claims is Nkomo’s brother. The man who molested me that night.

“Are you sure Amara?” He’s asking again. I nod my spinning head. Tears roll down my face and I nippily cover my mouth as a choked sob escapes.

“His face was vague at first, but now that I’m looking

at his picture...” Pain ripples through me as a second sob surges out of my mouth. My knees buckle and my body fails me, sending me crashing on the couch.

“Amara.” I hear Randall’s concerned voice. He’s next to me in a split second, eyes hysterically searching my body for damages. His large hand sheepishly caresses my belly.

“Are you okay? Why are you crying?” He asks.

I snivel, locking my teary eyes with his fearful ones. Words fail me, I’m unable to speak.

“Styles, what’s happening? Why is she crying?”

“Mkhize has gotten to Liyana.” Styles reveals.

I am afraid to find out how Randall will deal with this.

ZITHA-

Just when I thought life with Kenneth would be a walk in the park, Fezekile has gone and done her

worst. Lord, are you punishing me for wanting to live lavishly? Kenneth is my ticket to a good life and I'm not about to let anyone come in my way.

"Sisi, Khabazela doesn't eat baked beans." I roll my eyes at her. "If MaMkhize sees you, she will explode. Baked beans and mayonnaise is not a salad."

"As long as it has mayonnaise, then it's a salad." I say, as I continue to pour the beans into a bowl. She gives me a look when I add three full tablespoons of mayonnaise.

"Please grate the cabbage and carrots, I want to make a coleslaw." I'm given another stare. "What is it?"

"Khabazela doesn't eat any of these things, pap and meat will be fine." I will chop her to pieces if she continues to annoy me.

"Did he tell you any of this?" I ask, placing my bean salad into the fridge.

"No, but he is a Zulu man. They don't eat this type of

food, it doesn't make them full."

"I made this for Kenneth last week and he loved it. In fact he asked for seconds and finished off the leftovers the following day." I lie through my teeth, taking up the eye roll again which I should get paid for. I hate competition.

Call me evil, I couldn't care less what she thinks about me. I hate everything about her, I hate her innocent face. I hate her big brown cartoon eyes. I hate her soft voice that darn near melts my heart.

I spoke too soon when I said Kenneth had clothed me with confidence, this girl has pushed me back into a bubble of insecurity.

"Is there anything you want me to help you with?"
Why would I want help from her?

"The cabbage has your name written on it, Ntombo."
She giggles at my response. I don't find anything funny in what I said.

“It’s Mantfombi, sisi.”

She corrects me and takes the wooden spoon from my hand to stir the stew in the pot.

What kind of a name is Mantfombi anyway? Apparently Mantfombi and Kenneth grew up together. Her mother and his mother were best friends, I’m still waiting for him to explain the entire story to me and why she is living with us.

I don’t like how he’s protective of her, I don’t like the hug she gave him the day that witch Fezekile brought her home from some village. I was stuck in a pantry, with no way out until I heard a young feminine voice and had to take a peek only to find her with her arms around my property.

“Sorry, I thought it was burning.” She explains her forwardness, she’s testing my patience.

“Why are you in the kitchen, Ntombo?”

Her innocent-looking face drops, I hope she’s not

going to cry on me. I can't stand criers, they make things awkward for me.

"I want to help cook for Khabazela." She says.

If she calls him Khabazela one more time, I will scream.

"How old are you?" I ask, letting my eyes sweep through her body. The long red dress draped on her is hideous, although it flows down her body perfectly.

Fezekile must be behind the head wrap, I hate the colour purple. As to how they thought these two colours would merge flawlessly, heaven only knows.

"Thirty two, I will be turning thirty three in December." Her reply is modest. This woman does not look a day over twenty two, she's full figured. Looking like freshly baked bread, those hips definitely don't lie.

She's not wearing a bra under that dress, her nipples are unashamedly poking the fabric, maybe if her breasts weren't so plump I wouldn't have a problem

with it. Then there's her flawless tanned skin, I'm not okay with this.

"Let me guess," my eyes pierce through hers, she doesn't hold the stare. There must be something on the floor, that she keeps taking her eyes there.

"You're a virgin, right?" I'm curious.

"Haibo sisi!" The smooth drawl gives me the answer, she is a virgin.

"Goodness-gracious, Ntombo. How did you survive all those years without sex? Please tell me, you at least touch yourself." I doubt it and by the way she's blushing.

Her leg starts drawing circles on the floor, she's biting her nails.

"Sisi... I'm not sure this is something we should be discussing, especially with Khabazela in the house." She switches off the stove and I don't like it. I'm the chef for the night.

"His name is Kenneth." I correct, exasperated with

how she regards him.

“Huh!” Her eyes expand as if I have blasphemed against God. “You can’t call him by name, it is disrespectful.”

“What’s disrespectful?”

His cologne hovers into the kitchen before his face appears, my eyes dart to the shy girl and dear God... she is blushing again. The look in his eyes when he’s looking at her makes me want to gag. It’s like he’d give her heaven and earth if given a chance.

“MaMthembu.” I’m going to throw up. This is what he calls her, by the way.

“Khabazela, ngabe ubaba uyaphila?” (How are you?)

She says and this man I’m pursuing seems to be loving the respect deriving from this 32-year-old virgin. Someone book me a flight to KwaNongoma, I need lessons on how to catch a rich Zulu man. Kenneth specifically.

“I’m fine, how are you?” He stands beside her, tall and majestic in his black attire. The aura this man emanates is too powerful for one to ignore.

“I’m fine, Zithobile and I are preparing food for you. It will be ready soon.” She tells him.

“I think we should go out Khabazela,” my insecure ass jumps in. I stand in the midst of them.

“Khabazela?” He’s confused.

“That’s your totem right?”

“Yes... but, why are you calling me Khabazela? It feels weird.”

“But Ntombo calls you Khabazela?” Yeyi, Yeyi! This man must not, he must not.

“MaMthembu called me that since we were kids, it sounds weird when you say it.”

Great, so they are here regarding each other with so much respect while I’m stuck with his western name.

“Fine Kenneth, let’s go out to eat. I’m craving spicy chicken and rice from Nandos.”

“Go change, I’ll be waiting outside.” Go change?

“Is the question directed to me or Ntombo?” I ask, ready to clap back.

“It’s Mantfombi, sisi.” She corrects from behind me, I will not be giving her a second of my time. Kenneth peeps over, he’s looking at her and I’m trying my best to hide her from him. He should be looking at me and only me.

“MaMthembu, don’t you have a dress you can borrow Zithobile?” MaMthembu... sigh!

Wait... what?

“You want me to wear her clothes?” My voice rises just as the wicked witch of the west walks in.

“Mantfombi has a variety of beautiful dresses, she dresses like a respectful young woman. Someone one would take seriously.” Fezekile has a big mouth, I officially hate her.

“I know the perfect dress for you sisi.” Mantfombi says. I am not her sister, what the hell?

“Kenneth, is there something wrong with my outfit?” I ignore the two women and give all my attention to this tall giant in front of me.

“Uh... N... No.” He’s stammering, he’s lying to me. This is something I have picked up recently, he stammers when he lies. May he bite his tongue, one of these days.

“What do you mean, no?” Fezekile cuts in. “She’s wearing a body suit with leather tights. Can she even breathe in there? I’m sorry, but a woman needs to dress for her body, we can practically see everything.”

“Not now MaMkhize.” Kenneth reproaches, firmly.

“I actually love her outfit, you look beautiful sisi.” The new tenant sings my praises. I would find her adorable if I didn’t feel intimidated by her presence in this house.

“Thank you, Ntombo. Let’s go Kenneth, I’m hungry.” I

take his hand, he holds me back. "Don't wait up." I tell the two women.

"Take Mantfombi with you, show her around joburg." Fezekile says, pushing her towards Kenneth.

"I don't think that's a good idea, maybe next time." I argue.

This cannot be happening to me.

"I'm sure MaMthembu would love that." Kenneth says, is he smiling at her or am I seeing things?

I can't be that petty girl in the room, I have no choice but to agree.

"Go change Ntombo, we'll wait for you in the car." I tell her, I need to rush to claim the front seat. This one and Kenneth are too close for my liking.

"There's no need, she looks fine," Is that Kenneth's voice? Jesus tell me this man did not just say what I think he said.

"No she's not, she can't go out wearing this dress. Look at the sleeves." She will thank me later.

“What’s wrong with the sleeves?” Sigh! Kenneth again. Mantfombi has taken time to inspect the unsightly short sleeves of her red dress.

“My grandmother once had a curtain that looked exactly like this, I wouldn’t be surprised if it was made from the same material.” Lies are good for the soul sometimes.

Someone gasps, it’s Fezekile.

“I said what I said, Ntombo will thank me later. I don’t want you trending for the wrong reasons. People make memes out of anything.” They better take me seriously.

“I doubt that will happen, your dress is fine MaMthembu.” This is the umpteenth time Kenneth is taking her side. I hope he sees this woman as a sister, I’m too tired to be fighting demons.

“Bab’ Khabazela is right, he’s older and wiser.” I quip, deeply irked.

I knew I should have shagged this man, I hate this soft spot he has for Mantfombi. Confusion plays on his face, he’s caught the anger swirling around me.

“Please gather in the dining room, dinner is almost ready.” Sarcastically, I tell everyone.

“I'm not hungry.” Fezekile spits, she doesn't eat my food and I don't care.

“Go ahead.” Kenneth dismisses Fezekile and ‘MaMthembu.’

I turn away from him the second the room is cleared.

“What’s wrong?” His voice is soft, laced with concern.

“You said you wanted to go out. Why have you changed your mind?”

He must be crazy if he thinks I will go out with him and Ntombo, the whole thing is just off.

“I mixed baked beans with mayonnaise, I just need to make coleslaw. MaMthembu says you don’t eat those. Is it true?”

I put emphasis on her surname and look over my shoulder in time to see his face crumple into a frown, he’s not saying anything and that hurts. Knowing that she knows him better than me hurts.

A lump forms on my throat, I blink a few times calling upon tears.

If you want to see if a man is into you, play with your tears, make sure he sees them. Cry him a river if you have to, I guarantee your father will wake up the following day with cows grazing his yard.

I turn away from him. The cabbage won't grate itself, I wage war with the grater and the veg making sure he sees the anger dancing with my hands.

"Zithobile talk to me. Did I do something wrong?" He stands beside me, his scent is forever intoxicating.

"I know you're an influential man Kenny, you're used to eating Sushi and prawns. You drink Jacobs, when I have to settle for Frisco, it looks like coffee but doesn't taste like coffee. I eat fat cakes for breakfast if not leftovers from last night's supper. My bed makes a lot of noise when I climb on it that I have to freeze and hold my breath, thinking it won't break if I do that. That's my life, it's all I know, It's how I grew up. I'm trying my best. Please say you're going to eat

my baked beans salad. We can even give it a name if it will make you feel better.”

I flap my eyes at him, he’s still staring.

“I will never reject your food Zithobile, I appreciate the effort you made here. Ngiyabonga mama.”

(Thank you.)

Sheesh! I hear sounds of jubilation, wedding bells... old women ululating. Get those dresses made ladies, it’s a wedding...

He takes my hand, slowly brings it to his mouth to kiss it. His eyes not leaving mine a second, I wish Fezekile would walk in. Apparently he doesn’t want her to know about whatever it is we have.

“Thank you, Kenny. You’re my morning after pill.”

“What?” His face drowns in confusion, he needs an explanation.

“It means you make me happy.”

He shakes his head, nonchalantly and turns to walk away.

“I’m giving you permission to add love portion in my food.”

He says as he disappears into the passageway, I need to tap that before my pregnancy belly gets in the way.

*

*

*

A/N: Our Zitha

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-Six

ZITHA-

“I hear what you’re telling me, aunty. What I don’t understand is why you’re telling me all of this?”

“Your cousin was attacked Zithobile, they broke both his legs. He’ll never be able to walk again. Gatsha says you sent a man to attack him and Sbongiseni while they were sleeping at night.”

The devil must be testing me, why do I have to deal with this woman at such an ungodly hour?

“When was this, aunty?” Boredom lies in my voice.

“It’s been over a week, and the doctors say he will never be able to walk again.”

Way to go Kenneth... I like what I’m hearing, I would have loved to see him torture those fools. The thought of it almost gives me an orgasm.

“Is this the same Sbongiseni I was told was paralysed?” I enquire, feigning shock. These people think I’m an idiot.

“Z— Zitha... I...” She stumbles on her words. “You need to come home, I’m ready to forgive what you did. You’re my sister’s child, you can’t live with strangers while I’m still alive my baby. I’m here to take care of you, I lo... I love you.”

There is no truth in her words or voice. Does she think I’m that gullible?

“I’m not coming home aunty, goodnight.” I disengage the call, grab the gift box on the bedside table and make my way to Kenneth’s room. I’m not sleeping alone tonight, I made sure of it by getting him this present. I know he’s going to love it.

The door is closed, one knock and I wait. The door flings open as I scrap off the itch to knock again, my

eyes immediately fall on the man who makes my heart skip a beat. He's standing in the doorway wearing long- black pyjama pants, his chest and torso out in the open.

"You're late." I'm surprised by his quip, the stern look in his eyes is overpowered by a smile that's displayed in his eyes.

"You were expecting me?" So, he's been waiting for me to bring myself to his room?

"Come in." my feet don't waver, I hand him the gift box and bounce towards the bed. "Open it, it's your present for being yourself."

I choose the left side of the bed and slide inside the blankets, I'm nervous about how he will take this gesture. My gaze darts to him, to find him in a good mood with an open box in hand. He simpers...

"This is..." his eyes move from the box to find me bashfully staring in anticipation. "Nice."

He clears his throat.

“No one has ever bought me anything before.” He continues, nodding his head while revealing multitudes of gingered condoms.

“I’m glad you like it, it wasn’t easy buying those.” I got them at a garage, the cashiers there gave me funny looks. I won’t be going back anytime soon.

“There are so many flavours, which one is your favourite?” He asks, smiling at me which is rather peculiar. Kenneth hardly ever smiles... Strangely, my face flashes from his tongue-in-cheek. He saunters to the bed, hands leisurely playing in the box, as he examines each foil packet. I feel my body heat up when he moves at a snail's pace on the bed beside me, too close for me to smell his entrancing scent. The box is placed on his lap.

“There’s mint,” he looks up at me, seductively.

“Bubblegum, strawberry, grape, orange...”

“You’re shameless.” I tease him, feeling way too shy for my liking and startingly embarrassed.

“Hey, I want to test them. Take them for a ride and see which flavour I like best.” My Kenneth is saying this?

Placing the box on the nightstand, he lays next to me, covering me with his arms from the back. I lean into his touch when he snuggles his face in my neck and sniffs in my scent.

“Thank you for the present, I love it.” He whispers against my skin, showering me with wet kisses.

I feel his hand move towards my belly and cringe, not because he’s touching me. I don’t want him to bond with the fetus. I’m getting rid of it either way.

I shuffle in his arms, he moves his hand. I like where it’s going now, towards my bust.

“Do you like them?” I mean my breasts... he groans as a reply.

“When last did you visit your mother’s grave?” He’s

asking about my mother while his hand is playing with my breasts. Men!

“I’ve been too busy to visit her.”

“I can go with you tomorrow.” Kenneth offers and I fail to grasp his sudden curiosity.

“I have things to do tomorrow.” I’m lying.

“We can go when you’re done.”

“I will be busy the whole day, Kenny.”

“Don’t neglect her grave Zithobile.”

This is not why I’m here, I don’t want to talk about my mother.

“I’m not doing that, I’m just not ready to visit her grave.”

It’s unexplainable how the thought of visiting her angers me.

“Can we please not talk about my mother?”

I twist in his arms until I’m facing him, I don’t expect to see this glower on his face.

“I don’t know how your kisses taste anymore.” We haven’t been kissing for too long for me to actually crave for his kisses, but I do... every second of everyday and I miss him, he’s here but I miss him.

My heart is strangely racing when I lean in to nuzzle my nose against his. My breasts are pressed to his chest, his hands are on the small of my back... casually caressing me.

“Kenneth...” I breathe, he hushes me by smashing his mouth on mine. Sketching his tongue on my bottom lip, he nonverbally asks for consent. My lips part, giving him access and he slips his tongue in my mouth, whirling it around in a way that makes me dizzy.

My heart feels happy and at peace at how carefully he holds me in his arms.

“Remember what you said the first night we spent together?” He stares at my question, I loop my arms over his head and peck his lips.

“You said I’m yours forever,” he nods. “I want you to be mine as well Kenneth.”

I don’t want to feel like I would lose him anytime. His eyes glint with what I think is adoration.

“I’m all yours Zithobile, I give myself to you. You have the right to do whatever you want with me, I am yours.” I squirm and blink away tears. His dark demeanour contradicts with his sweet words, he is so sappy and romantic and I doubt he is aware of that.

“Kenneth,” I call, to have him raise his brows. “Make love to me.”

The look reflecting in his eyes warms my heart, he captures my mouth in a passionate kiss. I close my eyes and allow myself to get swept away in a long, insatiable kiss.

BAMBINDLOVU-

“You should let me drive you home, Lili. Your mother

must be worried sick.” He tells her, they would still be stuck by the dam had it not been for the white couple that was hiking under the blanket of stars...

Yeah! Strange...

His car got a jumpstart thanks to the couple. God sure works in mysterious ways, or was it their ancestors?

“I’ll go home tomorrow, I’m not in the mood to see anyone.” She’s on the passenger seat, curled up in a sweater gifted to her by the strangers.

“Anyone but me?” A smirk visits his face, it’s seductive.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” A question is thrown at him, her eyes narrow to have him laugh out loud.

At exactly 00:47am, he parks the caravan in its usual spot. She insisted on going home with him, although parked outside his flat, he is against her

carelessness. She has been away from home for far too long, it's not rocket science that her family must be worried and he knows it's careless of him to entertain her childish behaviour.

They make it safe on the stairs, the dreaded walk begins.

"We have to keep it down, my mother is sleeping. I'll sneak you out before she wakes up in the morning."

He's never had a girl sleepover before, Thandikela might not approve. Liyana is aware that she is asking for too much, she also knows that this man walking beside her would never say no to her.

They find Thandikela wide awake, seated on the bed and looking like her world has crumbled right before her eyes. The girl with her son is not the girl he had said he was going to fetch.

"Where is your sister?"

Come on! She knows where she is, she let her go with those people.

Liyana is instantly clothed with a black look, her back presses against the wall as she fails to find a place to hide from the woman's glare.

"Can I explain later? Have you seen my phone? The other one died" Bambindlovu prattles.

He's finding it hard to look his mother's way, he failed her and his sister.

"It's in your room." He knows that tone, he's in trouble.

Thandikela darts her eyes to Liyana the second her son is out of sight.

"The man who was arrested is your father?" That's an unexpected enquiry, Liyana frowns because well... Why would she ask her that?

“How do you know?”

“I saw him on TV, he’s the one who came to fetch you that night. And your mother is that TV reporter?”
It’s not a question per se, Thandikela is just observing, making sure she put the puzzles correctly.

“Yes.” Liyana is starting to feel uncomfortable, especially with the look given to her by this woman. Thandikela’s penetrating gaze remains on the girl leaning against the door.

“Have you slept with him?” Okay... Blunt, aren’t we?

Liyana’s heart jolts, she wonders if she can see right through her, if she can sense what they did. Or does a girl who just broke her virginity give off a certain type of aura.

“And?” Thandikela is waiting, glaring at the poor girl and Liyana has the answer but that’s not something you tell the mother of your... what are they again?

“It would do you good if you would stay away from my son.” She can’t be those mothers, can she?

The son walks back into a heavy room, swirling with malice, confusion and pettiness. His eyes find his mother's disgusted face then Liyana's embarrassed one.

"What happened?" He looks at his mother and gets nothing but a stone-cold look.

"Her father will never allow this to happen, he will kill you for even looking at his daughter."

Thandikela's talking about Liyana's father, and this thing that's brewing between them. Bambindlovu is confused for a mere moment, he would be of course. His mother is hardly ever random.

"Did Sambulo call?" He decides to snub her observation or snooping rather. What he does with girls is none of her business. Her job is to mother him not pick a woman for him.

"No." The answer is forced, gives a hint of unimportance. Is this not the woman who couldn't stop crying over her Sindisiwe?

“Give me his numbers maOlady.” He’s scrolling down his phone, searching if he has the numbers or not.

“What happened Sokalisa?” Annoyance plays on Thandikela’s face. “You left here saying you’re going to bring your sister home. But you bring someone else instead. Am I a fool to you, Sokalisa?”

“Haibo, maOlady? Z’khiphani?” (What’s wrong?)

He’s can’t manoeuvre his way past his mother’s mood swings, his attention is caught by Liyana clearing her throat. She’s now standing against the wall like a scared little mouse. Not once has Thandikela offered her a glass of water or a seat to rest her feet.

Thandikela shifts on her bed, scratches her head as if trying to ward off the annoyance prickling at her.

“I hate it when you speak like that Sokalisa and I hate it when you disobey me.”

“Where is all of this coming from? When did I disobey you mama?” Maybe calling her mama would

ease her anger.

“You come home with a girl in the middle of the night, you dare bring her to my house after sleeping with her, Sokalisa.”

Having heard enough, Liyana snaps out of the room, maybe she should've listened to Bambindlovu and let him take her home.

“Did you sleep with her, Bambindlovu?” Bambindlovu? Since when does she call him that? She stands, eyes engrossed on him.

“Did you have sex with that girl?” The question comes again, demanding an answer. Bambindlovu does not move an inch, however he is stunned by his mother's sudden anger.

“MaOlady...”

“Boy, I asked you a question, you will answer me if you know what's good for you.”

This is uncomfortable, the stare is stern.

How do you lie to your mother, especially when she's standing too close to strangle the life out of you? He drops his eyes and nods, not a second later, something hard collides against his face. It leaves a burning sensation and throbbing pain. He rubs his cheek, eyes wild and filled with disbelief. She has never laid a hand on him, maybe this is why her hands are trembling.

"Mama." A whisper sways past his lips, she slaps him on the other cheek.

"What are you doing? What is wrong with you?" He's asking his mother, note the irritation on his face.

"You are so stupid Sokalisa." She's shouting this time, throwing punches on his chest. He would hold her hands to halt this crazy behaviour, but Thandikela is an African mother. She is more dramatic than the word outlined. Bambindlovu takes it all, the pain, the insults.

"What have you done? I raised you to be a respectable man. Not to think with your penis, like your uncle. Is this what I get for my hard work, for

you to become your uncle's reincarnate?"

She stops, eyes wide and dubious. Her hand rapidly covers her mouth as if chastising herself.

"My uncle?" Bambindlovu asks, and this has Thandikela drawing away from her son. "Which uncle? Uncle Jonas? Uncle Mhambi?"

She chokes on her saliva and turns away from her son's stern gaze. The last time she heard these names was when... when... Thandikela can't bring herself to travel back to the past, it's too painful... too disgraceful. She's not that woman anymore, she believes she is not that woman anymore.

"Take that girl back to her father's house, and stay away from her." Thandikela demands folding her arms, she's looking everywhere except his direction. The tone she uses states that this is not up for discussion.

"Answer me first, which uncle are you talking

about?" He's not going to let this go, is he?

Thandikela clenches her teary eyes, secretes a long-deep breath. She grabs the nearest object and throws it across the room, the boy ducks the phone coming at him. It hits the wall with a loud bang that pulls Liyana back into the bedroom. Eyes probing the miniature room, she finds a fuming Thandikela and a sad Bambindlovu who is gathering the pieces of the phone from the floor.

"I will replace it before Sindi comes back, don't worry maOlady. I will tell her it was me who broke it. I know how you can't stand it when she's upset with you." There's something in his throat, it's making it hard for him to speak.

"Bam-Bam." Liyana murmurs, after understanding the situation. Bambindlovu would look her way, but shame has him snubbing her. Thandikela is drenched in regret, she is unable to look at her son.

"Take her home." Thandikela insists, as she mooches back to her bed. Her son replies with an

exasperated breath.

“It’s late maOlady, I will drive her back home in the morning.”

This cannot be happening.

“Dammit Bambindlovu.” Thandikela shouts, startling Liyana and shocking her son. “Why are you bent on becoming like him? You don’t listen, that’s your problem. I said take this girl back to her father’s house.” Her hands are curled around his leopard print vest, she’s fuming... breathing nothing but fire.

“Miss Thandikela, no.” Liyana finds herself budging in, trying to loosen Thandikela’s grip.

“Stay out of this,” with one push from her, Liyana stumbles across the room. “This has nothing to do with you, it’s between me and my son.”

“Mama, I’m sorry. Ngiyaxolisa standwa sam.” An unexpected apology from him, his arms roam around her plump waist, holding her in a tight embrace. He has to hunch over for his head to reach her chest.

“Please calm down, I will take her back. I won’t see her again if that’s what you want.”

A moment of silence for Liyana’s happiness.

Thandikela does not reciprocate her son’s hug, she pushes him off of her, fixes her garment. “I expect you home before morning.” This she says as she climbs back on the bed, turns to face the wall and closes her eyes. Bambindlovu centres his attention on Liyana, he’s not sure what the expression on her face is, however it borders, on misunderstanding, hurt, fear. Basically a mixture of emotions.

He walks past Liyana, knowing she will follow him. It’s not like she has a choice, this is not her mother’s house.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-Seven

ZITHA-

Sleepless nights are okay, I would rather be dreaming of course. But not about my mother, ever since Kenneth brought her up, she appears in my dreams. She never says anything, only stares with sadness in her eyes.

So to avoid seeing her, I have accepted the invitation of extended nights of insomnia.

I'm on the call with Mandla the driver who tells me he's at a car wash and will arrive at Cresta Mall in ten minutes. Ten minutes is too long to wait at a mall, I'm spent. Mantfombi insisted on tagging along for grocery shopping, she went to the bathroom while I pushed a trolley towards the parking lot.

“Zithobile Mthombeni?” A feminine voice coos, causing me to turn to the direction her voice came. Two women are standing before me, one could be the same age as my aunt and the other probably a few years younger.

“Yes.”

The older one’s face turns sour as she repeatedly nods with a lopsided grin, eyes sweeping the entirety of my body.

“So you’re the home wrecker who’s been sleeping with my husband?” She bellows out an accusation that renders me speechless and mystified.

“What, you can’t speak now?” She continues and I’m lost. I don’t do married men... I mean I’ve never slept with a married man.

“I think you’ve got the wrong Zithobile, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

She laughs, sneeringly.

“Does Tshilidzi Mulaudzi ring a bell?”

Oh my God. I fall numb to the realization as I look at the angry two women.

“It’s so typical of my husband to go for a young prostitute.”

“Look, I don’t know who your husband is. You’ve got the wrong person.” I deny as I hold a look of worry in my eyes.

That bastard Tshilidzi... How did I not know that he’s married?

The women bawl profanities, causing us unnecessary attention. Not wanting to be part of this, I turn to go back inside and probably find the woman I came here with. My trip is short lived when a strong hand grabs my hair, pulling me back. I yelp when I land with a booming sound to the ground. I don’t know which one has my braids in a tight grip, making it hard for me to get back up and defend myself.

“What are you doing? Don’t touch me, let me go.” I holler, trying to loosen her grip from my hair.

“I will show you what we do to prostitutes.” It’s the older woman, she’s pulling on my braids.

“Umph!”

Air comes out of my lungs like burp out of a drunk’s mouth when her accomplice kicks me on my spine. My knees bend against my will and I manage to block the next kick that’s coming for my stomach while reaching blindly for her leg.

Perhaps being ghetto might save my sorry ass.

The younger female falls with a loud thud beside me, I straddle her, my eyes rising to check on her friend and then darting back down with equal measures of fury and terror. My focus has long moved from Tshilidzi’s wife who continues to pull my hair forcefully, I slap her friend with my open hand- full across the face. She screams, rapidly blinking her eyes. Her headache must be from the deepest pits of hell.

She extends her hand and scratches me on the cheek, before I can attack, my body jolts towards the rear. My back, and head painfully hits the gravel, I feel a twitch of pain on my body. I don't expect or anticipate the wife overlapping me, she's shouting vulgar and slurs as she does so.

My face takes multiple slaps that hurt like a bitch. I'm palpitating with terror when her hands tighten on my windpipe, depriving me of air. Her thighs clasp on both my sides, squeezing my waist.

Tshilidzi and his wife must be fans of wrestling, damn these people can fight.

John Cena has nothing on a girl from the streets though, I smash an elbow on her face shattering her nose, she grunts and falls over and this gives me a chance to get up. I feel a sharp pain on my lower abdomen and press a hand over it as I grunt in agonising pain, my body slumped over in protective

mode. I might lose the baby in the process, I would count that as a blessing.

“She broke my nose Rendani.” The wife yelps in pain, hand inspecting her bleeding nose, while getting up from the ground.

“I have a black belt in kasi style, touch me again and I will slap you back to the suburbs.” The pluck to talk back while I’m aching... I must have a death wish.

“You’re going to pay for this, you bitch.”

The Rendani woman shouts and charges at me, growling like an angry bull. I slip to the right, which throws her off enough so that I could nurse the excruciating soreness on my belly. If this baby decides to go back where it came from, it better not take my womb with it.

“Rendani get her, grab her now.”

The wife yelps, unnoticeably warning me of the

danger behind me.

People are shouting, or cheering the fight on. I can't tell with how my head is spinning. I'm not fast enough to stop Rendani from grabbing a handful of my hair. She pulls my head forward and smashes her head against mine, still holding my hair in a tight grip, my vision blurs a millisecond

I knew they are wrestling fans. What kind of witchcraft is this?

I'm still treating the throbbing headache when the wife slaps me across the face, it rocks me, sending me in reverse. I manage to steady myself and blink away the dizziness.

These people are twice my body size and twice my age, are they not ashamed? The spectators as well, I haven't been paying much attention to them but I know I'm currently live on social media. That's a fact... I won't be surprised if Jub Jub is somewhere in this crowd that has gathered to witness my shame.

“Sesi, look at her stomach. This prostitute is pregnant, I told you she will try to trap him with a baby.”

Rendani reveals my secret, damn me for wearing a tight top. The stupid baby bump is popping out for the whole world to see.

“Voetsek wena sfebe.” The wife yells, at least standing at a distance. “You don’t know who you’re messing with, I’m going to make sure you lose that baby.” Fire in her eyes, the wife bawls.

Unbearable pain has gript my attention, I can’t think of anything else but that.

I take a deep breath. It hurts my ribcage. I can’t recall being struck there. I exhale and inhale again, as the pain in my stomach comes back stronger and vicious.

It throws me to my knees, grunting, my hands clench

around my stomach. My head swims, I feel my stomach tighten and what I had for lunch comes back up which hurts the ribs more.

I hear appalled sounds springing from the crowd, as if they have never vomited before. I stay on my hands and knees with my head hanging, everything blurs for a minute. These two witches can't be that cruel to attack me while I'm down, I could get up and show them their mothers but this baby is showing me my own mother.

Tshilidzi has always been after my life, it's either his baby will kill me or that bull fighter he calls a wife.

"Get up, sfebe. Get up and fight me like the street trash you are." I guess I was wrong about her not attacking me while I'm down.

The wife grabs a handful of my hair and pulls me up, my mother better slap this woman for me. I'm dying here, how do I fight a foetus and its stepmother? My life is a Nollywood movie.

Rendani goes for my stomach, for some reason I step back and she misses me by an inch. I grab the wife's hair forcing a scream out of her. We're pulling each other's hair, shouting and screaming at each other.

Out of the blue, big strong arms encircle around my waist from the back and jolt me out of the woman's hold.

Heaving and grunting, I send my foot back to kick the person, thinking it is Rendani. Then I feel a face on my neck, the stubble-beard tickles the sensitive skin. I must not be in my right senses to smell him after kicking the poor guy.

"Zithobile." His arms squeeze a fraction tighter and I breathe slowly, my body melting into his as every muscle loses its tension in his arms.

"What is going on here?"

His voice is half way between a whisper and a shout, deep, rumbling like thunder during a perfect storm.

“This bitch is sleeping with my husband.” The wife yells. How embarrassing.

I want to yell back, but I’m weak in his arms. Maybe if he lets go, I will tell my side of the story.

“Is that the reason you ambushed her like an animal? Look at her.” Kenneth snaps, gently shoving me to his side, his arm remains around my diaphragm. There’s a pang of guilt in his eyes, as he looks at me.

“What do you mean?” She continues to yell, standing probably three feet from us. “I should kill her for sleeping with my husband.”

I’m so embarrassed I can’t muster up the courage to utter a single word of defence.

“No one is killing anyone.” Kenneth.

“Who are you? Are you one of her sugar daddies? You should mind your own damn business, this has nothing to do with you. Stay the fuck out of it.” This woman has not been told about this man of mine, he’s a leg breaker, Sbongiseni would attest to it.

“Listen here woman, just because you’re used to speaking to your useless husband like you’re taking a shit, doesn’t mean you can practice that nonsense on other people. Speak to me in that manner again and I will fuck you up.”

He’s pointing a forefinger at her as he threatens, fear flashes in her eyes... she gulps and drops her gaze.

He turns to me and holds my face between his hands. Something is causing him to hold me a little tighter than he probably intended. I wince in pain, he lets go.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” I want to tell him I’m not fine and that I’m in so much pain and cry in his arms, but I don’t want to give this woman the contentment of seeing me reduced to tears.

“She hurt you, Zithobile.” A gravelly undertone, like subdued thunder.

“Serves her right,” the wife shouts.

I don't know how she pushes past Kenneth. The next thing I know she's violently poking my head with her finger. "I'm not done with you wena sfebe."

I return the poke, "Bring it on magriza, I'm not afraid of you."

She slaps me so hard, I reel back but not far enough because I return the slap just as hard. She screams, her feet thundering towards me.

"WOMAN!"

Kenneth booms, almost roughly shoving her back and that causes an unexpected silence in the crowd. Rendani catches her before she kisses the ground. She glares with a shocked expression.

"Touch her again and I will kill you." His voice shatters the quiet, rumbling, trembling, almost dangerous.

This is not good for his image, I don't want him trending for the wrongs reasons.

“I told you to stay out of this. Do you know who I am? I will ruin you, don’t you dare test me.” The wife.

Kenneth snickers, it’s cold and eerie.

“Sisi.” Mantfombi is here, holding on to my arm. Her timing is so not perfect, I almost died while she was admiring herself in the mirror. “I saw those women attacking you and called Khabazela...” Oh!

“Thank you.” I say with just a hint of shame.

My attention is stolen by a showy horse laugh, it’s Tshilidzi’s wife.

“Tshilidzi has always been a womaniser, but I didn’t think he would go for a loose cannon, gold-digging bitch like you. You’re so shameless, you seduce rich men and have them do whatever you want. Didn’t your mother teach you how to respect yourself? Or was she your mentor? Surely you must have learnt this disgusting behaviour from her.”

Who the hell does this woman think she is?

“You piece of shit, how dare you insult my mother.” Anger has me trudging towards her but Kenneth pulls me back. “Let me go Kenneth, I want to have my way with this witch.”

I’m shouting and wriggling in his arms, he inclines his face on my neck and whispers, “Don’t, please.” It’s enough to get me to calm down.

“Get out of here, now.” He tells the wife who gives me a deadly look, clicks her tongue and marches towards the crowd with Rendani. People start to scatter, finally.

Humans are strange creatures.

“Let’s go.” He takes my hand and lugs me to the car. It’s the Range Rover... brings back so many memories. “Get in.”

I don’t move a muscle, my gaze darts to Mantfombi who’s offloading the groceries then back to him.

“I said get in.” This is the first time he’s snapping at me.

“I didn’t know he was married.”

He doesn’t say a word, he stares motionlessly straight at me. His brows curl against each other right before he grabs my hand with vicious might.

“Ouch, Kenneth you’re hurting me.” I whine, fidgeting under his touch. The window on the passenger door rolls down and a familiar face appears.

“You don’t want to do that Kenneth.” It’s that Siphos guy from Noord taxi rank, I should’ve known he’s Kenneth’s acquaintance. Seeing terror in my eyes, Kenneth releases my hand and draws back. He jumps in the car and leaves me standing, Siphos gets out.

“Get in sisi.” He kindly says, holding the passenger door open for me. It’s not like I have a choice, I live with Kenneth now. As soon as we’re all settled in, Kenneth starts the car. Should I tell him I’m in pain and need the hospital or endure the pain until the

baby dies? But I trust him, with my life. He's been my protector thus far.

"Kenneth." I call.

Now that we're in the car, I have no reason to feign nonchalance.

I feel my lower lip quavering, tears pool behind my pupils and the dam is released down my face.

"Don't cry, you're going to upset the baby." He doesn't get it, I don't care about the stupid baby.

"Why did you fight those women, Zithobile? You should've walked away." Is he serious?

"Walked away? Those witches used my hair as a weapon, they ganged up on me and had me cornered. I had no choice but to fight back."

I struggle to tame my tears, Kenneth can frown all he wants. I will never back away from a fight.

"I don't understand what's going on Kenneth," I cry.

"My life is a mess, whenever I catch a break, something comes like a flood and throws me into

the deep end.”

He steals a glance and another one... and another one... Why is he not saying anything?

“I’m taking you to the hospital, you’re hurt.” His voice is suddenly soft. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“You didn’t scare me.” I say.

“You got yourself a fierce one Kenny, Zitha is a strong woman.” Siphon says.

How does this one know me? I’m not strong.

“I agree, you should’ve seen how she beat up those two women.” Mantfombi steps in.

I have a feeling they are trying to cheer me up. I’m not bothered about them, my worry is Kenneth. I need him to believe me.

“I didn’t know he was married.” The words slip out of my mouth again.

Kenneth sighs and places a hand on my thigh, it slides to my inner thighs and he squeezes gently.

“I know.” That’s all he says and I'm taking it.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty- Eight

KENNETH-

I see Zithobile's efforts. I see how desperate she is in making us work. I see her need for approval and acceptance. I see how confused and lost she is. I see her pain. I see her purity. I see all of her.

Right now I see the strength Sipho spoke of, which was probably out of context considering that he doesn't know her. She's lying on a hospital bed, we're waiting for results. She hasn't said a word since she saw the ultrasound and I'm worried.

"Can I get you anything?" She shakes her head, lashes rapidly flapping, eyes staring up at the ceiling.

“You can lay charges against that woman, if it will make you feel better.”

She doesn't say a word, the doctor walks in just in time.

“Kenneth, you're here? It's good to see you again.”

This is what I'd call incompetence, as to why the doctors have been switched baffles me. I move the chair I'm seated on a little to the left but not far from Zithobile so I don't have to strain my neck while looking at the doctor.

“Dr Linda?”

She notes the muddle on my features and explains that the previous doctor has an emergency, like this is not an emergency.

“How is she?” I swallow my frustrations.

“Who?” A question from her.

Her bewildered eyes are on me, scrutinizing, rebuffing the beautiful woman on the bed. I’m not easily tempered, my moods aren’t sociable with me. Though Dr Linda is starting at something that will have me snapping in irritation.

“Sorry.” Her eyes deter, eventually noting the patient. “Besides the baby’s heart beat being weak, everything seems to be fine.”

“The baby’s heart beat is weak? Is that a trivial matter doctor?” It’s obviously not, I’m calling her out on her stupidity.

“It is not.” Is a stammering response... nervousness on her face.

“You’re a professional, give us a proper reading. Unless you bought the doctors certificate?”

I tell her, withholding nothing. She throws a huff at me, woman have this way of rolling eyes without actually rolling them.

“When was your last check up?” She asks Zithobile.

“I don’t know,” dispassion in her voice, Zithobile answers. “Probably two, three months ago, the day I found out there’s something leaving rent free in my womb.” Frustration puffs through her curled lips.

“I see. The baby has what we call fetal distress, the fetal heart rate should be between- 110 to 160 beats

per minute during the third trimester of pregnancy. Your baby's heart rate is abnormally slow, this may lead to birth asphyxia. It means the baby won't be receiving adequate oxygen during labour."

I take note of the gleam in Zithobile's eyes, if only she knew how innocent this baby is.

"Are you saying I'm going to give birth to a corpse?"
My God.

"Zithobile?" I chide only to have her faintly roll her eyes. "Don't say that, this baby has done nothing to you."

"What do you mean?" She's snippy. "This thing is inside me, Kenneth. Invading my space and destroying my peace. God has deemed it fit to play me like a puppet, finding out I'm pregnant at 5 months was a plan of his. He wants to take me out,

that's his plan."

"Don't be absurd..."

"It's the truth, I have never hidden the fact that I don't wish to mother this baby. I don't want it in this world, only one of us can live." She deadpans.

"You said we'll give it up for adop..."

"No, it was your suggestion. I don't recall agreeing to it. I was afraid you might change your mind about wanting to live with me that is why I didn't say anything."

"We'll talk about this at home."

Although I don't see the point, her mind is already

made up. She will never love her baby.

“Uh!” Comes an awkward sound. “You’ve finally found someone Kenneth, you know I never took you as the type that would take a girl seriously?”

My eyes narrow on the doctor, reading the jealousy on her face. I’ve known Dr Linda for years, we worked together on a few projects I have at this hospital. A man can tell when a woman desires him and Dr Linda is as blunt as they come, daring enough to wear her heart on her sleeve.

“Yes, I have found someone.” I glance at Zithobile and catch her in the presence of curiosity and self-doubt. My hand grips hers, a sham of a smile crawls to her mouth. “She’s my life.”

I’ve spent enough time with her to be confident enough to say this.

“Funny how so many girls were prepared to be your life but Kenneth Mkhize wanted nothing to do with love.” The doctor sounds hurt and I’m confused as I don’t remember giving her hope that we might have something one day.

“Is there anything else?” I ask her, she flashes a small smile.

“I recommend bedrest for at least two weeks, the fetal heart rate will be monitored throughout the pregnancy and taken at every prenatal appointment. If there is no change an immediate intervention will be required.”

“Such as?” I ask.

“Delivery by C-section.”

“Can’t we do the C-section now? I don’t want this baby. Why should I continue to nurture it?” Zithobile grumbles.

Dr Linda looks quite uncomfortable, “Please get some rest, I’ll be back to check up on you later.”

“Can I take her home?” I ask, knowing Zithobile wouldn’t want to spend the night here.

“You can but we need to monitor the baby’s heart rate first.” She flips open the brown file on her hands, “It says here you discharged yourself from the hospital the last time you were here, there were already complications. I’m surprised the baby is still alive. I understand you have no attachment to the baby, but you need to take care of yourself. Your

negligence might cost you your life along with the baby's."

Zithobile snorts, "You're not listening to me doctor, I said I don't want this child."

"Thank you doctor." It is better I dismiss her before Zithobile explodes.

"Okay, you need to leave her to rest Kenneth or I will drag you out of here."

A soft touch on my shoulder as she smiles my way.

"Well, that's if you can handle me doc."

The doctor snickers, pushing regret down my throat. The retort has most likely sent another wrong signal.

Should've kept my mouth shut.

“You know there is nothing I can’t handle.” She returns.

I know she is a hard worker and that’s about it. She directs her attention to Zithobile, her smile is not genuine I can tell and so is the one on Zithobile’s face.

“You are a lucky woman to have a man like Kenneth.” I don’t see why Dr Linda feels a need to say this.

“I know, he’s lucky to have me.” Zithobile ripostes. “Are we allowed to have sex after these two weeks? He’s afraid he’ll hurt the foetus.” I almost jump to my feet, she intertwines our fingers together when she sits up and that alone has me grounded.

“I don’t see why not.” At the doctor’s reluctant confirmation, Zithobile presses her soft lips against mine. The kiss lingers, it’s sweet, I want more.

“Okay, I will leave you two.”

Zithobile doesn’t pull back until we hear the door open and shut.

“That’s if you can handle me? Really?” She creates space between us, a scowl on her face.

“What?”

“What was that about?”

“What are you talking about?”

“She was flirting with you Kenneth and you let her and entertained it.”

“She wasn’t flirting with me.”

“Yes she was, I’m a woman okay. I know when a woman is hitting on a man, that doctor wants you.”

“Zithobile...”

“And you two are on a first name basis?”

“I didn’t call her by her first name, and we go way back...”

“You slept with her?” She interjects, jealous eyes penetrating into my soul.

“No.” Honestly. “There’s no reason for you to feel threatened by her.”

“I’m not.” She snaps. “There’s... just so many women hovering around you. First it’s Ntombo, now this doctor. Will I have to compete for you Kenneth? I’m not sure I have the courage to do so.”

I squeeze myself on the small bed next to her and pull her into my arms, she wiggles wanting to spurt out of my arms. But eventually melts into my touch.

“You don’t have to do anything Zithobile, just be yourself. I promise to be faithful, protective and nurturing. If I ever betray you, if I ever betray my heart then let me lose my life. I’ve been alone so long it's almost unsettling to have company, but I am attracted to you. Finally my soul has stopped the search it has been on for a time that feels like forever. You’re here now, and for you it’s the simplest things that pull me to you. Your sexy

confidence, your eyes, your voice and how you carry yourself. You came, and claimed me, something others couldn't. Not that I restricted them from doing so, they failed to reach my soul. As if the key was hidden only for you to find. We are here now, you're what I want. Although it all feels so silly. So frustrating. So painful."

I run a hand over her baby bump, how do I tell her that I want her to keep it, that I want to help her raise the baby?

"It's all real and I wouldn't do this with anyone else. You're the one." I continue.

She sighs, I sense serenity. Small arms enfold around my middle.

"I think I'm falling in love with you, Kenneth."

I know, I see it in the way she looks at me.

“You’re my peace Zithobile, don’t ever forget that.”
She shifts and regards me with a smile. My heart is full.

The door opens when I’m about to kiss her, it’s Dr Linda with the white man who assisted us when we got here.

“Mr. Mkhize.” We shake hands after I stand to my feet.

“Is there a problem doctor?”

“Dr Linda must’ve briefed you in on fetal distress.” I nod. “The information is partly correct. The baby is already at risk. An emergency C-section has to be performed as soon as possible. If not, it can lead to

the baby breathing in amniotic fluid containing meconium (poo). This can make it difficult for the baby to breathe after birth or they may even stop breathing. ”

“I don’t understand, besides the weak heart. Dr Linda said everything should be fine if she gets enough bedrest.”

“Mistakes like this tend to happen sir.” He says and I am pissed off.

“Don’t tell me that shit doctor, I was ready to take her home. If you hadn’t picked this mistake up then both their lives would’ve been in danger.”

“I understand your anger Mr. Mkhize and I apologise.” He says, genuinely.

My eyes chase Dr Linda shamelessly hiding behind the male doctor. I don't understand how she could make such a mistake being a doctor for years.

"I'm ready for the operation, the sooner I get this baby out of me, the better." Oh how I wish Zithobile would refrain from her toxic words.

"Okay, please understand that the C-section does not guarantee the safety of the baby. While this is a safe operation, it carries extra risk to both the mother and baby. Those include blood loss, infections and possible birth injuries. But having skin-to-skin contact with your baby after the birth and breastfeeding can help reduce these risks."

Zithobile sighs, looking up at me. "I want it out now."

She is unable to hide the fear in her eyes. I settle back on the bed and cup her cheeks. She could pull

away from my touch but I don't see any fight left in her, just a well of tears in her eyes she refuses to spill.

"I won't let anything happen to you, I promise." I tell her.

Her head moves in agreement with my statement.

"I will need you to sign consent forms." The doctor's voice cuts in. "We'll move you to a private room and the first step we'll take is to give you fluids and oxygen. The next 24 hours we will be monitoring the baby's heart rate. You do understand that your baby will be premature, right?"

I don't think she cares, she doesn't care. Either way I hold her hand to show support, the way she squeezes my hand tells me that she is afraid.

“We understand.” I respond on her behalf. “If I may ask, will the baby survive being born at seven months? It hasn’t completed the seven months period.”

“Well, in general, infants that are born very early are not considered viable until after 24 weeks gestation. This means if you give birth to an infant before they are 24 weeks old, their chance of survival is frequently less than 50 percent. However, it’s a tad trickier to determine how many weeks seven months is. It can begin between 25 weeks and 27 weeks pregnant and extended up to 28 to 31 weeks. I wouldn’t want to give you false hope, but some infants born before 24 weeks development do survive.”

That’s a relief.

The doctor says he will send a nurse who will take Zithobile to her room and leaves with Dr Linda. I should deal with her but it will be a complete waste of my time.

“Are you okay?” I take Zithobile in with a kind expression.

“I don’t want to die, Kenneth. Don’t let me die in there.” She forces a throaty laugh, probably a coping mechanism.

“You’re not going to die, don’t think about such things and you’re allowed to break down ndlovukazi yam. My job is to hold you up when you fall.”

The tears well so fast it’s impossible to blink them away, she mops her cheeks with her fingers but new tears stream down. Her head finds shelter on my

chest, my arms ache to hold her close and so I do. I hear her choke on a small but audible sob.

*

*

*

A/N: I know the slow burn is agonizing, I feel it too. But we're approaching the climax. Please don't grow weary in commenting, I love hearing from you. Thank you in advance.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Forty-Nine

AMARA-

Randall hasn't been home much lately, he's up to something. I know when he's hiding things from me.

When he's home, he spends all of his time with our son. As his parents, we haven't sat down and discussed the traumatic experience Kwame went through. I don't know what his excuse is, but I'm afraid... I failed as a mother, I couldn't protect my baby. Conversations about Kwame last about a millisecond, they never go beyond the abuse.

He's also been taking him to therapy. I'd like to believe Randall needs therapy as well. Ifeanyi, his sister was raped years ago, it happened under his watch. To have his son go through the same thing is

torture itself, and he's too proud to cry out for help.

Sometimes I would wake up without him in bed only to find him in Kwame's room sitting in the dark.

The trip to Ghana hasn't happened, sadly because they haven't found Zwelethu, it is said he's in hiding. I know this because I overheard Randall and Styles talking, either than that he won't tell me anything else.

The man I am married to, does not run from his enemies, he eliminates them, he thrives on revenge. One thing is certain, he will not rest until Zwelethu and his father are down.

The ghastly truth haunts me, even more when I look at Liyana. She's a victim in all of this. Some days I'm overwhelmed by a strong evocative-heady scent, and I'm instantly sent to that god-forsaken night.

“We’re almost done.” I’ve been on the phone with Randall for the past five minutes, he refuses to cut the call and the old woman I’m with is growing excessively impatient. I thought she was his number one fan.

“You said that 30 minutes ago when I called you.”

It’s aunt Petunia’s fault, never go shopping with elders, they will drag you to every corner looking at everything buyable.

“Tell me, Mrs. Okolie. Are you buying the entire mall?”

“Hey, don’t judge a woman by the amount of time she spends at a mall.” My aunt gives me a look, she should focus on pushing that darn trolley and not my business.

“Please hurry home.” He says, worry tinted in his voice. If it were up to him, I wouldn’t have left the house. He’s been paranoid since Nkomo’s little brother disappeared.

“I will, and you don’t have to keep calling. I’m fine, I promise and we have a bodyguard.”

“I don’t trust him to take care of you.” He raises his concerns.

“You hired him to follow me around, remember?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean I trust him with my wife. Your life is precious to me, the only person I trust with you is your aunt.” He says and I can’t restrain myself from laughing as I turn to look at my aunt. “She’s a gladiator that one.” He’s not laughing, but I know he’s kidding.

“What do you want for dinner?” I enquire and my aunt shoots darts at me.

“You.”

“I’m not on the menu, sorry.” I murmur, careful not to let Petunia hear.

The conversation has become heated, I end it because well... I have deputy Jesus here and she will find everything wrong with this picture.

“Don’t be long, it’s getting dark outside.” Are his last words.

“You’re a lucky woman Mashenge, I am yet to meet a man who loves his wife the way that man loves you.” Here we go again, Randall is married to the wrong

woman. I don't sing his praises like my aunt does, she takes the cup.

She tells me she wants to send money to her daughters back home, we join the long queue at Shoprite. Newtown Junxion is too crowded for my liking.

"Mashenge." Gosh! What is she going to say now? I don't like that raised eyebrow, this woman has a strange mind. "Your cousin Nelisiwe is coming in two days, I was thinking she could help you around the house."

"I don't think that's a good idea aunty." Nelisiwe is their third born, she's within my age group. Aunt Petunia and uncle Mhambi only have daughters, I'm not close with any of them.

"It is, you need a helper Amara."

“She’s my cousin aunty, I can’t employ family and I’m not used to her.” Where has she ever heard such irrationality?

“I can stay with you, until you two get acquainted with each other.”

The devil is a liar.

“It’s really not necessary, and I doubt Randall will agree. Nelisiwe is family, maybe Randall can help her get a job at the company.”

“Nene failed matric, have you forgotten that? She hasn’t worked a day in her life, but doing house chores and taking care of a nine year old won’t be hard for her.”

“Aunty think about this... Nelisiwe is well in my age, she’s a grown woman. How do I bring her into my house? There’s a man in that house, surely you can’t expect me to...”

Her hand uplifts, halting my objection.

“Is it your husband you don’t trust or my daughter?” This woman... Jeer! “I’m not going to argue with you about this, those children need a guardian. That little boy lacks a mother’s love, you’re too busy with other things that you’ve neglected your son. That’s why the devil found a way into his life. No offence, but you are a child. You still need proper guidance.”

“What...”

“Mashenge!” She harshly interrupts me. “You should listen when elders advice you. Are you properly taking care of your husband? How is he? Is he eating

well? You need to make sure your husband is well fed Mashenge, he lost so much weight in prison.”

This woman’s frame of mind changes like a damn chameleon, I swear it’s so hard to keep up with her.

“I can only do so much aunty.”

“This is why you’re a bad wife and I don’t mean that in the most disrespectful way, you are still young. There’s a lot you need to learn about umendo.”
(Marriage.)

This is what she called me here for? To throw insults at me. The only reason I haven’t told her to fuck off is because I respect uncle Mhambi.

I will speak to Randall, he’ll have to tell her no.

“Let’s get something at KFC, and hurry back home.” Great, I thought we were done. “Your uncle must be tired, taking care of Junior is a lot of work.” That’s what she calls R.J now, since Kwame is forbidden. Granduncle says a ritual has to be performed to cleanse his name, I’ve come to know that he’s very traditional. Randall won’t let his son touch blood, his words not mine.

“Your uncle loves that boy as if he were his.” She lets go of the trolley. “Push this.” It’s a command. We manoeuvre our way through the crowded food court after her craving for KFC fades, we’re at Shisanyama. She orders pap, meat and wors. There are no chairs in here, we have to stand against walls while waiting for our order.

“Sometimes I see the longing he has for a male child, we thought our first born was going to be a boy.” Eh! When did we get here? “He was so excited, and so

sure about the baby's gender that he named it Malibongwe before it was born. I warned him against it, but he said his ancestors would never disappoint him. I guess I let him down when I gave birth to a girl instead. I knew he was disappointed, he didn't show it though." A long sigh!

"He loved Notofo like she was a gift from God. My second pregnancy he hoped for a boy but when Nandi was born he celebrated her life and said we will try for a boy again."

Didn't they have ultrasounds back then?

"But he became distant, he didn't play with his daughters as he should have. His touches were different, he would avoid any form of intimacy or come to bed after I had fallen asleep."

Eww! This is not something I would like to hear.

“When Nelisiwe was born, he gave up hope that I will ever give him a male child. Nonjabulo came three years later. He sent my daughters off to boarding school because he didn’t want to look at their faces, he couldn’t look at his failures.”

This conversation is really depressing. “I think our order is ready.” I snatch the slip from her hand and hurry to the front hoping she would’ve wiped off her tears by the time I get back.

She avoids eye contact when I hand her the food, this is what I prefer. A bashful Petunia.

We’re debating about sitting at the food court when we hear sounds of gunshots, and like any black person, I duck and crawl to the nearest corner. Turns out I’m not the only one seeking shelter, while some

are screaming and running around like headless chickens.

My mind hurriedly runs to my aunt, engulfed with fear and panic, my eyes browse the chaotic place and see her face down on the ground. The bodyguard is lying next to her, he too is not moving.

“AUNTY!!!” I scream, I must be driven by insanity when I take off running towards her. I don’t hear the gunshots anymore, only horrific screams and loud lamentations. Someone has lost a loved one, my heart freezes thinking it could be me in a few seconds. She has to be alive.

“Aunty, aunty...” She doesn’t twitch as I shake her plump body, she’s dead. My aunt is irresponsive.

My hair is unexpectedly gripped and pulled weightily, a scream escapes my mouth.

“Voetsek sfebe, sukuma nja.” (Get up.)

A husky voice behind me, it's loud and carries arrogance. A hard object pricks my waist and everything around me spins at the knowledge that the person has a gun to my side.

“Please don't hurt me.”

“Thula msunu.” A haughty bark.

I'm dragged on the ground like a bag of mealie-meal, my feet support my structure, preventing me from lying flat on my back.

“NO! NO! Please I'm pregnant.” I plead for my baby, people are too busy trying to stay alive. No one will think of helping me.

He stops and his face comes to light as he slants his head to take a peek at me. A creepy smile stretches his black full lips.

“Remember me?” He recalls, he does look familiar but I fail to hunker back to where I saw him. “That night on the highway...”

He laughs, tightening the grip on my braids and pulls me up to my feet. “I had to think of another way to get to you after the police came, we wouldn’t be here if your husband had listened to me and handed you over.”

Now I remember, it feels eons ago when Randall and I were held at gunpoint by this lunatic. But his face was masked then, how is he familiar?

“Oh yes and that night at the restaurant,” he adds,

dragging me towards News café. The exit is that way, if this man leaves with me, he will kill me. “The shooting was all me.”

He laughs.

“I had two bullets with your names on it, you and your husband I mean.”

“Ba... Balungile Mkhize?” Disbelief leaves me, he catches it and accepts it with a loud snort. The gun is still pressed to my side and I can’t slip away.

“Yes, in the flesh.”

“Bafo donsa lomuntu, sihambe.” (Brother hurry with this person.)

A man standing at the gate yells, there's a quantum behind him. I try to escape Balungile but the grip is too tight. People are gathered inside shops and eateries, watching with horror and some dispassionately.

"Please let me go, I have children and I'm pregnant."

"Oh your kids will see you don't worry... In a body bag, I am going to enjoy..." His remark is swallowed by a blaring sound of a gunshot. My head regains its normal weight before a loud thud captures my attention. Balungile is on the ground with a bullet hole on his temple. I lift my gaze toward the gate. His friend is down, I think he's dead as well.

"AMARA!" My name echoes from a familiar voice, I pivot and see Randall running towards me...a gun in hand. Emotions pile up with threats of escape, I

don't want to cry but...

I gasp for air, staring in his direction. "Randall!" The dam breaks, I thought I will never see him again.

He pulls me into a hug the minute he gets to me and I let the grief consume me.

"It's okay me hemma, I'm here now."

"My aunt... she... she's dead, Randall." My voice breaks as I recall the horrendous sight.

"Let's go."

He grips my hand and begins to lead me towards his car, the Junxion is so quiet and empty. No one daring to come out, as we near the Market theatre

my heart jumps upon seeing a crowd of men approaching us.

“They are here to clean up, relax.” Randall elucidates.

Clean up? That means they are going to dispose of the dead bodies and all evidence leading to the crime scene. This is what they do, they kill and make everything disappear. This is the reason they are never caught. My aunt is amongst the people that have died, I can't let them throw her away like trash. She deserves a burial, uncle Mhambi deserves to say goodbye to his wife.

“Wait.” I stop and he turns to me with an impatient look on his face.

“We have to go Amara, it's not safe here.”

“Aunt Petunia, Randall. I can’t leave her here.” I know her, she will never forgive me for this. Her ghost will never let me rest.

“My men will take care of her.”

“Dispose of her body like a dog? Is that what you mean?” He grimaces, pungent gaze dubbing me witless.

“Amara, I’m begging you. We have to get out of here.”

No sooner, I see two men carrying a body on a stretcher... It’s my aunt.

“Put her down.” I scream at them, running to their direction. Randall cuts my trip short by ringing his arm on my waist.

“Me hemma no.” The reproach is mumbled into my ear, with his arm around my waist and the other hand holding a gun, he lifts me up and starts scuttling the opposite direction.

“She’s my aunt Randall... please... please don’t let them take her away.” I’m screaming and fighting with all that I am, but this man is twice my height. He’s a big giant and in his arms I’m like a baby Kangaroo in its mother’s pouch.

He places me down when we get to the car. “Get in.” He’s holding the door open, impassive eyes looking down at me.

“My aunt.” He grabs my hand, the impassive look on his face not promising anything constructive. “Get off me.”

I snap, yanking my hand.

He doesn't say anything, there is no reason for him to be so standoffish and cold.

"You're an animal." I snap once more and jump into the stupid car.

There's a man on the driver's seat. Randall joins me in the back.

"Drive." He instructs the driver, I look out the window as the car moves.

"She's the only mother I have, I swear I will never forgive you for this. If my uncle does not get to bury his wife, I will go away from you. I will take my children and you will never see us again."

“Amara!” Voice pompous. “You want to leave me?”

“I want my aunt,” is my answer.

“I understand what you’re going through Amara but don’t threaten me with my children.” There’s a thread of warning in his voice. I turn away from his sharp gaze.

A ring tone pierces through the silence.

“Yeah...” He answers. “I found her and you were right.”

He’s frowning at me. “He’s dead... What about her?... Really?”

While intently gazing at me, his eyes glow with relief.

He hands me the phone. "Your aunt is unharmed, she had fainted that's all."

What in God's name is going on? She must've have fainted when she heard the gunshots.

"Aunty are you okay?"

"Where are the groceries Mashenge? There's a strange man here, he says he doesn't know anything about groceries."

What! She can't be serious... we almost died for heaven's sake.

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-

NKOMO-

It's the little things his brother does that frustrate him, not taking his calls is one of them.

The phone rings once and sends him straight to voicemail. Weeks later, Zwelethu's phone is unreachable. To say Nkomo is upset would be adding sugar to Amasi and uphuthu; a complete joke. He's livid and in need of answers.

He receives a call from a private number as he's getting ready to head out and answers without any hesitation.

"Yes."

“Bhuti, it’s me.” That’s his brother alright, the anger in him skyrockets upon hearing his voice.

“Where are you?” Nkomo keeps his voice neutral, clamped teeth in action.

“I can’t tell you that, your friends are after my life.”

“What the hell did you expect Zwelethu? You touched his wife of all people? Do you have a death wish?”

“Unlike you bhuti, I couldn’t turn my back on ubaba.” Nkomo snorts upon hearing the absurd explanation.

“Oh God, I was afraid of this. Mkhize has slithered his way into your head.”

“He didn’t have to, after seeing him down and out I couldn’t bring myself to turn my back on him. He’s our father bhuti, he’s family and he needs us. Please help him destroy the Okolies, they killed uncle Lungile. Ubaba is not okay, he’s broken.”

“Mkhize means nothing to me.” He sputters, a look of disgust taking over his features. “Get out while there’s still time Zweli, this won’t end well.”

“I’m not turning my back on my father.”

“Fine, since you two are so buddy-buddy. Did he tell you what the Okolie ancestors are capable of?”

Nkomo would testify greatly of the things he’s seen, the havoc the Okolie ancestors have caused.

“Please, that’s a myth. Besides, we found a very powerful sangoma, he strengthened us. Why do you think I dated Okolie’s daughter without him knowing about it?”

This one thinks he’s smart.

“I’m warning you Zwelethu, get out while you still can. I’ll try to get Randall to pardon your sin.”

“Listen to you bhuti, you sound like his disciple. Worshipping the bloody ground he walks on. You’re

not your own person, you live for that man and I hate him for that. I hate him for having control over my brother.” Zwelethu’s angry voice erupts through the line. “I’m going to kill him myself, his wife as well.”

The line dies before Nkomo can reprimand him any further.

Is it too soon to start funeral arrangements? Pink is the colour theme.

BAMBINDLOVU-

She let it slip again, it's become a thing now where she would let anger fill her up and explode like a damn volcano, spilling things she's not supposed to. He's noticed that a lot, her anger is his ticket to finding his family. He just needs to meet up with his uncles, he remembers their names, only met one of them. He can't remember which one, the memory is stacked somewhere in his head.

"When last did you speak to Sindi?"

She doesn't provide an answer, she has sworn to silence... Three days ago they had a fall out, he said something about reconnecting with his father's family and like always Thandikela threatened to disown him. At this point, he's not sure if he cares anymore.

“I’m going out.” Says a barely-there frail voice.

He would ask her why she’s not talking to him but will gain nothing from that. Her stubbornness makes ones blood boil, it’s the kind of stubbornness that would annoy the gods as well.

“Where are you going?” Now she talks?

She directs her body to a sitting position, pleading eyes following the traditional head band her son is placing on his head. The man looks the same every day, perhaps him not wanting to let go of this crazy attire has everything to do with the desperate desire to connect with his father’s family.

“School.” Her son has to work in order to put food on the table.

“Come straight home when you’re done, there are no customers in Joubert Park. I’ll be working at Bree today.”

He shrugs because of his mother’s cold tone, it’s been weeks since she slapped him and her anger

has not subsided. However, he's not sure he still knows the reason behind it... Sleeping with Liyana or not bringing Sindisiwe home. They don't talk about that day.

Sambulo was man enough to let him speak to his sister, he wouldn't tell him where they are and made it clear that Riverlea is not their current location. Bambindlovu knew then that his sister is basically a needle in haystack.

Schools will be out by 3:30pm, an hour from now. But that's not his problem today. He asked a friend to do the rounds for him, his destination is the Reef Hotel. He makes it to Marshalltown in peace, parks the car on 58 Anderson St.

A standard double room. It is so like her to pick a

four star hotel, he was against it but Liyana knows how to have her way with him. For the past weeks he's spent over R3000 in this room, it only costs R720 a night which is nothing to the Okolie princess. However, Bambindlovu is a man with dignity, his ego does not let him live off of her. Borrowing money from his taxi driver friends is better than letting Liyana pay the full amount. They always split the bill, he makes sure of it, as broke as he is.

He uses his key-card to open the door, someone runs into him.

A head-on collision.

He holds on to them lest they fall. Long legs wrap around him, tight arms around his neck and a face rummaged on the curve of his neck. Her scent entices him, as she is wrapped up in his arms.

"I missed you Bam-Bam." Confesses a cheerful

voice, warm breath stamping the delicate skin on his neck.

“I know, that’s why I’m here. Or you would die from a nostalgic heart.” He teases her and she takes it with a ghost of a smile. His arms loosen around her, but she’s clinging on to him like a monkey. He’s getting used to her snuggles, it’s growing on him but he’s not going to tell her that.

“Get off mfethu, I can’t breathe.”

“But I love it here.” She whimpers, all of her tightening around him. “Let’s stay like this forever.”

“We were like this yesterday, and the day before and...” Gently, he places her down to meet a pouty face. “Argh, I’ve lost count. If I could I would make a photocopy of me, one you’ll cling on to all day every day.”

Liyana Jabs his shoulder, a giggle so soothing it brings a smile to his face.

“You secretly love my clingy ass, you’re just too

proud to accept it.” She is sure of it because of that smile on his face. Her smile gradually fades giving perplexity the spot light.

“Why are you taking your clothes off?” She questions.

“Ha mfethu! I’m saving you the trouble of having to remove my clothes, plus you’re always tossing them recklessly as if ironing them is not hard enough. This saves us both the trouble, I won’t have to walk around in crumpled clothes and you won’t complain about how tight my pants are and working extra hard to pull them down.”

“Why would I want to remove your clothes, Bam-Bam?” Her inquisitive eyes trail the pile of clothes he has neatly folded and placed on the chair near the large window overlooking Ghandi Square. He’s standing half naked with hands on his hips, the only thing covering his magic stick is a pair of animal print underwear.

“We’re having sex like we always do when we come here, now stop staring at me and take off your clothes. You can leave your bra and panties on, I don’t mind doing that part myself.” A conceited grin is resting on his face, Liyana finds it hard to keep a straight face. It takes a minute for her eyes to water from laughing like a lunatic.

“What’s funny?”

No answer, just a loud horse laugh. Folding his arms, he waits for her to finish her laughing marathon.

“Oh Bam-Bam.” Her arms find their way around his shoulders, he’s so tall that she has to stand on tiptoe.

“Khuluma mfethu, mara ungang’bambi.” (Speak but don’t touch me.)

He sulks, peeling himself off her arms.

“I want to feed you first.” She says, the cocky smile won’t leave her face.

“Oh!” He grabs his pants and slips them on. “You should have said so. I thought you were ready to be eaten with the way you were clinging on to me.”

“Oh my God, Bam-Bam. Can’t you try to be romantic at least?”

“I would fail even if I try, my syllabus was different from yours. I went to Zenzeleni High School, my school uniform was a yellow shirt, brown pants and brown school shoes. Maru and A walk to Freedom were our literature books. While you ama coconut were reciting Romeo and Juliet, Othello or whatever crap Shakespeare scripted.”

She would be offended but he is her Bam-Bam and she’s grown to manoeuvre past his harsh words. They are worlds apart but love knows no bounds...

Wait, what! Love? That’s a bit too soon, right?

“You don’t have to be from an influential school to be romantic.”

“Yeah sure.” He brushes off her remark. “Lalela mfethu. Do you want atchar with your quarter? Coke or Fanta orange? You look like the Fanta grape type. I’ll get both, women can be indecisive sometimes.”

He would know if they spent more time out than in bed savaging each other. Liyana folds her arms, grimacing at the man who has captured her heart.

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

A grin, it’s haughty. “I know.” He replies. Her needy side comes to play, she’s showering him with kisses.

“Let’s go before your father starts looking for you again.” There’s boredom in his voice, the thought of their parents’ dictatorship is fretting. He’s not sure about Liyana’s parents, but his mother will never understand nor accept this thing they have.

*

*

*

That night after Bambindlovu dropped her off, she didn't think she would find the house lights on and loud voices in her parent's living room. She stood in the entrance between the kitchen and the vestibule, fiddling with her fingers the moment her angry father caught a glimpse of her.

She couldn't look up at him, not when she was dripping with shame. Not when she had just given herself to a man in his caravan that transports school children.

Her outer lips, inner lips and clitoris were still swollen. Her vaginal walls still held the intense feeling of his erection. Her blood pressure and heartrate were only beginning to go back to their normality.

She could smell the umblaselo- wearing, tsotsi taal-speaking proud Zulu man on her.

When her father took a step towards her, fear laughed in her face, if he came any closer, he would smell him too.

“P—papa...” Her voice refused to support her. “When did you come back?”

She would know if she were home and not out screaming “OH! BAM-BAM.”

“Where have you been?” He asked but Liyana too had questions for him. She demanded to know why he killed her mother and when he couldn’t answer, she told him how much she loathed him, scurried to lock herself in her room. Amara had to be a mediator, his granduncle said a few words as well. But weeks have gone by, Liyana is still without answers.

Something is happening in her father’s house, her stepmother won’t look her in the eye. Her father doesn’t speak, he snaps at her. Her little brother, the

only one she deems innocent seems to be falling into depression.

She is fuming and unhappy, the only person keeping her sane is her R.J and the man she enjoys spending time with. Her Bam-Bam.

*

*

*

“Have you told him about us?” Zwelethu he means. They step out of the hotel room, she insists on him holding her hand as they walk down the corridor.

Yep! He’ll get used to it.

“I haven’t heard from him in a while.” It is better this

way, that's what she thinks. That's what he thinks as well, although it would be nice if she would end things with him.

They find themselves in Cnr Fox and Rissik Str, only because he couldn't find a tuck shop where they sell quarters (Bunny chow.)

Nandos it is...

He orders a meal for two, 1/4 chicken, chips and beverages. It sends him over R100, it's his last. A friend promised to send an e-wallet, he didn't specify the amount. He will need it if they are going to spend time in the hotel room. As he waits for his change from the cashier, he looks over at Liyana who is reserving seats for them. There's an elderly woman with her, his brows clash as a desire for knowledge nudges him.

Retrieving his change, he strides towards the table

as he nears he notes the panic cloaked on Liyana's face. His eyes shift to the elderly woman who is staring with wide eyes, he knows shock paralyses and this old woman is currently a prisoner of it.

Liyana gets up and stands next to him, "aunt Petunia, this is my friend."

Is grandma-aunt a word? Argh...

Petunia has not blinked, her chest is heaving like she just ran against Usain Bolt. Her body drops down on the chair while her wide eyes remain on the man draped in umblaselo traditional attire.

*

*

*©

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-One

BAMBINDLOVU-

When he woke up this morning, his heart was soaring joyfully with thoughts of Liyana cascading in his mind. He couldn't wait to see her again, it is safe to assume that at this stage in his life, she is the only person who brings him peace.

Yes, today was not going to be perfect because this is his life, it's never perfect even if he asked for a twitch of it from his ancestors. Now here he is, eyeball to eyeball with his girl's aunt. The senior is scrutinising him under her widespread gaze, she hasn't said anything since Liyana helped her up from the chair she fell on and things are starting to get uncomfortable.

"Aunt, please don't tell my parents. Papa will kill me."

Liyana jumps the gun, assuming this is the reason behind Petunia's shock paralysis.

The elder's gawky eyes deter from the young man, meeting Liyana's vexed gaze. There's an undeniable shock in her eyes.

"I'll get her some water." Bambindlovu offers just as Petunia opens her mouth to speak.

"Who is that boy?" The question is out there, unsure voice chasing Bambindlovu. The syllables lose to the young man's long legs.

Liyana would say they are sex buddies because they haven't confirmed the relationship, but this is her "grandmother." And Petunia has a crazy mentality, she would drag her to her father's house with means to expose her.

"He's..." there goes her gaze accompanied by anxiety, her eyes are scrutinising the man she adores to find him staring back while talking to one of the staff members. "He's my friend, like I said."

“No!” Petunia's eyes dash to him. “This can't be happening.” The mention is inaudible so much so that Liyana barely catches it.

“Are you okay, aunt?”

Petunia turns to face her, pale faced... cartoon eyes stretched in panic.

Without another word or any explanation, the grownup sits back down as if her legs have commanded her to do so. Inquisitive eyes carefully dissecting the man walking towards them with a glass of water in hand. Anyone would squelch while being pored over like that.

He clears his throat hoping it will do away with the old woman's officious stare.

“Uh, I'm sorry. What's going on?” A confused tone.

“Sokalisa?” Yep, Thandikela is not the only one familiar with this name, so it appears.

His lashes flap once... brows crinkle with questions... curiosity takes over his mind... As far as he knows,

Liyana has not told any of her family members about this prohibited affair. Prohibited because their parents would wage war against them if it were known that their souls are one.

“What did you call me?”

Oh Bam-Bam! That’s not what you should be asking.

“How do you know my name?”

Good boy...

Petunia carries her hands on her head, “Ohh Jehovah.” An expression of grief breaks forth. Face twisting in agony, “Lord, I’ve been good to you all my life. What did I do to deserve such a punishment?”

She’s loud, people are watching. Liyana and the man beside her exchange looks, a wordless conversation takes place, they shrug in unison.

“Aunt, what is it? You’re scaring me. How do you

know him? How do you know Bam-Bam?" She has not moved from Bambindlovu's side, she would shift if she understood what's happening.

Petunia gasps disbelievingly and shakes her head in disapproval.

"Your mother named you Bam-Bam? Are you not Bambindlovu Buthelezi?"

Jeer! What is this woman trying to do?

Although she has given hints that she knows him, shock ripples through his bones.

"I am, that's what my mother named me." He shakes his head, settling down beside her. "It's what my father named me, that's what she told me."

Petunia regards him with a soft look, shuddering hands moving up to cradle his cheeks.

"You look just like him," a whisper sashays through her lips. "You're a splitting image of him."

“What is going on? Who does he look like aunt? How do you know him?”

Yes! The girl is still drowning in confusion. Bambindlovu would like to know as well.

“His father.” Okay we’re getting somewhere. “You’re a man now. You were four the last time saw you.”

“Are you my father’s wife? The woman he left my mother for?”

It’s silent for a minute before Petunia speaks, “Is that what Thandikela told you?”

“Mkami.” A deep voice materialises from nowhere, everyone turns their heads to find Mhambi striding to their direction. Eyes are on his wife, soft and warm almost as if they are smiling at her. “You said you won’t take...” His words falter as his gaze finds the boy whose face is resting in his wife’s palms. Mhambi freezes, Petunia liberates Bambindlovu. He stands at the sight of a face he’s been yearning to see all his life.

“Malume?” His voice slightly cracks, tears fill his eyes.

“Sokalisa?” His face bares a frown. “You’re here? How? When?”

Mhambi steps closer.

“Malume.” Vindicated tears roll out of his eyes, he doesn’t care to wipe them. Nothing matters now, but this man who is standing before him.

“Sokalisa.” Mhambi has always been soft hence the tears.

Nandos is serving nothing but chilli-shock today...

“Where have you been malume?” The murmured words are bumpy. “I’ve been waiting for you all my life, where have you been?”

Mhambi gets into his space and wraps his arms around the young man. Sniffles are heard, they belong to Mhambi. The first and last time he cried was when they found his brother’s daughter, Amara

after she was “sold off.”

“Mfana wami, there is no place we didn’t look for you. This is a miracle, you’re home Sokalisa, you’re home now.” Mhambi comforts, the young man in his arms is trembling while silently crying.

“My whole life, I have been waiting for this day.” Bambindlovu tells him, he snaps an indistinct smile when Mhambi wipes away his tears.

“I have found you now, I will never let you go again.” Mhambi.

“Your father should be here to witness this day, he died Sokalisa. He died without knowing his son’s whereabouts. How could Thandikela be so...”

Someone tell Petunia there is a time and place for everything.

“Mkami.” Mhambi interjects his wife’s candour, she sighs shaking her head in displeasure.

Liyana is dubiously staring, shaky hands on show, mouth hanging open as disbelief claims the wholeness of her being. Somehow her hand finds the strength to cling on to Bambindlovu's hand, he doesn't hold her back and that terrifies the life out of her. She lets go, and by the grace of a higher being, the elders did not see anything.

"Uncle Mhambi!" Tears. "What's going on? Why is Bam-Bam calling you uncle? Is he uncle Jonas' son?"

"Oh my child, this is your mother's brother."

Only Petunia... it's time we gag this one.

"What?" The young couple sizzle in unison, heads snapping to the bearer of bad news.

"Your grandfather Vusamazulu had an affair with his mother and..."

Petunia for president...

“Petunia!” Mhambi snaps loudly and that gets the attention of customers.

Their order number is called but no one pays attention to it. A bomb has been thrown by the one and only Mrs. Buthelezi, leaving the victims numb to the core.

“That is not true, my mother said they were married. They lived together as husband and wife until my fa...” Defending Thandikela is something he’s been doing all his life and he does not plan on stopping.

“Let us go home, I will explain everything. This is neither the time nor place to talk about family matters.”

Don’t you just love Mhambi’s wisdom?

“Liyana,” Mhambi holds her hand. “Your mother does not know about this, please my child keep it to yourself. I will tell her myself.” His voice persuades, oblivious to the fact that this is the least of Liyana’s worries. Her teary eyes are on Bambindlovu, desperate for him to glance at her. She doesn’t know what all of this means, maybe his eyes will provide answers.

Getting no response from his granddaughter, Mhambi decides that they leave.

Liyana’s presence weighs on Bambindlovu, he feels every ounce of it. But he’s finding it difficult to acknowledge her, what he’s just found out is too much to grasp. Without granting her a onceover, he follows the old couple out the door. And Liyana... well the heaviness on her feet won’t let her take a step.

SETHU-

Styles said he needed space, but how much of it? She hasn't seen him in a while. The only time she gets to hear his voice is when he calls wanting to speak to his daughter. He fetches Sihle from school every Friday and drops her at school Monday morning, knowing her mother would fetch her after school. Sethu does not approve of this silly arrangement, but that's what Styles wants and what Styles wants, Styles gets.

"Please mom, please." The child choruses in the back seat, Sethu is entertaining her last nerve. This is not the day she ordered when she woke up this morning.

"I'm not taking you there Sihle, I told you R.J is not feeling well."

"That's why I want to see him, please take me there mom."

Sigh! How does she tell her daughter that she and Amara are not on speaking terms and she can't budge into her house like everything is okay between

them?

“I said no Sihle, now stop.” She snaps and gets a grumpy nine year old in return. Sethu is leering at her through the rear view mirror, she would apologise but she is not in her best mood today.

“I want my father.” The child cries.

Sethu is too tired to give a befitting comeback.

Her phone rings, she reaches for it on the dashboard. Suddenly something runs in front of the car startling her in the process. Sethu slams on the brakes but the car hurtles to the side. She turns the vehicle so the passenger’s side is away from the oncoming cars. The sound of her car’s screeching brakes and Sihle’s loud cries shatter the immense silence that was hovering in the vehicle. As the car spins out of control, images of Sihle flash across her mind. Her baby has to be okay after this.

The metal of the car groans like a wounded animal as it smashes into an onrushing vehicle, after the disorder all is silent for a while.

Sethu is well aware that she's lucky to be alive, the crash would've claimed her life, yet here she is... face pressed into an airbag, still strapped firmly into the driver's seat with nothing worse than cuts and scrapes as evidence of the crash.

"Sihle." The child has not made any sound.

She struggles with the airbag, it takes a second to finally push it to one side. There is no sign of Sihle in the back seat and the passenger door is wide open.

"Sihle!" She screams, in panic. The seatbelt doesn't give her a hard time, neither does the door.

The moment Sethu gets out of the car, she nearly falls over. Dizzy, she rushes to the back seat to double check, the child is not there.

"SIHLE! SIHLE!" She's running around the car, checking where her daughter could be. The scene of the accident is crowded with vehicles and people watching this pregnant woman shouting in horror. The road is too crowded that anyone would leave the place without being noticed.

“Sisi, what’s wrong?” Some random guy asks.

“My baby is gone, she was here strapped in the car seat.” She’s in tears, body shuddering and heart thumping crazily in her chest.

The man dips his head inside the car to check, “Are you sure you had a child with you? There is no sign that there was a child in here. Like a backpack, a toy.”

“I’m not crazy.” Sethu screams at the man, like a woman who has never had her marbles on point. “I was with my daughter, my baby was here. Please... please help me look for my baby.”

She doesn’t have to ask twice, the civilians scatter in search of the child.

Some check under cars while others scrape the sidewalks. It is when they confirm that there is no sign of her child when a wave of dizziness rushes through her, she starts to feel weak and nauseous. She can feel her body starting to slow.

“She... she was here, my baby was here. I remember... she was here.” The words tug at her for the longest

time, chasing her through moments of logic, blankness... long enough for them to eventually stop making sense. The last thing she sees is a man rushing towards her before everything goes black and her body loses its normal weight as she seems to float away into complete and utter darkness.

KENNETH-

I expect to find Zithobile with her baby in her arms when I arrive at the hospital, the C-section was meant to be performed this morning and I believe everything went well.

All the good emotions and feelings disappear when I spot Mantfombi seated on one of the hospital benches with her hand on her cheek, she looks tired as hell not to mention drained. My feet refuse to move, this is not the state I left her in hours ago.

One of my taxis have gone missing, it was vital that I

attend to the matter. Mantfombi has been showing insufficient support, coming to the hospital whenever she can. I can't thank her enough.

Her eyes snap up and meet mine, worried and expectant.

"Khabazela." A loud salutation as she hurries my direction.

"Where have you been? I was worried about you." Mantfombi says, and gives me an unnecessary hug. I don't hold her back, she pulls away at the tensing of my body... backpedals, eyes chasing the floor until they reach her feet.

"How is she? Are they okay?" That's all I want to know, that's all I care about.

"No one has come out of that room yet."

How is that possible? They should be done by now.

“I’m scared Khabazela, what if they...”

“Don’t...” I don’t want to hear anything negative regarding Zithobile and her baby. “They are going to be okay.”

The doctor suddenly materialises from the theatre room. I can’t tell from his expression if he’s carrying good or bad news.

“Congratulations Mr. Mkhize, you’re a father to a baby boy.”

“God is good.” Mantfombi sings cheerfully, wrapping her arms around me again, she has been looking forward to the baby’s birth. Her excitement is justified, while I can’t wait to hear how Zithobile is. I shuffle until she lets go and steps back.

“What about the mother?” There’s no promise or anything good in his eyes. “Where is she?”

“I’m sorry sir, we...”

A sudden wave of heat rushes through my body as the doctor fails to give me a report regarding Zithobile.

“No.”

It takes all the strength in me not to drop to my knees.

“Khabazela” Mantfombi spots my weakness and holds on to my bicep lest I fall.

“Where is Zithobile? Is she...is she dead?” I ask the doctor.

This word is death itself, it takes the life out of me. There is never a time when I have associated it with her name, but now it has become a reality, one I can’t run away from and for the rest of my life I would have to associate the word death with her name.

“Doctor please say something.” Mantfombi pleads on my behalf. I don’t understand why the doctor has suddenly become mute.

My heart is beating so fast it seems to hum in my chest.

“I can’t say what really happened in there. But she didn’t wake up after the operation, we tried...”

His voice wearies off, becoming nothing but background noise. I’m not weak, it goes against everything I am—everything I believe in.

Yet here I am, back pressed against the wall, heart struggling to keep its normal beat.

“Zithobile!” Her name purrs from my trembling lips.

“Khabazela,” Mantfombi’s blurry figure stands before my eyes, unshed tears threatening to trail the edges of my skin. “Get a hold of yourself.” She’s touching me again. I don’t know how I have allowed it thus far.

She’s telling me to get a hold of myself but I can’t, for the first time in my life, my heart is in torment. The pain is suffocating, almost life threatening.

“I’m sorry Khabazela, you will need to be strong now,

for the baby.” Mantfombi.

“No, Zithobile is not dead.” I whizz past her to get to the doctor. “What have you done?” My hands ball the fabric of his white coat. “Sir, we did everything accordingly. There were no complications or mistakes and medically, she should’ve have woken up. We’re still doing tests.”

“No, I don’t want to hear that shit. Go back in there and bring her back.”

“Khabazela please, control yourself.”

How do I do that when I’m stark raving mad? How do I do that when all of me wants to kill this man?

“You’re going to get into trouble, please. Think of the baby, we have to take him home.”

She succeeds in pulling me away from the doctor, he leaves us with another useless apology and I crumble to the bench. I want to cry and scream, but nothing is coming. No tears, only the urge to burst

into fireworks. Small arms enwrap around me, bringing my head to a squishy plump chest. Strangely it's comforting, homey. She smells of a familiar scent... strawberries, the odour draws me to the precious recollections of my mother before she lived for my father, before Isisa was born.

I can't explain how in Mantfombi's arms I can feel my mother's shower of care, I can vividly see her set of stern yet soft eyes.

"I'm here Khabazela, let me take care of you."

Puffs of air blow my neck as Mantfombi's warm breathe crashes against my skin. No one but my mother has ever held me in a way that makes me feel like a kid.

I'm pulled out of her arms by the sound of my phone ringing. A foreign number is displayed on the screen.

"Kenneth." I recognise the voice, it takes a minute for Neo's face to flash in my head.

"Maake?"

“I don’t know why your name keeps playing in my head, with an undisputable urge to call you.” Yet boredom abides in his voice.

I met Neo through Styles and happened to get acquainted with him. I can’t say we are friends.

“I’m busy Neo...”

“There’s a woman on a hospital bed fighting for her life, I hear cries of a baby, probably a new born. Are they somehow connected to you?”

Could it be? My lips feel numb but I manage to give him an answer.

“Zi—Zithobile.” My voice fights the name, tempering with the syllables.

“I see Ntenga, Duma, Magagula.” Neo continues.

This can’t be, I stand as astonishment leans into me.

“Zithobile Mthombeni.” I murmur sceptically.

“Ntenga, Duma are her clan names.”

“She hasn’t crossed over yet, I see about six naked old women standing in front of a closed door, moving side to side. They are stopping her from entering that door, but she’s frustrated. She doesn’t understand why they are preventing her from walking through it, if she does then it will be the end of her life.”

I didn’t know he’s become a prophet.

“Tell me what to do Neo and I’ll do it.”

“Don’t let them touch her body, you need to get her family to the hospital... a close relative or something. They will have to burn impepho and ask the ancestors to show her the way back. Someone is after her life, and they are not going to give up until she’s dead. Pray as well Kenny, I’m sure the cult will understand. Sho sho ntwana.”

The line goes quiet, he’s dropped the call.

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Two

STYLES-

The call came in while at work, he doesn't have the full story yet, only that his wife was in a car accident. She was hysterical over the phone, too hysterical that she couldn't explain what really happened.

At reception he is given the room number and told which ward to head to. He's running, crazy thoughts evading his muddled brain. Are they okay? Is what he wants to know?

He walks into a not so crowded room, there's a nurse dotting something on a patient file and an old woman seated on a chair. Their eyes clash, the old woman's eyes are shifty and his inquisitive... incisive. There is a familiarity to her, Styles is having a hard time pinning it together. However, he is sure he's

seen the old hag... pardon my manners...

He's sure he's seen the old woman somewhere. The nurse must be done with her rounds, she departs.

"Kitten." His attention shifts to the woman wearing his wedding ring, she's on the bed, eyes puffy and red rimmed. A pang of pain stings his heart at the sight, it's not a secret that they have been apart and probably the whole of north knows that the Sishis have gone their separate ways. What they don't know is that this man right here is still madly in love with that fragile lady lying on the bed.

"St- Styles." She cries, his name breaking into pieces as it escapes her mouth. She's in his arms where she feels the safest and he's trying to calm her down.

"Excuse me." A crooked voice trembles into the room, Styles shifts his gaze to her. The old woman keeps her regard on the ground, she appears panicky and very jittery. In a millisecond, she's out the door like an unwanted fly being chashed out of a house with a dish cloth.

“Who is that?”

No. No. No. Styles, you’re doing this all wrong. How are you? Is what you should be asking.

Sethu’s eyes dart around, shame crowns her.

“My father’s aunt.” Her response invites a frown to his face.

“I know that woman.” His eyes are directed towards the door. “That’s Randall’s maid.”

“What?” Her focus is not really there, she’s thinking of a way to break the distressing news.

“Her name is Mantombi, right?” Styles asks.

A nod is Sethu’s answer.

“She’s Mkhize’s aunt?” Another nod, this time it comes with an exasperated frown.

“Styles...” A tremble... “Sihle is missing.”

Styles is not sure he heard right, he must be getting old or his mind is too busy to grasp everything at once. Mantombi's relation to Mkhize and Sethu being hospitalised. Perhaps he's hearing things.

"What did you say?" His back straightens, heart stops for a mere moment as he waits for an answer.

"I don't know what happened Styles... I was driving, the next thing someone ran in front of the car and... and the rest is a blur." She delivers with a jaw trembling fear. "I can't word what happened back there but I know Sihle was with me. She was with me, Styles. I looked everywhere for her, our baby is gone, she's gone." The wife breaks into a heart wrenching sob, body trembling like a generator. Styles is standing there, in total paralysis, wide eyed, he doesn't even shake.

"Where is my daughter, Sethu?" She flinches at the intensity in his tone. Unable to look into his angry eyes, Sethu opts to fiddle with her fingers.

"I—I don't know, I... I told the police what..."

“Don’t tell me, you don’t know. Was she not with you?” He shouts, it’s barely loud but carries the same force. He doesn’t think of calming himself at least for the sake of the baby she’s carrying.

“Someone took my baby Styles, they took my baby.” Instead of being defensive, Sethu accepts a flood of tears. Crying seems to be the only thing she’s able to do and Styles can’t accept that, the man needs answers, not a bucket of tears.

“I better find my daughter or I swear to God... I swear to God.” He grinds out the words between clenched teeth and storms out of the hospital room, his wife’s cries are heard from the hallway but they are not wrenching enough to send him back to pacify her.

BAMBINDLOVU-

He wouldn’t ambush his mother like this had his uncles not told him what really happened all those

years ago, how he came about into this world. It's unlike him to disrespect his queen. However, how does he go about life; pretend everything is okay when nothing is?

Now he's parked outside his mother's flat, heart sprinting in a painful way. He's not one to wear a cloak of betrayal, now he has to walk into his mother's house adorned with nothing but betrayal itself.

"Let me speak to her first then you will come in."
Mhambi sees no problem with that, but Jonas' crinkled old face says he's ready to dispute.
Bambindlovu learnt back at the house in Vaal that his uncle Jonas is the most difficult, not only does he look or come across as strict, he is the word elucidated.

Jonas appeared to be the most vexed about Thandikela keeping their son from them, the level of his anger hit the roof. His brother was able to calm

him down as the man was ready to act on his rage.

Liyana was sadly sent home by the ever so loving uncle-grandpa Jonas, the couple did not argue about it. She left with a heavy heart and unspoken words that bothered her.

“We are coming with you.”

Sigh!

You can't take Jonas anywhere.

“Please Malume.” Hands joined together as if offering prayers to a deity...

See the things Jonas makes people do.

“I respect my mother, although this has everything to do with me. Let me hear her side of the story first.”

It's that expression on his face, the one Mhambi and Vusamazulu would have when trying to soften the man up. As the older brother, Jonas remembers it and guess what... dear old Jonas has a weakness.

We're getting a nod...

Praise the most high...

The prodigal son is content, he leaves them in his caravan and finds his way into the flat. The stairs seem longer today, probably because he's dreading the conversation that's about to take place.

“Where have you been wena? Didn't I say come home early? Were you with that girl again? What did I say about staying away from her? Why are you digging your own grave Bambindlovu? Do you know who she is? This is an abomination.”

This is the thing about shouting, you spew things you're not supposed to...

As we wait for Thandikela to explain the 'abomination' part.

“What happened with you and my father?”

I guess we have to wait a little longer...

Thandikela stares with shifty eyes. Since when is this one so random? She shifts on her bed, grimacing. Questions she has no answers to flying around her head like flies on a freshly slaughtered cow.

“Wh— what?” She stammers.

“We hardly talk about him, and today I got curious and want to know how you two meet. How was I conceived?”

Okay, wrong question Bam-Bam.

“Uyahlanya wena? What are you asking me?” She’s snappy, probably hasn’t had supper yet.

“Sorry MaOlday, that came out wrong.” Wittiness is found in his voice, but his face lacks even a smidgeon of it. “Please tell me.”

“Why are you asking me these things Sokalisa? After what your father did to me, how are you so cruel to want me to relive the past?” Tears... they always work.

He moves from the door, there's a plastic chair at the foot of the bed, small enough to fit the hips of his twelve year old sister. He squashes his big self on it because sitting on his mother's bed is a no go. He gawks, eyes investigative.

“I told you, we met, fell in love, got married and had you.” Thandikela struggles to keep eye contact, for some reason she can't look at him.

“And the woman he left you for?”

“I've never met her.”

“Why are you lying to me, mama?” He forces himself out of the chair and stands to his feet. “Abomalume are here, downstairs. They want to see you.”

Thandikela ultimately sinks into a condition of mental stupor, there's a voice in the room, her son's

voice. She hears him but can't puzzle the sentences together.

"Did you hear what I said?"

At the loudness of his voice, she jumps off the bed feeling as if she is emerging from a stupor for the first time in forever.

She runs out of the room in a state of panic, he trails after her thinking she's going to meet up with them. Thandikela makes a turn on the passage leading to the kitchen. He's confused, unable to think straight as he watches his mother open the cupboard. She pulls out a bottle of paraffin and without batting an eye empties the container over her head.

"Mama, wenzani?" (What are you doing?)

He yells marching to her, but Thandikela is fast enough to grab a box of matches from the top shelf before her son reaches her.

He stops, bloodshot eyes scrutinising his mother drenched in paraffin.

"Is this what you do to me, Sokalisa?" The woman is

screaming, it's too loud that the other residents leave their rooms because who wouldn't miss a verbal fight and it's free?

"Mama," is all his trembling lips can mutter.

"I brought you into this world, raised you singlehandedly. Away from those toxic people, I let you keep their name and allowed their ancestors to invade your life. I did all that for you Sokalisa, and this is what you do to me?"

Her voice carries the cries of a burdened woman, she lights the match stick. Disbelieving gasps echo.

"Stop her Bambindlovu." One of the male tenants alerts. But the son baring an angry face does not move an inch, he is glaring at his mother, chest heaving.

"I told you time and time again to stay away from those people, and you have the audacity to bring them to my house? Like you did with that Okolie girl. This is all her fault, she introduced you to them. She brought them back into your life."

She's not going to stop shouting, is she?

"You should've listened to me when I told you to stay away from her, now look what you did Sokalisa. You slept with your niece."

Gasps! Might as well call Daily sun because wow, Thandikela is on fire. Not literally... yet...

"She is not my niece." Bambindlovu defends whatever he has with Liyana, he was relieved when he found out they are not blood related. The two have not disclosed their relationship to the family.

"What do you know? You know nothing Bambindlovu." Her screams elevate and the flame dies out. She must really want to die because she lights another match.

Gasps are heard again... These tenants are so... sigh!

"That's why you slept with your sister's daughter." She insists on Liyana being his niece.

The tenants will be breathless by the time this woman is done venting if they continue gasping like this.

“That’s why you brought those men here, I will kill myself before I let them into my house.” She’s dead serious. Bambindlovu looks spent, drained and defeated.

Jaw clenched and eyes filled with nothing but rage, he breathes heavily as if relieved and that’s when a pail of water is poured over Thandikela’s body. She wheezes and turns around to find Maki with an empty bucket in hand. Thandikela’s eyes widen as she turns back to her son, the man is swimming in anger. He regards her with an enduring expression, clicks his tongue and walks out of the house.

KENNETH-

The hospital was so adamant on taking Zithobile to the morgue, as the only person responsible for her, I had to fight them. My word does not stand solid because I'm not family. If they provide a letter from the court stating that a deceased is ought to be sent to the morgue then I will lose her. I don't understand how she was declared dead, it doesn't make sense to me. Although there is no heartbeat or pulse, her body is warm. Doctors came with absurd reasons as to why her body is still warm.

None of Zithobile's immediate family is willing to come forth, each claiming they are too busy to travel to Joburg. Time is of the essence and Nokzola is my last hope, she's closer.

That day after confirming Zithobile's whereabouts, after I left this place. It never crossed my mind that I would be back here. I knock and stand a measured distance. It takes a minute for the door to open.

“You?” Shock hits her across the face. I’m glad that she remembers my face, it makes things easy for me. “What are you doing here?”

When I don’t give her an answer she tells me to come in which is kind of unusual, I walk in anyway.

“Please sit.” I don’t have time for that, so I remain standing while she settles down.

“Zithobile is not well.” Honestly, I don’t expect her to be emotional about this, the impassive expression on her face is an indication that she does not regard Zithobile as family.

“How is that my problem?”

“A family member is needed to communicate with the ancestors.” My plea comes across as rude, so I try again in hopes that I will get it right this time around.

“Something happened to Zithobile, she had to undergo an operation. There were complications and she didn’t wake up. The doctors have declared her dead but she’s still alive, I believe stuck somewhere in the spiritual realm.” The look on her face affirms

that I have just wasted my time.

“Maybe it is better she follows her mother, the world is not a nice place for young women like her.”

My hands clench from inside my pockets.

“What about your daughter?” I ask.

“What about my daughter?” As expected confusion paints her face.

“She’ll be better off buried in your garden right next to your husband.” Disbelief rains on her, she jolts up, frame visibly shaking.

“Wha... what?” Her lashes repeatedly flap, she must think this is a dream.

“Do you still remember the Mthombeni clan names Nokzola?” I ask, poker-faced.

I push back the urge to slap the shock infested on her face. It’s purely time consuming.

“Who are you?” Loud, again as expected.

“If I say your worst nightmare, would you believe

me?" I raise an eyebrow as I read the flurry of emotions playing on her face.

"Get out of my house."

"Careful Nokzola, you might wake your dead husband with the way you're yelling. Remember, we don't want anyone to know he didn't run away with another woman? But that you and those old witches killed him " I feel my mouth twitch, accepting a snide smile. It doesn't feel like me so I wipe it off.

"I didn't kill my hus... husband. He left me for a young girl, everyone knows that, they..."

I should be laughing at her stupidity.

"I see..." Leisurely, I count a few steps towards the picture of her daughter displayed on the room divider. "She looks like her father, don't you think? Maybe we can get her to dig up his remains. That's if you haven't eaten them."

Can a person die from shock? I can't have that, not until she does what is expected of her.

“Are you okay Nokzola? You look parched, perhaps you should drink a glass of...” I pause, a sadistic smug taking over my features. “What is it you and your witch friends drink again? Ah yes, blood.”

She chokes on her saliva and stumbles three steps backwards and grips the couch armrest for anchor. Can her eyes go any wider?

“You don’t know who you’re messing with.” She threatens.

“I’m not fazed by an old witch who thinks she’s powerful because she trapped her husband spirit.” This is getting boring.

“Grab whatever you can and follow me.”

I turn to head to the door, her shaky voice halts my movement.

“She’s never going to make it out, the Mthombenis will never let her go.”

My U-turn is slow, clean and not giving off any sort of emotions. A staring contest... I find pleasure in the fear illuminating from her wide-shock eyes. I could drink it and relive this moment for a time that pleases me.

“Amadlozi amabi?” A cold chuckle leaves, it’s indifferent. “Are they your escape goat?” (Bad ancestors?)

She steps back when I step forward until her back is pressed against the wall.

“Call on those bastards and I will mark this as the last day of your life. Trust me, Nokzola. I will make sure your daughter is the first one to set your old body alight.”

She blinks back in shock, mouth ajar. I tilt my head, a drop to the left.

“Let’s go.” I burble, dismissively.

With a fearful expression splashed across her face,

she grabs her bag from one of the couches and I let her lead the way. I guess she's too shocked to think of locking her door.

On the way to the hospital, the woman tries to convince me that she is innocent. I do not acknowledge her presence.

At the hospital, I meet up with Dr Linda and two nurses wheeling a bed and on it is a body covered with a white sheet.

"Kenneth." She smiles at my presence. "Good you're here, the test came back as expected. We can't keep her here Kenneth. Miss Mthombeni is no longer with us." I never thought her presence would ever annoy me. My gaze moves from her to the bed, I flip the white sheet open and my heart drops at how helpless Zithobile looks. I admit to myself how much I miss her and her talkativeness. Nokzola cackles condescendingly, probably at the sight of her niece. With a tongue click she strides to sit on one of the benches.

“What do you mean as expected? You declared her dead the second you got that baby out of her womb.”

“That is not true Kenneth, Miss Mthombeni was very much alive during the surgery. She just...”

“Save me the details of your incompetence Dr Linda. I was specific that she should not be touched. What the hell are you trying to do?”

“Kenneth...”

“Mr. Mkhize to you.” I interject correcting her, stoical.

“I understand what you must be feeling, but...”

“You don’t understand shit,” I snap. “I want her transferred back to her room.”

“That won’t be possible, the hospital won’t allow it. We need the bed for another patient. Her body has to be taken to the morgue.”

“Who is paying for the bloody room Dr Linda? Me or

you?”

Silence.

“Thought as much, now take her back to her room.” I tell the nurses, they do as per my command. This is the only way I can get Zithobile help, the only way I can keep her alive; dishing threats and not taking nonsense from anyone.

“TSHILIDZI MULAUDZI?” Nokzola’s incredulous shout snaps my attention from the doctor. I quickly turn and the bastard is here. What the hell?

“So this is you Tshilidzi, after so many years?” Nokzola continues and curiosity nudges at me. These two know each other?

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Three

KENNETH-

“Nokzola?” The bastard sounds just as shocked, my intuition tells me not to interfere, so I stand at a distance and wait it out. At some point they will say how they know each other. Nokzola folds her arms, unshrinking.

“I’m surprised you still remember me,” She crows.
“Do you remember my sister perhaps and what you did to her?”

Mulaudzi suddenly looks uncomfortable, his head whips left, right and behind him. I drop my head, my hair hanging sluggishly on both sides, working as a disguise.

“Keep your mouth shut Nokzola.” He chides, muttering furiously under his breath.

“Why? Give me one good reason why I have to keep it down?” The woman is too loud and I’m not complaining. “You slept with my sister and had the audacity to run after knocking her up.”

No. No. No. This can’t be happening, how did I miss this? I gathered everything there was on Zithobile, including her family’s past.

“What?” Is sent out in shock. “Why didn’t she tell me? I could’ve...”

“You could’ve what, Tshilidzi? You could’ve what?” She’s poking an index finger on his shoulder. A sneer crosses his face, he is not taking this well.

“Stop.” He growls, shrugging her hand away. “I loved your sister, but we couldn’t be. I had a wife, a family. There was no way I was going to leave my family for her.”

“Hehehe!” What a way to bring attention to yourself. “You’re a fool Tshilidzi, a bloody fool. Do you know what love is? If you loved her, you wouldn’t have left.”

“Oh please, was it not you who continuously begged me to leave her for you? If my memory serves me right, you were ready to betray your sister. Although married to that useless man Hlubi, you presented yourself to me on a silver platter. Remember that day Nokzola, the day you seduced me? Remember how we went on and on in your sister’s house on her bed? Remember how you screamed my name, telling me how good I was?”

“Lower your voice you bastard.” Nokzola sizzles.

“Now I must lower my voice? Were you not the one screaming your lungs out just now? What, can’t stand the taste of your own medicine?”

“I hate you as much as I hate that daughter of yours. I had to raise Zith...” Nokzola spits, malice is found in her voice.

“Nokzola!” I interrupt, my feet bordering on them.

I don’t want this fool to find out before Zithobile does, I will protect her from Mulaudzi. This will kill her but then again, she is a strong woman. She will

decide what to do with this information. I am going to protect Zithobile and her baby from these two lunatics. Nokzola blinks away the disgrace displayed on her face. Shameless woman.

“Let’s go.”

I snub Mulaudzi, though I can feel his eyes on me. He’s probably shocked to see me, I will have to deal with him later. I don’t kill people, or he would’ve been a goner the day I saw him lay hands on Zithobile.

“Wait!” I wouldn’t stop me if I were him. “You’re that guy who beat me to a pulp, you took my...”

“Your, what?” Does he have the audacity to actually proclaim that he’s been unfaithful to his wife? His eyes are hesitant, scuttling everywhere with no place to land. He gulps and drops his head. Bloody fool. He better not be here for Zithobile.

“You two know each other?” Nokzola’s curiosity comes to play. It’s a relief that none of them know each other’s connection to Zithobile. I need to play my cards right or I will lose.

“We don’t have much time, let’s go.” I would pull her by the hand just to get her as far away from this man as possible, the authoritative tone of my voice is powerful enough to get her to move.

We find Siphon standing outside the door, I asked him to come because he’s familiar with the tradition of uk’phahla. He’ll be able to detect if she’s talking to the bad ancestors or not.

“Everything is set,” he tells me. “Are you sure you want to do this here and not at home?”

“She will need medical attention when she comes to.”

I lose my breathing pattern for a minute at the sight of Zithobile peacefully sleeping on the hospital bed, you’d think she really is dead. I can’t keep my eyes off her, there’s a longing to have her back in my arms but a heaviness in my heart pushes against it. Neo was sure this would work, it has to work. I need her back.

“Cover your head.” Siphso throws a headscarf at her.

We watch her as she does the ritual, by the time she’s done, she’s on the cold hard floor, her body convulsing violently.

“What’s going on?” I ask and catch sarcasm in Siphso’s chuckle.

“A witch calling upon good ancestors cannot be good, this is not her usual routine. Let’s hope they will hear her, she is a Mthombeni by blood.”

“By blood?” I question the confusion he’s brought forward.

“Yes, when she got married she no longer belonged to the Mthombeni clan. But that doesn’t stop her from messing with their ancestors and that’s exactly what this witch has been doing. I say we burn her, this one will not live long anyway. Her days are numbered.” He laughs, it’s unnerving and borders on brutality.

“I don’t want dead bodies here.”

“Don’t worry, today is not her day. We can change her fate though, I’ve always wondered how it’s like to burn a witch.” Sipho.

“Do you think they will heed her plea? I need Zithobile alive Sipho.” I choose to ignore his messed up brain.

“I’m not sure, we’ll just have to wait and see.”

At his response, I move to her bedside. It’s not a second till her hand twitches, in a miniature, her eyes snap open.

“Zithobile.” My arms spread to cuddle her, but she bends to the side heaving. I watch mystified, as vomit passes between her open jaws, splattering sounds resonate as lumps of puke hit the floor. The colouring is abnormally green. She coughs and spits out what I hope is the last of whatever it is she’s retching. I tell Sipho to call the doctor just as Zithobile wipes away the involuntary tears that are streaming down her eyes and the mucus hanging from her nose.

He forces Nokzola to her feet and drags her out with him, he can be bender insensitive sometimes.

“Are you okay?” Perhaps some painkillers would help. She gives me a thumbs up. “Hang in there, the doctor is on the way.”

“The... baby?” Her voice is brittle.

“He’s fine.” I’m not sure if I should give her more information.

“I want... to see him.”

My brain falls into a muddle, wondering if she woke up with a change of heart. Two doctors walk in snatching my retort. Thankfully Dr Linda is not among them, I don’t trust her with Zithobile anymore.

Shock slaps them across the face, they can’t believe this is the woman they declared dead. They are too focused on the supposed miracle to pay attention to the smoke and strong smell of impepho, lingering in the room. I’m told to leave so they can do their job.

The second I step out the door, I'm met with a howling sound. As I turn to my left, I see Sipho, a conceited expression dancing on his face. I can't tell if he's fighting the urge to laugh, but I know he's enjoying whatever is happening there.

Shifting my eyes centimetres to the floor, I spot a fatigued Nokzola, legs spread out. Beside her is Mulaudzi, crying as if a tragedy has taken place.

That witch couldn't have told him about Zithobile, I will kill her if she did.

Sipho approaches, he's smiling like an idiot.

"I love whoever is in charge up there. God or ancestors." He says, folding his arms. "His wife had a stroke last night, she just died a few minutes ago."

That's the reason he's at the hospital?

"Why is this funny?" I really want to know. Sipho huffs, and chortles one more time.

“Remember the fight at the mall, the wife must have done something to Zitha. Why would she have a stroke all of a sudden then dies when Lazarus comes back to life?” Siphos assumptions make perfect sense but he’s insane.

“Who is Lazarus?” I know who he’s referring to. Is he brave enough to repeat it though?

“Zitha of course, sis came back from the dead.” Why did I ask? “I’m glad she’s back, I wasn’t ready to see you marry Mantfombi.”

“That’s a crazy thought Siphos. Why would you say that?”

He considers me with an eye roll, I find it strange that a man would do that.

“Don’t tell me, you haven’t noticed how she looks at you, she’s probably planning a wedding and Mamkhize is her maid of honour.” He laughs and I can’t find my way through the joke. “Would you like anything Khabazela? Would you like me to feed you, Khabazela? Perhaps I could suck your d!ck

Khabazela?”

This conversation is getting uncomfortable.

“Fuck you, Siphon Mndeni.”

He will never stop talking. My attention is stuck on Nokzola. She’s not herself, and my fingers are crossed that she remains like that, otherwise she will sing like a bird.

Mulaudzi is still grieving and that conjures an unexplainable satisfaction in me.

“Mantfombi would love to hear those words from you.” He’s teasing me, now I get it. It doesn’t matter what Mantfombi feels anyway, I have my eyes on Zithobile. She is all I see.

“Walking around smelling like your mother.” He complains. “Be careful Kenneth, I see red flags all around her.” I shake my head, as I don’t want to dwell on that.

“Keep an eye on Nokzola, I don’t want her saying things she’s not supposed to.” I leave Siphso with this instruction and head back to the room. The doctors are taking too long.

MKHIZE-

I knew this was a bad idea, that boy is going to kill me.” This is what she’s been singing since she arrived at his house in Diepkloof extension. Mkhize is done trying to keep her calm, the woman never listens anyway.

“Would you calm down, and explain to me what happened.” A heavy breath follows his order. MaNtombi exhales, face shrinking with disgust. She drops down on the nearest chair.

“I didn’t think he would find me at the hospital, I was planning on leaving when he arrived. I could tell from the look in his eyes that he recognised me.”

“So?” Voice is kept neutral and unbothered.

“What do you mean so? You sent me to the Okolie mansion to spy on them...”

“And you bailed out...” Mkhize.

“I have a family to raise Bangizwe,” Mantombi sputters, nose flaring. “I told you from the start that spying on the Okolies was a bad idea.”

“Yet you came out alive aunty.”

“Would you stop patronising me?” Mantombi yells, jerking to her feet. “Let go of this anger you hold, leave that man and his family alone.”

“That is never going to happen.” Mkhize continues to keep it casual. “Especially after he has killed my cousin.”

“My point exactly. What if the same fate awaits you and your son?”

“I’m not a coward aunty, I will come out alive this time. Okolie and I can’t leave in the same world. One of us has to go.”

There is really no point in arguing with this one,

Mantombi shakes her head. She's giving up, throwing in the towel.

"I'm leaving for Durban tomorrow, don't try to contact me. I want nothing to do with you anymore." Mkhize is not fazed nor hurt by her words.

As she turns to leave, she is met by an elegant woman walking into the house. They have met before, and their spirits do not like each other. No one bothers to greet as they parade past each other.

"Thandaza my darling." Mkhize sings as he stands to salute the woman with a hug.

LIYANA-

There she is, lying in bed. If anyone walks in now, they'll think she's sleeping. But she would see them, although her eyelids look shut, they are fluttering slightly. They are the only parts of her that she can move, she is fully conscious but can't shout to

anyone, her body is completely frozen.

She feels a presence of a malevolent intruder in the room, pressure on her chest as if someone is sitting on it, squeezing the breath out of her lungs. Her mouth hangs open to release a scream, a whisper, anything that will alert anyone in the house. But, nothing.

Through her heavy eyelids, she sees a ghoulish figure at the foot of her bed, in a split second the figure looms above her... it's an old woman in a black cloak, her face morphs into some kind of demon. Without notice the creature shrieks and draws near.

Liyana tries to shout, to pull at her eyelids, desperate to snap out of it, but can't budge.

The woman smirks, it's eerie.

"Ndelu. Madiba. Dimba. Duma. Mseleku." (Clan names.)

The whispers swoosh past her ears, the names

uttered, birth an extensive amount of fear in her heart. “Asihambe ntombazane, ukhokho sekudala alindile.”

(Come my child, your great-grandmother has been waiting for you.)

Suddenly she feels as if she is being dragged out of bed, her bed covers instantly snatched from her. There are ominous voices and she can't make out what they are saying. She would scream but she is helpless, every bit of her immobile. She sees a giant figure of a man walk into a room, it's her father and he's rushing to her bedside.

“Liyana, wake up.” In what feels like forever, she hears the gruff tone. “Liyana.” The voice calls again. “Wake up princess, you're dreaming.” Her eyes snap open.

“Papa!” Her first words, relief showers over her at the realisation that she can speak and move.

Her gaze searches for the clock on the wall, it's three in the morning.

"Are you okay?" Her father asks, worry splashed in his voice. "You were crying in your sleep."

Liyana hides in his chest, arms wrapped around his lower torso. Randall is taken aback but holds her still.

"I had a terrible dream." She starts. "There was a scary looking old woman, she wanted me to go with her."

She pulls out of the embrace, eyes staring into nothing.

"Mseleku, Madiba, Duma..." The creature's sayings raid her mouth.

Randall is first surprised and then aghast at the clan names.

"Where did you hear that?" His voice is a soundless whisper, concern in his eyes.

“The old woman, she whispered them to me before telling me to go with her. She said my great-grandmother has been waiting for me.”

A slight grimace on his features is accompanied by a nonplussed shaking of the head. His hand slides up to nestle her soft cheek, his eyes recite a tale of animosity, dejection and sadism. None of them directed at his daughter but what his mind has gathered. He holds her in his arms. You’d think Randall would offer comforting words, but the man remains quiet.

Even in her father’s arms, the darkness weighs on her. With the light streaming throughout her room, she still feels uneasy, like the darkness is pressed up against her.

“Sleep, I’ll be here princess.”

Liyana turns to the lampstand and grabs the white doek given to her by Bambindlovu and wraps it around her head.

“What’s that for?” Randall.

“It keeps the bad dreams away.” That’s all she gives him, and he doesn’t probe any further. He shifts back a little as she wraps herself in the duvet. It doesn't take long for her to fall back to sleep. Her phone pings with message after message, now the dad is more curious than ever. His takes it from the lampstand, a message from a certain Bam-Bam is popping on the lock screen. ‘Pray now.’

He can’t see beyond those two words, it piques his interest. Now he’s eager to know who this Bam-Bam is and the meaning behind the message.

His mind is now occupied with a lot of things, Liyana’s dream being at the top of the charts. He knows who to call and hopes the person will have answers for him.

“Mzi, tell me everything you know about our mother and her grandmother.” He says over the phone, turns back to check on his daughter and leaves the door open, barely a crack.

*

*

*

A/N: A picture of Liyana

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Four

NQABA-

Growing up in the Biyase household, Nqabayomzi was oblivious to his mother's evil ways. For years he lived under the illusion that she was a saint, yes he was the least favoured by the woman who gave birth to him and it bothered him but not to the extent of actually dwelling in the matter. His step father, Duma Biyase was there to fill in the blanks. Barbra Biyase, Blose by blood practised witchcraft, I'm not talking the Harry Potter kind.

It was years later that he found out who she truly was.

Barbra wanted to kill his son Zulu, the boy has the Okolie blood running through his veins. And the Okolies do not mind taking a life, hell on earth is

what they give you first before you meet your demise. The woman was struck by lightning, courtesy of the Okolie ancestors.

Today he's in his brother's house and after talking to the man who had told them that their mother was a witch, the twins have come to a conclusion that the woman in Liyana's dream is their mother's grandmother.

"There's a reason the witch recited the Blose clan names. How do I protect my daughter?"

Unquestionably, Randall would be worried, this is bigger than him. It's not every day you deal with witchcraft or demons or whatever devil is out there.

Nqaba glances from across the coffee table, leans back on the couch and shrugs gesturing that he too is clueless.

"Maybe we should see a sangoma." It's not something he would randomly recommend. "It could be that there's a dark cloud surrounding your family,

Kwame's misfortune, Liyana finding it hard to cope at school... the terrible dreams and the storm you're facing in your marriage. Did you get cleansed after killing our mother?"

Randall leers toward the kitchen, he can hear his wife's and daughter's cheery voices from here.

"Might as well stand on the rooftop and tell the entire neighbourhood." It's a joke, Nqaba finds it funny, mostly the manifestation of displeasure on his brother's face.

"I didn't kill that witch, I only tortured her. She was struck by lightning, remember?" As far as he remembers Neo's prophecy.

"And you held her captive against her will, including our aunt the woman who raised you."

Why is Nqaba bringing up the past?

"I don't regret what I did, they deserved it." His tone mirrors his facial expression, cold and emotionless.

"You scare me sometimes Randall, if you're able to

torture the woman who raised you and not feel bad about it. What would you do to us?"

Okay, someone tell Nqaba to shut up.

Randall's gaze narrows in on his twin, he should be squirming due to the intimidating glare. But Nqaba is never intimidated by his half.

"I would never hurt you Mzi, you're a part of me I can never diminish. Hurting you would be hurting myself."

Maybe this is too deep, completely out of their comfort zone. They will never talk about what just happened. That's the course of their relationship.

"Chala is out," Nqaba breaks the silence, he expects a reaction from his brother. Nothing comes forward. "Her husband bailed her out, that son of a bitch, I thought he disowned her. Apparently they can't find the case file."

"I know." Randall nonchalantly articulates.

Regret joins Nqaba on the couch, he knows his

brother's lethal colossal behaviour is something never to be conjured. That when triggered it's hard for him to have self-control.

"Lend me your phone, I want to call Thandiwe." He wards off from the Chala topic after getting nothing from Randall. "My battery is dead." Randall hands him the phone with a clearing of a throat. A few searches, Nqaba's brows knit as confusion takes over his features.

"Why are you Googling different ways to torture a person?" He keeps his voice low.

"Just." Randall shakes his shoulders.

"What are you planning Randall?"

"Nothing."

"You're an old man now, you do know that, right?"

"We're the same age."

"I'm warning you Randall, don't do anything stupid. Whatever you're planning cancel it now." Someone is getting worked up.

“You sound like a pastor.” It’s more of a reproach than a complaint and it has Nqaba exhaling deeply. “I thought you said you wanted to call your wife. What, you have to Google her numbers first?”

Randall says while ambling out of the living room, his destination is the back yard. Nqaba knows he’s going for a smoke.

AMARA-

“I think that’s about it.” The last of the dish prepared for lunch. My aunt lives to give me stress, she woke me up with a phone call... her favourite thing to do. She stated that they are coming over for lunch, my mind immediately went into excuse mode. She didn’t buy any of the excuses I came up with, I went to the extent of lying that I’m going to church. For that I was called a heathen who has a special place in hell right next to the devil.

“Great, I can leave now.” Doing away with the apron, Liyana honours me with a smile.

I won’t lie, her cooking skills are still terrible.

“Where are you going?” The question catches her before she steps out.

“I don’t want to be here when aunt Petunia arrives.” She sighs with a roll of her eyes. “You know how she can be, I don’t want her interrogating me. I’m not ready to tell her that I’m dropping out of Varsity. Papa as well, those two are a team from hell.”

I’m still stuck on the dropping out statement. At my disbelieving stare, her eyes duck for a second. Bottom lip slipping in between her teeth.

“Why?” I get a sigh.

“School is not for me, Amara. I know it’s not what Grandfather wants for me, I have a calling I need to focus on.”

“A calling?” I am familiar with the visions, but... “I doubt they would want you to neglect your education.”

“So much has been happening, things I haven’t told you and papa about. I’ve been seeing and experiencing things that have made me question my sanity. Sometimes I’m not sure if I’m still alive or a lost soul wandering around without a purpose. I didn’t ask for this gift Amara, and yes I find it unfair that they would choose me.”

That’s because she’s the first born of their heir, well this conclusion makes sense.

“I can’t do anything right, my grades are terrible no matter how much I study I always come defeated. I’m fighting battles I know nothing about. The only way to smoothen out everything is for me to take time off and focus on the ancestors. Grandpa is angry, this is something I know. I haven’t heard from him in a while and I know it’s because I have turned my back on him.”

“Baby, I hear what you’re saying and you know I’m always here for you. But your father will never accept this.”

Randall is a different kind of specie, sometimes I question his humanity.

Lately there's this dark aura hovering around him, he's not the man I know. Sometimes I'm woken up by chills rippling through my body only to find him staring at me.

This one time I was watching 'Evil Lives Here' on a crime channel, he flatly asked if I would still love him if he were to execute an entire family like the man on the show. Not only did I find the question uncanny, the way he said it made my skin crawl. There was no emotion in his voice, his eyes were empty like his soul was slurped out of his body.

"I will tell him myself," she sounds confident. "Papa is a very difficult man to please."

"That's because he wants the best for you." His children mean the world to him, he would choose them over me. I would choose them over him without a doubt.

“Maybe, I can’t really attest to that. He did kill Olivia.”
She prompts and shifts to a bar stool.

“Liyana...” It’s not my place to explain this matter.

“I know.” She cuts in. “There’s a reason he did that and I’m not saying I’m okay with it. Perhaps one day he will tell me why he killed her, I know though not to hold grudges.”

“Wow, when did you grow up?” I find a seat beside her.

“When you two were busy with your lives,” guilt grips me. We have neglected our kids over the past months, it’s embarrassing. “I met a friend, and have learned so much from them.”

There’s a glow in her eyes, they recite a tale of the affection she holds for this friend.

“A guy friend?”

Her cheeks turn beet-red.

“Yes, and don’t tell papa. If it were up to him he would put me in a bubble and lock me up in my room.”

“Do you love him?” She acknowledges my query with a smile.

“Maybe I do.”

My hand slithers to her thigh, I catch a glimpse of the ten year old Liyana in the innocence of her eyes.

“I’m here for you Liya, don’t ever forget that. And I’m sorry that I have neglected you and your brother, I’ll try to be a better mother.”

“I have never questioned your parenting skills Amara.” She pulls me to my feet, an assuring smile on her face and envelops me in her cordial arms. A sweet giggle erupts as she breaks the hug, she’s scrutinising the 5 month old baby bump.

“I can’t believe you’re pregnant... again, when will you two stop having babies?” She’s always known about the baby, we just never had time to sit and talk.

“Come on, you know your father still wants a soccer team? I doubt he’s ever going to stop.”

In response, her nose creases in disgust. “Eww

Amara.”

I chortle at the tone she uses and crib her cheek in the palm of my hand.

“I’m happy you’re here Liya, I miss spending time with you.”

“Me too.”

“Why do I smell fish in here?” Look what the devil is dragging into my kitchen. “You know your uncle does not eat fish.”

Is she supposed to be opening my pots? Aunty or not, this is my kitchen.

“We didn’t prepare fish aunty, it’s...”

“You’re kidding me.”

Why is she shocked? Tread carefully woman, there’s a pregnant woman in here. Liyana squeezes my hand, halting my crazy hormones from spilling all over this place. I find a soft smile on her face.

“We made Ghanaian dishes aunt,” she comes to my

rescue. “You’re going to love it, trust me.”

“Trust a girl who can’t even boil water?” A huff slithers through Petunia's lips.

This one was made and born in the kitchen, look at her tasting every dish we prepared. We’re standing behind her waiting for a verdict, if possible a prosecution. This is Petunia Buthelezi we’re talking about.

“MZALA!” An ear splitting shout emerges from the hallway. “Where is my cousin?”

A wide, round face appears. Eyes active, lips stretched into a broad smile. She’s coming for me... Right... The hug is awkward on my side, by the time I raise a hand to pat her back she pulls away. Nelisiwe has her father’s height, unnecessarily tall.

This is really not the Nelisiwe I met years ago, I know people change when they grow. But, how did she grow to look ten years older?

“Nelisiwe!” I salute, smiling like I’m okay with my

aunt bringing her to my house. I know she's here to stay. "You're so grown and different," she observes.

No, you're different.

"You've grown too."

Literally... She looks like she's been through the toughest battles in life.

You know when they say life took its toll on someone? Well life took its toll on Nelisiwe.

She's my aunt's younger version, a few shades lighter and vibrant. What's with the granny look though? The long vintage dress is not doing her any justice.

"Amara, Amara, Amara." I try not to flinch at the loudness of her voice. "Look what you've done for yourself, one would think uthwele. Leaving such a lavish life. Do you know I had to take a bus to Johannesburg? That time I have a whole cousin who's married to a king."

"Uhh!"

“Speaking of a king, mza!” She jabs my shoulder a little too hard. “Where do you fish? I’m tired of eating Lucky Star, I need to taste some sushi as well. Does he have a brother? We can be sisters-in-law...”

Geez... Will she ever give me a chance to speak? Liyana is amused by the talkative cousin, she titters and introduces herself. I’m not a fan of unplanned events, I haven’t even had time to tell Randall about Nelisiwe.

“Aunty, malume said...” The family reunion is interrupted by a calm throaty voice, eagerly my attention darts to the direction where it came. A striking young man in traditional clothing is gawking at us, my first impression is that he’s in his mid-twenties. Bulging eyes are on Liyana, she’s staring back with the same expression.

“What is it Sokalisa?” Aunt Petunia turns her attention to him.

Sokalisa? He’s also a Buthelezi? And he called her aunt. I don’t know this cousin.

“He’s hot, don’t you think?” Nelisiwe whispers beside me with a bite of a lip.

What is going on here?

“Excuse me.” Liyana runs out of the kitchen, the young man’s gaze follows her.

Wait a minute!

“Aunty, who is this?” He must be uncle Mhambi’s son, I hear he had a wandering eye in his time.

“He’s my cousin, your brother.” Nelisiwe chirps, loud.

I find her remark quiet funny, I am my parents’ only child.

“That’s impossible, my parents only had one child.” I dispute. Somehow the stare he considers me with seems to confirm Nelisiwe’s riposte.

“Nene,” aunt Petunia rebukes her daughter. “This was not yours to tell.”

“Aunty, what is going on?” I ask.

Come to think of it, he looks exactly like my father... Like uncle Mhambi does.

ZITHA-

Three days, it's been three days since I've seen Kenneth. He was unable to directly look at me the last time I saw him.

Remembering his promises I try not to let insecurity claim me. He loves me, although he hasn't said it yet, he loves me. I'll ask him what the problem is when he comes back, I have to or else my brain will birth crazy thoughts.

Mantfombi is here talking none stop, I can't repeat a word she has said to me. I'm not here, I don't want to be here. I want to be with Kenneth, I need him with me.

"Madlabantu." Siphos says, walking in the room. The statement has my name written on it because his eyes are on me. Playful and a line of a faint sneer on the corner of his mouth. Mantfombi stands, this girl

is too deep. Why in the land of the Zulus is her head bowed?

“How are you?” Now he’s serious.

“Fine,” I’m not. “Where is Kenneth?”

“Kenneth has taxis to drive, he’ll be here later today.” Since when does Kenneth drive taxis? He’s lying to me.

“You’re a terrible liar Siphon, where is he? I haven’t seen him in three days. Why is he avoiding me?”

The last time I saw him was when he brought the baby to me, he said his goodbyes after dropping him in my arms. Yeah, Yeah. I held him in my arms.

The near death experience made me see life differently, the little human is innocent in all this. I haven’t named him yet, I’m waiting for the so called ‘taxi driver’. I want him to choose a name for him, that’s if he will come back.

I was wrong, from wanting to abort the baby to giving him away for adoption. To conceive him and

want to send him back to where he came... the impression alone is wicked.

“He’s not, believe me. Maybe he’s playing it safe, trying to see if you’re not a zombie. Phela you came back from the dead. What if your aunt messed with the ritual? We think we’re talking to Zithobile kanti umgijimi.” (A zombie)

Why is he serious while saying this?

“You two are hiding something from me, I just know it.” There can’t be any other logic here. Men are bad at keeping secrets.

“You see?” He steps back, pointing a finger at me. And that fear on his face... he’s feigning it. “I guessed it, you’re not our Zithobile. She wasn’t a psychic.”

Mantombi is having fun behind Siphos, her laughter is reserved though as if she’s not supposed to laugh in the presence of a man.

“Siphos stop.”

“No, really. How did you know we are hiding something from you?” This man wants me dead again.

“Spill, now.” I demand.

“Well, the thing is Kenneth is transforming one of the rooms into a nursery for Dlozi.”

“Dlozi?” Who is that? He grins, it’s playful. I have to admit, the man has a beautiful smile. I’m allowed to appreciate such, right?

“Yes, the baby’s name. You should’ve seen him on his first day on earth, he looked like an old man. One of your ancestors escaped the land of abafileyo, I don’t blame them really. Kumnandi ukuphila sisi, ai impilo imnandi. I would also force my way back if I were to die, either as mgijimi or through reincarnation.” (Life is nice)

Either Siphos is trying to distract me or he’s losing his mind.

“I’m not accepting that name, Siphos.” The poor thing

will have to go through life with such a terrible name.
“And stop lying to me.”

He’s looking at me with sincerity in his eyes, a fool would actually believe him.

“I never speak lies sis Zee, I’m a Mndeni.” The pride look tickles, but there is no urge to laugh. “If you take time and look closely, you’ll see it. I’m sure it’s your grandfather, or ugogo perhaps. You know old people look alike.”

I’m done... And then! Why is this one laughing?

“Oh bhut’ Siphos, you’re so funny.” Welcome back to Mantfombi’s voice. This girl does not love me, she should be rebuking him and not cheering him on.

Siphos smirks her way, “I wasn’t making a joke, Sarah.”

Siphos notes the confusion he has caused and frowns, at this point Mantfombi and I are the crazy ones in this room. That’s how he’s eyeing us.

“Your name is Sarah?” She replies my question by shaking her head negatively.

“Yes she is, you’re Khethiwe.” Siphos eyes point at me. “And Kenneth is Khaphela. I feel sorry for my friend, imagine having two women after your heart. Jolani, I’ll just watch from a distance.” He’s walking out as he drops the bomb, I’m left with a dazed late bloomer.

Does he mean Mantfombi is in love with Kenneth? I knew it, this woman is here for my Kenneth.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Five

BAMBINDLOVU-

Come home please, I miss you. Don't let them come between us. We can talk about this.

A text from his mother reads, the tip of his tongue itches. He wants to clack it, however, he's in the presence of elders.

It's not that he doesn't love his mother anymore, he's upset with her. What she did was utterly low, and Bambindlovu is finding it hard to forgive her.

He hasn't been home since that day, his uncles have given him a roof above his head. They were disappointed when he told them his mother was not home, he lied of course. But it was better than telling

them he has a selfish dramatic mother. She watches too much Indian telenovelas, that woman.

Coming to the Okolie house was not part of his plan, he knew Liyana was here and had no plans of seeing her anytime soon. Mostly because he has no explanation as to why he's been distant, why he hasn't been to see her. Text messages are nothing compared to the heartache tormenting him.

The dining room is crowded... an uncle, an aunt, a garish cousin who won't stop talking, his new found sister. A standoffish, menacing brother in-law who hasn't spared anyone at the table a smile but his wife. The second giant man next to him was introduced as his twin. He was told there's a little nephew who is sleeping up in his room and then there's her... This woman who suddenly makes him nervous, something he is not accustomed to.

Their eyes have been clashing from the first bite of whatever is presented on the table, no words have

been exchanged between them. He's spotted anger and a glint hurt on her features.

If it were not for the inconsequential conversation at the table, held by Petunia and her daughter, someone would've probably noticed their chemistry.

"Mzala, I thought you'd visit me when I was admitted at the hospital." Nelisiwe says after telling everyone how 2020 was unfair to her and she had planned to make 2021 a great one.

"I didn't know you were hospitalised, what was wrong with you?" She wouldn't have visited still.

"Nothing honestly." She waves her hand as if the matter is trivial. "Those stupid doctors diagnosed me with bipolar..."

Welcome to Iraq, bombs falling left right and centre.

"Why didn't I know about this?" Amara.

"I thought your mother told you." That's Mhambi responding to Amara's question.

“There was nothing to tell.” Petunia says, with carelessness in her voice. “We’re here for Sokalisa, let’s not talk about things of the past. How about you and your brother spend time together. Sokalisa doesn’t know much about his father, maybe you can let him in on the memories you have, Mashenge.”

“I don’t mind.” Bambindlovu says, and gets a glare from Liyana. Now more than ever he’s eager to know what’s on her mind. “I mean, when we’re not busy.”

“Most of the memories I have are a blur, I was very young when he died.” Amara ripostes, this is not a subject she would like to get into. Her parent’s death was a tragedy, she would rather forget.

“You don’t have to do it now, my child.” Mhambi jumps in, sending her a smile.

“How else will they bond if not through their father’s memory?” Petunia’s stubbornness disputes.

“I can tag along, I remember uncle Vusi.” A loud

giggle follows behind Nelisiwe's interference.

"Liyana can come too, I'm sure she'd like to get to know her uncle. We can set a date, maybe go out for movies." She adds.

Bambindlovu's heart does that thing that hearts do when caught by surprise. Maybe because he's falling for this Liyana, their eyes clash again. She looks pained this time, something tells him that this is not what she wants.

"He's not my uncle."

"She's not my niece."

The couple snap in a chorus, clearly this fact bothers them.

"You're Bam-Bam?" Randall questions.

Oh! Oh!

The room is filled with thick silence, even the talkative Nelisiwe does not dare raise her gaudy voice. All eyes fall on the man of the house, then flick back and forth on Liyana and Bambindlovu. Bambindlovu clears his throat in hopes that it will

scare this huge elephant in the room.

“Ba— Bam-Bam?” It’s a question which Randall does not acknowledge, he’s waiting an answer; so is everyone at the table.

“What did you say, papa?” Liyana comes with her own question, she knows her father won’t say anything not before they explain themselves.

“I don’t... know who that is sir.” There really is no need for him to be so formal with his brother-in-law. Randall’s gaze flicks to Liyana, she’s just as nervous as her Bam-Bam.

“Do you two know each other?”

Anyone willing to draw a smile on Randall’s face, please come forward.

“They do.” Petunia answers. “In fact, the day we met Sokalisa they were together.”

Someone check on Petunia’s serving dish we need her out of the house as soon as a second from now.

“Oh, what a small world.” Amara is not as curious as her husband, could be because she’s mostly oblivious to her surroundings than aware. “How did you two meet?”

“We’re not that familiar with each other, I met him through a friend. There’s really nothing to it.” Liyana. Fire to that lying tongue.

“Can I be excused?” Strange how the only plate she grabs is Bambindlovu’s plate, just as the man is shoving a fork to grab a piece of meat. Everyone is now looking at him, he feels their gaze on him however he doesn’t raise his eyes to check.

“What just happened?” That’s Nelisiwe, her question is snubbed.

Lunch was not meant to be this heavy, he thinks of running after her, then again that would confirm her father’s suspicions. But, can he ignore this urge to chase after her?

“I’ll take the dishes to the kitchen.”

Maybe not...

Gracelessly, he hunches over and pushes the chair back as he stands.

“That is not a man’s job, Sokalisa. Not the men in our family.” Yoh look at ousie Petu. “Nene gather the plates, Mashenge will help you wash them.”

“No, I don’t mind.” He’s half way up, awkwardly slouched over.

“Soka...” There he goes, headed towards the kitchen.

Petunia is very easy to read and after living with her for weeks, he’s learnt the trick on how to avoid her. The woman is patriarchal in a way, she’s back minded and esteems men way too high above women. A notion he was not brought up with, in his eyes men and women are equal. Come on, the man grew up with two females under his wing.

Something is happening to him, something crazy

and scary. That day when; the first time they slept together; he was certain he liked her a lot. Love or any other affection deeper than that was not on the list, now what is this thing that's making his heart skip a thousand beats while watching her bustling in the kitchen?

He wants to say a word or two to her, but they fail him. Where does he even start?

So he stands there on the kitchen entrance and continues to watch this woman with different eyes. He blinks when she suddenly stops, body language gesturing that she feels his presence. He thinks she will turn, and hopefully, fingers crossed and bible oaths; she's not as grumpy as she was back there. It will be easier to speak to her.

"You can leave those dishes on the counter." Her voice hits him on his heart like cupid's arrow. When last did he bask in the sweetness of her voice?

"Mfethu." There's something on his throat, he clears it and treads towards her, she does not spare him

even a tilt.

He does her bidding as he nears the kitchen counter and continues with his escapade. It's not him to be clingy, this is an unusual thing to do. Hands around her waist from the back, face buried on a vanilla scented neck. He feels the tensing of her body.

"I miss you, mfethu." It is a whisper that has Liyana whimpering and only because her knees have decided to react to the Umblaselo-wearing freak's sweet nothings.

"I miss you, it's driving me crazy." He repeats, deeper and a tad hush-hush; this time.

"Let go Bam-Bam," she says, trying by all means to school her breathing. "Someone will walk in."

"Let them, I don't care. Uyabona mina nawe uZola no Seven. No one can ever keep us apart." He's serious though.

It's easy to make her laugh and he does it so effortlessly.

“Why have you been ignoring me, Bam-Bam?” She’s not going to cry, she’s not a crier this one.

“I didn’t know how to face you, Lili. I guess I was overwhelmed by everything, I still am.” Her hand finds his forearm, a smile playing on her face.

“But we’re not related, I refuse to accept that you’re my mother’s brother.” Her words. “We can’t let that keep us apart.”

“And we won’t, but we need to play it safe. Right now is not the time to tell them. They will never understand, my mother as well.”

“Does she know Amara is my stepmother?”

“I haven’t told her anything yet, she’s too angry to understand.”

He turns her around to face him and immediately cages her lips; a passionate sexual kiss. Liyana happily reciprocates. They would go on all day if they were not in her father’s house. They pull apart, breathless.

“Tell me, you’re happy now, I love it when you’re

happy.” She smiles as his assertion has her feeling bashful.

“I’m the happiest when you’re with me, Bam-Bam. And I love the clingy you.”

“Hey, this is the only choice I had to make it up to you, seeing how much you love us playing Romeo and Juliet.” His lips touch hers again.

“There’s something I have to tell you.” Liyana mouths, audible enough for just the two of them.

“What is it?”

Before that... her arms loop his neck, drawing him closer to her, another kiss is shared.

“Haibo, so this is what is done in Joburg?” They know that voice, how can they forget it? It’s loud, it’s annoying... it borders, on fake sarcasm. Liyana is the first to slip out, they turn, eyes wide and dubious.

“Nelisiwe?” Her voice trembles under her breath, while Bambindlovu looks as calm as a cucumber.

“Your uncle mfethu?” She imitates Bambindlovu’s voice and the endearment, a sneer lain on her face.

“He’s not my uncle.”

“She’s not my niece.”

The couple sing again, they find each other’s gaze and swiftly glance back at Nelisiwe.

“You’re my niece and he’s my cousin. That means he’s your uncle, this is an abomination Liyana.”

They hear footsteps, it’s two pairs actually. Petunia and Amara appear before Liyana and Bambindlovu could ask the loud mouth to keep it shut.

“What’s an abomination?” Nelisiwe’s mother’s questions, it must be a mother-daughter thing to be so nosy.

“Uncle and niece kissing.” A naughty smile on Nelisiwe's face. Liyana is faintly shaking her head no, eyes pleading and Nelisiwe...well sis is not too blind or illiterate to notice it.

“Of course it’s an abomination, why are you talking about such a terrible thing?” Petunia again.

“No reason mama, just a book I’m reading.”

What do you know? The girl knows how to keep secrets...

Liyana regards her gratefully.

“I’ll tell you what else, is an abomination.” Petunia says, strolling towards the couple. “A man in the kitchen.” Her strict gaze on Liyana.

“Why didn’t you send him out Liya?”

Liyana has no answer for her, who would have a response for such a dumb question? Bambindlovu wants to answer her but his aunt is tiring.

“He doesn’t look like he minds, besides, Randall enters the kitchen every day.” Amara.

Maybe she should’ve kept her mouth shut.

“I’m going to take a shower then check on Kwame.”
At least someone has found an escape.

“Please wake him up if he’s still sleeping.” Amara sends.

“I will.”

Liyana looks at the man beside her, a conversation is shared through eye contact... none of the spectators catch it. She hurries out, heart racing against her wobbly feet.

AMARA-

I should be happy that I have a brother, but I feel nothing. Maybe I should take aunt’s suggestion that we spend time together; get to know each other. I see how she’s trying to control him as well, she will never rest... my aunt. Randall, Nqaba and uncle Mhambi have gone to the backyard, I’m so glad Jonas did not come. I came to the kitchen to ask Neliswe to help me clear the dishes, now my brother and I are watching her and her mother admiring the place.

“Don’t you think this house is beautiful Nene?” Her eyes make love to the four walls of the kitchen, gradually moving to the cupboards and leaving little kisses on the kitchen appliance.

“I do mama, you know I’m so excited about living here.” Nelisiwe has this smile on her face, one I can’t make out. I don’t like the chills I get from it.

“If only we could join you, my child, I was thinking we could have your birthday party here. Ntombi’s house is old.” Join who? Where? What party? “No one is willing to renovate it for us.”

“Amara can do it, she’s got the money.” Nelisiwe.

“Wait, what party?” I must’ve heard wrong.

“Her birthday party of course, didn’t I tell you about it, Mashenge?”

No, you didn’t. Why is she looking at me as if it’s something I should have scribbled on one of the

pages in my diary?

“No,” I snarl. “You didn’t tell me anything aunty.”

A sneer crosses Petunia’s face, she exchanges glances with her daughter, a motion I cannot grasp.

“Well, now you know. We’re doing the party here, the place is bigger and...”

“This is my house, aunty.” I sizzle, drilling my gaze on the women looking at me like I have no say in this matter.

“We are your family, in fact every celebration should be done here. Birthday parties, Christmas gatherings and family meetings. The house is bigger, Mashenge. You can’t be such a snob. Do you want people to think we are poor?”

“What does that have to do with my house?” My voice escalates. She’s getting on my nerves. “You can’t make decisions on my behalf aunty, I have a husband who questions everything we do in the

Buthelezi family. He hasn't worded his concerns yet, but I know they are there. You decided on holding a meeting in my house without telling me about it, there's a suitcase full of clothes lying in the foyer. Again, I did not agree to Nelisiwe moving in or whatever it is you want her to do in this house. You undermine everything I do in my marriage, call me a bad wife who can't take care of her husband and kids and expect me not to take offence. I took every blow from you aunty, without complaints. But this..."

I will not allow this nonsense.

"Why are you being dramatic, mzala? It's just a party, a one day thing and it's not like I'll be staying with you forever. I'm just going to help around until you're sorted." Nelisiwe.

"There won't be a party here and Nelisiwe is not moving in." I murmur into thick air.

"Mashenge..." Petunia.

“This is none of my business, but Amara is right. This might cause problems in her marriage.” My brother steps in, shifting closer to me. I almost forgot that he’s here, embarrassment leans on me. I hate that he gets to witness this, how dysfunctional this family can be. We’re standing on one side of the kitchen, my aunt and Nelisiwe on the other. They do not look like happy people.

“What problems? My son in-law has no problem with us being here.” Petunia returns, sounding arrogant and territorial. She is right though, Randall has no problem with them visiting, it’s my cousin moving in he might not be happy about.

“Well I have a problem with you wanting to have control over my home.” It feels like a ton of bricks have been removed from my shoulders, I haven’t offloaded much but this much is something and makes a difference.

“Fine, the party can be cancelled but Nelisiwe is moving in.” Eh!

“She’s not moving in.” I argue, brows crinkled together as irritation gathers around me.

“Yes she is, Mashenge. You need...”

“I don’t need her here, I don’t want her in my house.” The raising of the voice is not intended. “I’m not a child, I know what I’m doing.”

At this, Petunia cackles and claps once. It’s loud and borders on disrespect.

“You know what you’re doing, Amara?” It’s the daughter. Why is she even here? No one wants her here. “If you knew what you’re doing, your son would not have been molested and your daughter would not be dating her...”

“That’s enough.” Bambindlovu chides and the rest of Nelisiwe’s words are pushed back, down her throat. She’s not affected, in fact, her eyes roll to the back of her head in a disrespectful manner.

“Take that back!” Fury is found in the tone of my voice as my tongue moves faster than my brother’s. Clogging his clap back.

“The truth hurts mzala, doesn’t it?”

“You don’t know shit about me, Nelisiwe.” My quip and steps are predatory, eyes scrutinising her. Funny how she is bold enough to meet me halfway, arrogance pouncing on her cynical face.

“I know enough to know that you’re a bad mother, a bad wife. Despite being an orphan, my mother took you under her wing. Guided you through life and wena umbonga ngeplate yo thuvi. Idrama engaka for a party? You think you’re better than us wena mzala, just because you eat cheese for breakfast.” The slight shoulder poke summons a deep irritation, it settles on my throat with a desperate plea to spew out of my mouth, vile words standing at attention and any form of regret tossed aside.

“Fuck you Nelisiwe, do you hear me? Fuck you.” I yap, schooling my voice because I have a nine year old in the house who should not be hearing his mother cursing.

“Amara.” My brother’s compassionate voice trickles into my ears, a second too soon his hand wraps

around my bicep. "Let her be, you're pregnant. Please, you should not be getting upset."

"No," I yank it back. "She doesn't even know me yet, she has the audacity to judge me."

"I'm not judging you, I'm only stating the truth." I perceive the so called truth is what her mother told her about me. To think I trusted her like a daughter would a mother?

"Bullshit!" I shout. "Do you know what I had to go through to be where I am?"

Silence!

"Exactly, you're just a pretentious bitter bitch. I don't want you in my house, I don't want you anywhere near my children or my husband. Whatever fantasy you have of ever living here, cancel it. I don't entertain serpents and I don't entertain bullshit. Get your suitcase and get out of my house."

She's staring, eyes narrowed and condemning every inch of me.

“Aunty?” Maybe I should turn to her, she’s the one who brought this woman into my house, knowing she’s not stable. “Is this the woman you want near my children? A crazy witch who has no control over her emotions?”

“Who are you calling a witch?” I don’t care for Nelisiwe’s nonsense right now, I want to hear from the woman who brought her here.

“Keep quiet Nene.” The tone she uses is imploring.

Dusky eyes piercing, Petunia moves at a snail’s pace. Her thick hand collides with my cheek, generating a loud sound. I hear my brother gasp, ‘no.’

I would’ve seen the attack coming if she had marched towards me with furious rage.

A flash of immediate pain and anger engulfs me. There’s a split second where I’m trying to figure out what to do. My primal instinct is to lash out in anger, but my intellect is trying to tell me there’s a better way.

Bambindlovu's hand is on my forearm this time, pulling me back. I can't move, my feet won't let me or rather the look in my cousin's eyes. It's holding me hostage, rendering me a prisoner in my own home.

"The meeting is over, get out of my house." I will most probably live to regret this, I don't care. I want them gone.

"Let's go sisi." He's dragging me backwards.

Giving these women a final glare, I turn to follow Bambindlovu, but a tight grip on my hair stops me. I shriek and grab the person's hand.

"You're evil Amara, you're evil." It's Nelisiwe, she's screaming and pulling on my hair. Then there's my raging hormones, as my brother rushes to get her off of me, I manage to spin and grab her braids. Now we're screaming, each voice fighting for attention. Somewhere in this chaotic noise, I can hear my aunt's voice. I can't make out what she's saying, neither can I see her. My gaze is on Nelisiwe, Bambindlovu has his arms around her waist, trying

to pull her off of me.

“Amara!” Randall’s vocal sound booms into the kitchen and at the same time my brother rips the crazy cousin from me. I quickly turn toward Randall, embarrassed. He’s angry, puckered brow heavier than usual. Eyes consumed with fire on the people behind me.

“Ra... Randall...” I call out, but his eyes instantly widen, a blow of shock knocks him, overtaking the anger on his face, his pace quickens. He’s running towards me, shouting my name.

“Nelisiwe no.” I hear my aunt yell from behind me, I want to turn to see what is happening but the man coming for me pulls my interest.

It’s as if time is moving too fast yet so slow

“Amara move!” He barks.

He’s almost close when, rapidly, a sharp object penetrates my skin and muscles, grating into my back. Whatever it is, is pulled out and I feel a cold

burning flame that leaves me winded. A scream erupts, I know my aunt's screams. I'm on the floor, in my husband's arms looking at my cousin who has a bloodied knife on her hand. No expression on her face.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Six

RANDALL-

Measly seconds; that's how long he feels she was out of his sight. Gone are the days when he was always careful when it came to her, she was forever under his watch. Now she's in his arms, with a knife wound to her back. There's chaos in the kitchen, his wife's aunt wailing like a barren woman. A question stands; is she crying for his wife or the woman who stabbed her, her daughter?

"Don't move her, you might cause further damage."
Nqaba halts his brother from whisking Amara up.

They were together when they heard the noise coming from the kitchen, Randall didn't think twice, his feet were faster than his brain as he headed to the direction. His twin trudging right behind.

In this congested space, Nqaba is the only one who thinks of calling an ambulance. Bambindlovu is stationed next to the suspect, lest she tries to run away. She hasn't let go of the knife, rationality hasn't taken over her brain yet. The woman is immobile, facet as cold as a killer's heart.

"My... baby." Grief cuts through Amara's ragged breathing before she passes out due to pain. Had it been someone else, they'd be a victim to anxiety. However Randall Okolie is not a man who gives in to panic hence the calm demeanour

There has to be a pulse somewhere, he finds one on one of her pulse points.

"The ambulance is on the way." Nqaba tells him. She is going to be okay, Randall convinces himself.

In his youth, the man had an alter ego, even gave it a name. A name that had people crawling under rocks at the mention of it, never had he let his family see that side of him. Perhaps it's still there, lurking in the

shadows of his soul. A kiss is placed on her temple before he looks to his brother for help.

Rage pounds in him like a heartbeat as he pulls himself up on his feet, eyes glow with savage fire, drilling through the suspect's soul, Randall's back hand attacks Nelisiwe's face. It sends her flying, a loud thump resounds as her body collides against the wall and falls with a thud to the floor.

"NELISIWE!" Her mother yelps, eyes wide like a deer stuck in headlights.

"How dare you touch my wife. Do you know who she is?" Flames of fury lick through him and escape through a thunderous roar as his hand tightens and locks around her neck. He's got her pinned against the wall, aggressive dark eyes conical. "She is my wife, I will kill you."

Clawing at Randall's hands, Nelisiwe's eyes bulge

out. Wheezing with each given breath she releases a raspy, “can’t breathe.”

“No, please... stop” Petunia screams. “Please spare my daughter.”

By the looks of it no daughter is going to be spared here.

Bambindlovu has joined Nqaba, watching over Amara. The ambulance should be here by now.

“He’s going to kill her.” It’s just a thought that slips through his mouth, Nqaba hears it and nods with the words, “I know.” The tone used lacks compassion, and that births worry in Bambindlovu’s system.

Do people randomly take lives and no one bothers about it?

“How dare you, how dare you touch my wife. I will kill

you, I will kill you.” Voice cold and exact, Randall growls with the certainty of someone who would never be satisfied.

Petunia has no choice but to watch her daughter’s life flash before her eyes, she has four so losing one is... ahem...

Like load shedding, Mhambi drops in, his wife’s cries must’ve drawn him here. He’s a smart man and it doesn’t take him long to figure out what has happened.

A father’s job is to protect and this is what Petunia expects from her husband, to protect the child they helped bring into this cruel world crawling with ruthless people like their son in-law. Her feet know their way to the man she’s loved from the time she had round hips, fresh plump cheeks and perky breasts.

“Baba stop him, he’s going to kill my baby.” He’s her only hope, a respectable man in the Buthelezi family.

Like Jonas, his word is final and it stands. Randall respects him, she's seen it. But how does he chastise a man in his own house?

Sure that's his daughter, Randall is about to kill. However, Amara is his daughter as well and his brother trusted him with his children, even before his passing. Vusamazulu spoke like a man who would jump off a cliff trusting his brothers won't let him hit rock bottom.

To think Mhambi will take a stand, as an alternative he accepts a tsunami of shame, compelling the elder to drop his gaze.

"Mhambi!!!"

Ey! Fear anger! Respectful Petunia has called her husband by name.

"Why are you not doing anything?" Her hands grip his shoulders, she's vigorously shaking him; yelling to his face.

"She's your daughter, baba, he's going to kill your

daughter.”

“If he doesn’t kill her, I’ll do it myself.” There’s a thread of warning in Mhambi’s voice.

Disbelief smothers the heartbroken mother, she’s become a victim of defeat and lethargy.

“What have I done?” The old woman falls to her knees, filling the vast kitchen with her heart wrenching cries. It doesn’t take long for her to drop on her back and roll on the floor screaming into the tiles, her dramatics are disregarded.

Randall is not oblivious to what is happening, he hears and sees it all. But the mission is not complete yet, he’s set on killing Nelisiwe.

“Papa, papa.” A panicky voice shouts from the hallway, there are loud footsteps escorting it, a person running.

“Papa, what are you doing?”

Okay, that’s it. Who let the little girl out? She’s too innocent to witness her father’s dark side. The look

on her face is of disorientation, she can't grasp what is happening. An elderly woman is embarrassingly weeping on the floor, her mother unconscious on the floor as well and her father is strangling her mother's cousin like it's a hobby.

“What's going on, papa? What are you doing and why is Amara unconscious?”

Randall drops his victim like a dead dog in the trash, she fights for her right to breathe at the first taste of freedom.

The man of the house turns to find Liyana caged in fear, bambi eyes judging him.

“Go back to your room Liyana.” His voice is unruffled, but face unkempt with anger.

See what happens when you give your heart the remote control? Look at Bambindlovu cupping Liyana's face in the presence of her father. Does anger cloud one's eyesight? Randall should be

questioning the act, but...

“What’s wrong?” Bambindlovu must’ve noticed something on her features to ask this question.

Has anyone checked on the ambulance? There’s a wounded woman here.

“Papa,” she’s looking at her father and for the first time in forever, tears kiss her cheeks. A river current. “It’s Kwame, he’s not breathing. He won't wake up.”

At the drop of this bomb, Randall snaps a question. “What?”

He takes off like a crazed man, he hasn’t forgotten his wife. It’s just that... this is his son, his heir. His gigantic body almost crushes into three paramedics in the corridor.

That took them too long...

“She’s in there.” Urgency in his voice, he tells them, pointing towards the kitchen. “You! Come with me.” He pulls one of the paramedics, lugging him along to the boy’s room.

Meanwhile, Nqaba makes way for the paramedics team. Liyana breaks down in Bambindlovu’s arms... And Mhambi... he’s seething with rage and has a belt on his hand. Once the kitchen is cleared and it’s him, his wife and daughter left, Mhambi targets a weak Nelisiwe. She would stand and run, but her muscles have not come back to life yet. She can hardly see with all the blood that had piled up in her head when Randall was strangling her.

“Baba ngiyaxolisa,” Nelisiwe crows, trembling like that stubborn leaf in dusty August.

Mhambi turns a cold eye to her cries, Petunia can only watch from a distance. Perhaps this is better than having her daughter strangled to death. There's

fear behind Nelisiwe.'s distended pupils. At the first whip she rumbles, her voice refusing to release an audible sound and curls into a fetal position, it's not enough to stop Mhambi. He goes on and on until she's whimpering and snivelling like a dying goat.

STYLES-

"Don't involve the press."

Styles had made it clear, yet their house is flooded with news reporters ready for her to call out to whoever took her baby, grovel if she has to, so they bring her back unharmed. He's been sleeping home since the ordeal, in a way Sethu finds hope in that. Maybe once all of this is over Styles will move back and they will fix their marriage.

"Where are you going?" She question the attire he's wearing, it's a weekend today and as far as she

knows he doesn't work on weekends.

"Out, I have things to take care of." This is the most he's said to her in days, it bothers her that they are not on speaking terms.

"The reporters are here, we'll be going live in ten minutes." Obscure eyes turn to her, the wife seems to have forgotten her husband's words. Styles does not spare her a single glance, he stands after tying his shoes and heads for the door.

"It's not my fault that she's missing, you know?" She shouts after him, the tone she uses is not powerful enough to get him to stop. He walks out of the room and is out of the house in a jiffy, snubbing the reporters invading his home.

Not having his daughter with him is driving him crazy, he doesn't understand how she has disappeared without a trace. It's as if she never existed... if it were not for her belongings and pictures spread out in their home, one would certainly say there was never a nine year old Sihle

Sishi to begin with.

He finds himself in the busy streets of Joburg where it all began, where his life with Randall began. This is where human trafficking is mostly probably active, it's a crazy thought yes, one that has left a poisonous dagger in his heart but he has to look at all possibilities.

It takes him a minute or less to find a parking spot, today he's driving one of his old cars, a Hyundai i20. It will draw him less attention, if none at all.

The person said to meet at Mcdonald's, he remembers that there was a Spar close by.

"You incompetent bitch." Styles is welcomed by slurs the moment he steps into the restaurant. He's not one to pay attention to things that do not involve him, so he continues in finding an empty table. The eatery is a tad empty, which is expected, they are approaching month end.

“Look what you’ve done to my shirt?” The deep arrogant voice is heard again. “This shirt alone would buy this damn place and the people working here.”

“I’m sorry sir.” No, he didn’t hear right.

His head should be up by now, confirming if what he heard is true. Is she really here? Why is his heart doing this? Moving with a familiar beat, one that brings about a déjà vu feeling.

“Stop saying that.” The stranger continues to yell. “Is that all you can offer? A useless apology?”

“What else do you want me to say? If an apology is not good enough for you then don’t make it my problem.” That voice again, this time his head involuntarily flips up.

Damn his heart, it should not be betraying him like this. Damn him for coming here. Damn her for randomly being here. What the hell is she doing working at Mcdonald’s? The last time he checked her mother was a successful business woman.

“Hey, hey.” The stranger in an oversized suit grips

her writs, the touch makes her uncomfortable. He could tell from where he's seated. He wants to stand, intervene if he can. Something is hindering him, probably the fact that he's married and has a woman waiting for him at home.

"Let me go." She snaps, voice cracking and swirling with disgust. The man does not concede to her behest.

Welcome to Johannesburg, a place where women are manhandled and people would rather take pictures and videos than help.

Darn it, what harm could lending a helping hand do? He stands but his unsolicited plan is rubbed off by a short man dressed in black, face camouflaged with huge black sunglasses.

"Sishi?" The short man asks, at Styles' head nod, he sits uninvited.

Styles steals a glance over at the woman he once shared a bedroom with, the argument is over. In fact, the people that were arguing are long gone. It's as if

it never took place.

“You said you have something for me.” Styles.

The man looks too edgy, head darting from one corner to another.

“I’m dead if they ever find out I was talking to you.”
It’s an enigmatic whisper.

“Who?”

“I would tell you if I had a death wish.” His answer prickles Styles in all the wrong places.

“Where is my daughter?” Frustration kicks in.

“There’s an old factory in Crown Mines, it’s flooded with Somalians. It is said they are trafficking little girls, shipping them off to Europe.” The man says.

This is styles’ biggest fear, although the thought had come to mind he had hoped that it could just be that; a thought.

“Here’s the address.” He slides a piece of paper across the table.

“I want to know, who’s behind this. Who has my daughter?”

“What’s the use of knowing? The most important thing is getting her home.”

Bullshit! Styles thinks. A sneer accompanied by a nod, it’s not him agreeing with what the man is telling him. Rather a sinister thought is scratching his mind.

“I’ve done my bid, it’s up to you what you do next. But be careful, they have eyes and ears everywhere. I have to go.”

... And there he is, running out of the eatery. Not once does Styles remove his gaze from him, his upper lip twitches. He stands up to his feet, ready to follow the man.

“Syles?” It’s that voice again, he turns around this time because it would be weird of him not to.

This face, he hasn’t seen this face in years. He finds it strange that it still has an emotional impact on him,

hence the frown lain on his surface.

“Khethu?” Neo and Randall would probably kill him for talking to her, the last time he was a weakling in her presence and his friends fought hard to keep him away from her.

“How have you been?” She asks but Styles does not have time for small talk, he has a daughter to find and people to kill.

“I’m fine, you.”

Oh, I said it too soon.

The question seems to make Khethu happy, a smile brushes her mouth.

“I’m okay,” She’s rubbing something down there, curious and undisciplined, his eyes drop to find a baby bump. Could be five if not six months pregnant, she looks too tiny in that Mcdonald’s uniform, too tiny for a pregnant woman. They are not friends, so he doesn’t dwell on the fact.

“What is a man like you doing in this side of town?”

Funny he would ask her the same. Her mother was swimming in riches if his memory serves him right.

“Business.”

“Oh!” In a quest of discomfort, they clear their throats in harmony.

Looking at her, a question invades his mind. Does he hold hatred toward this woman? It takes him a millisecond of thorough soul searching to find an answer. How do you hate someone you once loved beyond limits? No she wasn't his first love but she was once his only eye, a woman who chased away his demons just by a mere touch of the hand.

“I heard about your daughter, I'm here if you need help. I can ask my dad to...”

“I've got it covered thanks.” Styles interjects, he would rather cut off his hand than accept any form of help from Dladla. His phone buzzes, it's a text from Randall telling him Amara and Kwame have

been hospitalised.

“I have to go.” Styles.

He should have ran out of that place the moment she opened her mouth to speak to him.

“It was nice to see you.” She means it, the smile on her face seals it. Styles’ reply is a shaky head nod, he leaves hoping he won’t be bumping into her again.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Seven

ZITHA-

Kenneth really is avoiding me, till when do I have to deal with Siphho? Not that I mind his presence, he's a great guy and I don't mind basking in his beauty. It's not every day you get to dwell in the presence of men like him. You see I grew up in Orange Farm and... let me not get into that.

I get to go home today, Siphho knows. He promised to tell that dark skinned Dracula, the promise was unnecessary. It watered my suspicions.

"I'll need you to sign here sisi, these are your release forms." God must love me to grace me with a hunk for a nurse, pity I'm going home today. I should not be smiling, but here I am.

"So," my mind is starting, I feel it coming. "You work

here?”

Mother of Christ, sanctify my mouth.

“Uh... yes.” The poor guy is confused, I’m trying to flirt here. I suck at it, maybe because resentment is keeping me company. It’s Kenneth’s fault, he’s supposed to be here with me. Where the hell is he?

“Nice... very, very nice.” What do I say after this? And why am I trying so hard to get his attention? “Your working hours?”

“Excuse me?” He takes the papers, confusion etched on his face.

“Maybe we could go out on a date and you’ll tell me about...”

“Maybe not.” A voice at the door pops, I didn’t hear it opening. Siphon instantly towers over the nurse, his big build makes him look like a high school kid. I’m so embarrassed with the way he’s looking down at the man. Since when does he have a menacing

approach?

“Don’t you have shit to wipe?” Oh my God, he did not just say that. The nurse nods and like a little kitchen mouse scurries out of the room.

“Why did you do that? It’s not his fault that I’m a hussy.” I’m not okay with his wild behaviour.

Annoyed eyes glare at me, a daunting stare that has me looking away because this man reminds me of Kenneth. Dark aura, eyes that stab right into your soul, as if they see all your secrets.

“You need to get your mouth checked Zithobile.” Sounds more like a warning. I’ve never seen him angry before, I guess there’s a first time for everything.

“Here.” Sipho hands me a gift bag, it’s not my birthday, is it? I’m given a phone and told to speak, I don’t even know who I’m talking to.

“Did you get your gift?” It’s Dracula. I’m so upset with him.

“I don’t want gifts Kenneth, I want you.” Okay, maybe I’m lying. I love being spoiled, I deserve it. My life has not been easy. “Why are you not here with me?”

“I’ll come fetch you, open your gift.” Since he’s so eager for me to see what he got, let me make his day.

“What is it?” I ask, almost happy to find out.

A pink dress? Did he pick this out from mantfombi’s wardrobe? No this must be a nightdress because... God, what am I looking at? I look to Siphon for an explanation, he’s still wearing a frown. Argh!

“You got me a nightdress?” His bank pin would’ve made me the happiest woman alive.

“It’s a dress Zithobile,” Kenneth corrects. I know it’s a dress but... This is why you take your phone with you to the toilet, to avoid such ideas coming into your mind. Whoever designed this was constipated.

“I want to take you out.” To where? A stokvel? “On a date, I want to date you.”

That's sweet shame, but can he date me in a Gucci dress? I mean, what's his money for? The man lives in a bloody mansion for Christ's sake yet he's gifting me dresses from Rakesh and Sons.

"Uh! Thanks." What else can I say?

"How is Dlozi?" Jesus slap that man for me.

"I deserve multiple orgasms for accepting this name." Siphon chokes on his saliva, I forgot he's still here. He avoids my eyes, puffs out a breath and instantly slides out of the room. Meanwhile, Kenneth is lightly chuckling on the other line.

"Yes you do, are your stitches healing? I can't wait to have you powerless beneath me." That's right, I'm teaching him well.

"You will have to wait for a month, sorry."

"Don't tease me, Zithobile. You know how much I thirst for you, I'm losing my mind here."

"I can suck you while we count down." I love how he's losing track of his breathing, seeing him, getting

worked up over my sensual hints would be a sight for raw eyes.

“I have to go, I’ll see you later.” Already? I was having a blast.

“You’re still fetching me, right?” The thrill of having to see him fills me up and overflows like a broken dam.

“Yes, goodbye ndlovukazi yami.” He’s gone before I could bid him farewell.

Now I need to get this hideous dress into a fatal accident, I’m not wearing it.

STYLES-

He didn’t expect to be led on a wild goose chase, following that short shit was the right way to go. He can’t express how frustrated he feels, his time has been wasted. His brother needs him at the hospital, his daughter is missing yet there are people toying with his time.

His phone beeps, a location pops up as he swipes open the screen, plus the man's personal information. Everything he needs to know is there.

Trust Neo to always deliver. He has to admit, it's not a big deal finding that short man's whereabouts by hacking his phone but his boy is good at what he does.

Styles is already on the way, he speeds up and in a few minutes he spots a white car pulling out of KFC's drive-thru. There are three passengers in it. To avoid being seen, he slows down and once they are in a secluded area, he hurtles towards them and parks his car right in front of the vehicle. The driver hits the brakes to stop and dips his head out the window.

"Hey, what the fuck is wrong with you?" It's the driver shouting, forehead crinkling in annoyance. Styles rubs the bridge of his nose to perhaps get rid of the irritation clawing at him before jumping out of the car, clearly the idiot can't make out who he is. A sneer reaches for his lips and spreads them as he pulls out a gun from his belt buckle.

“Get the fuck out of the car, all of you.”

Styles demands, gun aimed at them. He’s about five feet away from their car. He could see a woman in the backseat, the passenger seat is occupied by another man he’s never seen before.

No one moves as if paralysed by fear but he couldn’t care less, he wants the bastard who gave him wrong information.

“I said get the fuck out of the car, now.” He barks, loading the gun. One at a time, the passengers scurry out.

Yep! That’s the short shit alright, the bastard looks poised than expected. In a way Styles is stumped by his blank face. He’s used to people staggering and quivering at the sight of him but the confidence that this man is showing scrabbles at him. It gets him thinking that whoever he’s working for must be one powerful motherfucker.

“What the hell is your problem? What do you want from us?”

Styles chortles at the arrogance, the idiot is too brave for his liking. His gaze shifts to the two people beside the man he’s after.

“You two, go.”

A gun is directed at them, and with no thought to it, the lady swivels but the guy grabs her arm.

“No, we’re not going anywhere without Mehlo.”

Wrong move on his part, don’t be fooled by Sishi’s kind features. The man is a psychopathic, sadist who made his sister’s killer watch while he slaughtered his family in one night and what he did to the man afterwards cannot be said.

The second chuckle sounds like a cocktail of everything evil, in the blink of an eye he pulls the trigger, shooting the short guy on the leg. He groans in pain as he falls to the ground, a feminine scream erupts.

“HEY, HEY, SHUT THE FUCK UP.” Styles shouts.

She shakes her head vigorously, obscuring her mouth with her hand.

“You son of a bitch.” It’s the Mehlo guy, grumbling in pain on the tarred road. Styles pays him no attention, he wants the two idiots gone.

“Seems like your friend is not going anywhere, now get the fuck out of here before I change my mind and kill you all.”

“Siya, baby please, let’s go.”

The lady pleads, hand wrapped around the man’s arm, he’s hesitant at first but seems to be cooperating.

“No, Siya bruh, don’t leave me here bafo. He will kill me.” Mehlo yells.

If fear had a face...

“Siya asambe. Come on, let’s go.” A car honk makes a racket, it’s the woman. She’s found shelter in the car, ready and desperate to get away from Styles the maniac.

“Listen to your bitch Siya,” a wide unsophisticated grin plays at Styles’ face. Like a child locked up in a candy store, excitement fills his eyes and with a tilt of a head he continues, “I don’t mind digging three graves, it will be so much fun. There’s nothing more beautiful than witnessing a human breathe their last. Some orgasm from that, strange hey?”

After delivering his statement, Styles laughs like a hyena, startling the three humans.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from. I’ll behave.” He regards them with an unnatural wink.

Siya can’t find the map through the statement, he glares— jaw clenched before hurdling into the car, ignoring his associate’s plea not to leave him.

Styles turns to the wounded Mehlo the moment they drive off.

“Mehlo, Mehlo, Mehlo. You piece of shit.” He drones. Should he be playing with a gun? The man acts like he’s in kinder garden.

“Siya is going to call the police, you know?” Mehlo cracks, it sounds like he’s trying to convince himself.

“More people to kill for me then.” Styles excitedly replies, his pupils dilate and in a minute he’s sniffing the air, it looks too inhumane. “Don’t you just love the smell of blood?”

“You’re weak Sishi, without that gun we both know I will kick your ass.” The confidence emerging from Mehlo is one to be envied, Styles seems to be loving it. It’s growing on him actually.

“I know you’ve heard of me, Mehlo and what I’m capable of. Surely you can’t be that stupid to challenge me.” Styles crouches in front of the injured man. “Pray tell, has uncle Mkhize ever read you a bedtime story from the Sishi chronicles?”

Mehlo looks confused, he would answer had he understood a word Styles has said.

“What?”

“You’re Mkhize’s nephew.” Styles.

“I... don’t know what you’re... ta... talking about.” He stammers with fear.

Styles takes up the head tilt again, a smirk that would set an evangelist’s bible on fire. A little up and a little down, it’s a wrinkled smile, yet a rumped frown.

“Let’s revive your memory, shall we?” He pulls the trigger, piercing a bullet through Mehlo’s other leg... right on his knee cap. The man roars in horror and excruciating pain.

“Fuck!” He yells.

His hysterics have Styles rolling his eyes.

“Oh relax, it’s just a bullet.” He yawns. “You are lucky you’re not burning in hell. Now tell me. Why did you send me on a goose chase?”

“Fuck you!”

A sinister smile with a foul intention to impose cynicism appears on Styles' features, he's not happy with the answer.

"I really don't like impudence Mehlo, your response is very disrespectful, but I'll forgive that... for now."

He stands to his feet, looking down at his victim.

"You're nothing but Mkhize's mannequin, so I'll refrain from interrogating you. Now I want you to go back to your uncle and tell him I'm coming for him. He better have my daughter in one piece."

Mehlo is wheezing in pain, chest rising and falling like a speaker at a rock concert, the only thing he can do is nod.

"You're a grown ass man Mehlo, I'm sure you know how to speak. You still remember the 'a, e, i, o, u's right? Now I want to hear you say it."

Styles smirks like a joker sharing a non-funny joke.

"I will... give him the mess... message."

"Good boy." A little push sends him falling face down to the ground.

“Now, I’m sure you’ll be able to find your way home. Like I said, you’re a grown ass man and don’t worry about those short legs, by the time you get home they’ll be numb. Pain... less.”

“No please, at least drop me... drop me at the nearest hospital, I won’t be... able to walk like this. I will bleed.... to death please.”

He squalls like a little girl, the man he’s pleading with is not moved. As a matter of fact, there is no trace of humanity in him.

“Don’t be a pussy, you should start walking now. You’ll make it home before crack of dawn.”

And with that, Styles marches back to his car and drives off like nothing happened. This is what happens when people piss him off, something dark inside him disentangles and he loses his mind.

In the car, while driving back home, he calls Randall. The phone is answered straightaway.

“How did it go?” Randall.

“I’m done playing house. Time to drop bodies. We’re meeting at Nkomo’s house tomorrow.”

“Did you think this through Styles?” It’s Nkomo he’s worried about, he wouldn’t want their plans ruined.

“Nkomo doesn’t have to know the entire plan.” Styles vocalizes.

“As long as you know what you’re doing.” Randall.

“Mkhize wants to play a game Randall, it’s time we put on our big boy shoes.”

“I’ve always hated that bastard.” Randall speaks with malice and Styles can relate. This is one mutual sentiment they’ve always shared.

“I’m worried about Sethu though, she thinks her father is a saint. I can’t tell her he has our daughter without proof, that bastard has probably hidden her in a maze.”

“You don’t have to tell her anything, we’ll find Sihle first. You can tell her about her father on the day of his funeral.” Another dry joke from his friend.

“How is R.J and Amara?” Styles changes the topic.

The less he talks about his daughter, the less it hurts.

“Amara will be okay, the knife didn’t dig deep enough to cause damage. Kwame is physically healing, they were able to drain all the pills he consumed. My son has lost his childhood. What does a nine year old know about suicide, Styles?”

“Is he awake?”

“Not yet. One of the guards found a memory stick in his room, on it was a piece of paper written ‘watch this after my funeral.’”

“Shit, that bitch messed him up.”

“Chala should’ve stayed in prison, the outside world is not safe for her.” Randall returns, the tone of his voice hinting at something sinister.

Styles would do anything to keep that boy safe, just as Randall would do anything to keep Sihle safe. They are a family after all, and family is the most important thing to both men.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Eight

MANTFOMBI-

I'm tired of pretending that I don't love him, I'm tired of pretending that he doesn't affect me, that the way my name rolls out of his tongue does not affect me. I've known Kenneth ever since I can remember, he was the boy next door. Too tall for his age, daunting dark features.

I practically grew up in his house, our mothers were friends. Through that we found each other, but I found my first love. I never told him because he wasn't looking for a partner, he loved being alone and in the years away from him, I believed he still did.

The day Mamkhize came to my house and convinced me to go with her, I was sceptical, until

she mentioned Kenneth.

Now I'm here, in his house, ready to give myself to him but that can't be possible because sadly, his heart belongs to another woman.

I can't breathe each time he looks at her, it's as if his beginning and end is found in her. I didn't know the course of their relationship until one night I heard them having sex in his room.

My view on Zithobile changed from then, she's not the best person in the world and I fail to understand why a classy, powerful man like Kenneth would go for her. He can do better really, she's a gaudy little girl who speaks without thinking.

Her vocabulary consists of nothing but utter rubbish, don't get me wrong; I have nothing against her. She is kind and loud and unnecessary and... maybe there's a pang of distaste I feel for her. The girl leaves an after taste in my mouth each time she makes her presence known.

It's embarrassing that Kenneth is dating a girl the same age as his sister. I want him to do better, I know without a shadow of a doubt that I am that perfect person for Kenneth.

I only need to make myself visible, make him see all of me. He needs a real woman, someone who will take care of him and his sister, plus this huge house. Zithobile should think about going back to school, it's too late for some of us. Marriage and bearing children is what's left for me and I want that with the love of my life, Kenneth.

Kenneth is not your typical taxi boss, and not your typical modern day Zulu man. The men I've encountered, without a doubt proved time and time that all men are the same. No way was I going to give myself to some second-rate loser who has nothing behind his brain but a picture of a pussy.

A virgin at my age? Come on! That is nothing to be proud of, but no one has been worthy enough to claim me. Given a chance, I would give myself to

Kenneth, risking it all.

“Sisi, the food is ready. Serve him before he leaves for the hospital.” Mamkhize says to me after calling me into the kitchen. “Don’t tell him I made it.”

“Why?” The look she gives me dubs me stupid.

“He’s a very stubborn man who prefers food prepared by that ugly girl, he will starve to death if he continues along that path.”

I see, I can’t seal her words although, Zithobile is the only one who cooks in this house and he hasn’t been eating home since she was hospitalised. This might sound evil but I’m glad he’s not the father of her baby, yes I know. I’ve heard him and Sipho talk about it.

Mamkhize tells me she’s going to town and that I should serve him now.

He’s in the living room, standing by the large window.

Head bowed as he's engrossed on the phone in his hand. I take a moment to bask in his glorious beauty, it doesn't last because his eyes snap up, a blush kisses my cheeks. He accepts a ghost of a smile that has my knees wobbling.

"Mantfombi?" Lord, I can't stress the number of times I have imagined him call my name while buried deep inside me. I had insisted that he calls me by my first name since Zithobile was not comfortable with the surname, I had to score points with the guy.

"Are you hungry? I made you something to eat."

"I'm okay thank you." Always so polite. "I have to fetch Zithobile, she and the baby are coming home today."

Must his eyes smile like that when he talks about her?

I am disappointed a little, even though I didn't prepare the food.

"I'm not a bad cook, Khabazela." The least he can do

is give me a chance to show him that I'm capable of taking care of him.

Crinkled brows? He probably doesn't understand what I'm talking about.

"Did I say you were?"

"Then, why won't you eat my food? I know sis Zithobile is the one who takes care of your meals, but she's not here now. I don't want to seem like the useless one in this house."

This is not emotional blackmail, but the honest truth. I crave for his presence, for him to sit with me even for a second and forget everything and everyone else.

"What did you make?" He asks after a long moment of silence. A smile dances on my lips. He asks to be served in the lounge and tells me that he'll only have a taste which he does, a few bites later he places the plate on the table.

I forgot to ask Mamkhize if she added any spices. As

far as I remember, he doesn't eat spicy food. The series of light coughs have me worried. Puffing out a sigh through his nostrils, one I can't depict, Kenneth slowly leans back on the couch, his hand sways to his temple to rub it. He looks out of it or drunk if my reading is correct.

"I'll get you something to drink khabazela." He grips my hand, as I'm half way up.

This is the first time he's ever willingly touched me, either than the hug I initiated the day I came here.

"Stay." His eyes are suddenly enflamed, heavy-lidded. An appearance of a man who's had too much to drink like I had predicted, I note lust in them. It's for me, right?

"Stay with me." He repeats.

The deep drawl has me shivering, I hear there are tiny orgasms. Like when you scratch your ear, and your toes curl or your leg shakes just a little. Or when you sneeze, but you can't get the feeling back at the second sneeze. Or when you hold your pee for too long and the moment you release, it feels like you're

flying.

I didn't know it happens when hearing the voice of someone you love, my heart skids to my chest. Moreover, my heart is full, I'm content. I can die now. He's like a gravitational addiction, absorbing me in all facets of my being. Like an aphrodisiac, he takes over the entirety of my being without even noticing.

"Khabazela?" The look in his eyes confuses me, he regards me with a different aspect. His lips twitch into a faint simper.

"Why do you call me that?" What does he mean? I always...

Oh God, why is he moving close? I hold my breath as he leans in and sniffs my neck, my body counters with a light shudder. "You smell different today."

I don't think so, I used the same perfume MamKhize bought me. A wet kiss is swiped down my neck.

"How am I going to make love to you when you smell like my mother?" His speech is slurred and barely

comprehensible. "I need to touch you, or I will lose my mind."

Lord don't take me now, not when I'm still a virgin. What is going on? Why is he acting like this?

"Kha... Khabazela?" I can't breathe, my heart is literally banging against my ribcage.

He is close, so close I can almost taste his breath. His entrancing scent seeps into the depths of my soul, every bone in me accepts the enthralling drug, inducing a deeper need for him. One I can never walk away from.

"Aren't you going to ask me to kiss you like you did last time?" A chuckle to my face, his breathe smells of the food he just ate.

"Wh... what are you talking about, Khabazela?" I fail to school my trembling voice.

How does he expect me to breathe and walk out of here alive when he's so close? He doesn't respond, but viciously attacks my lips. My eyes expand, as shock smacks me on the head. I don't understand what's going on, what he's doing. I know what he's

doing, but why is he doing it? I thought he's in a relationship with Zithobile. The woman who owns the heart of the one that owns mine, the woman I would love to hate.

It's when the palm of his hand cups my cheek that I return the kiss, he's suckling my lips, a slow dance that pulls tears to my eyes. A laid-back tongue play on my bottom lip, before he tries to push it through the seams of my lips.

I don't want to miss the opportunity to taste him so I open the gates of my soul and let him in. His tongue feels warm and so damn good in my mouth. He's my first kiss, I want to tell him that and if this goes farther which I'm hoping it will. He will be my first time.

Kenneth lightly lifts my waist up and lays me on the couch, the sudden act makes me lose my breath. His eyes are filled with lust, lust for me and only me. I could take a picture and frame it on the wall in my

bedroom.

He spreads my legs widely with both his hands and gets in between them to shift closer to me. I'm panting like a teenage girl experiencing her first time. His kisses are life threatening, from this day, I know I will die without them. He disposes of my clothing in a jiffy and has me laying naked on the couch, legs spread out in waiting. No man has ever seen my nakedness, now I know it was reserved for him. He seems so sure about this and I want this as well. I want him, I've always wanted him.

I don't know when he removed his clothes, he's rubbing his erection on my throbbing opening. His face buried in the crook of my neck.

"Next time, wear the fragrance I got you." A slurred whisper into my ear that causes more confusion, in this muddled state, I'm not about to repudiate what he's about to give me.

"Khabaaazela." I drawl with bated breath, digging my nails into his back as he submerges himself inside

me. There's a way he's moving, a roughness... as if we've done this before, as if I should be familiar with how he moves inside me. I'm new to this, maybe I should have told him that I'm a virgin.

There's an undeniable uncomfortable pain, but with how fast he's moving, the pain quickly transitions into an edible pleasure. I clutch my arms around him, my nails digging a tad deeper into the skin on his shoulders.

Deeply he thrusts my walls making me scream in ecstasy for more. I find myself thanking the gods for his manhood, it must have been made for me, a gift given to me by my forefathers. A forbidden sin borrowed for a stolen- consuming passion. I'm whimpering from the incredibility of his skills, and how he feels buried balls deep in me.

"You feel so different, ndlovukazi yami." Again with the confusion, his voice sounds different as well.

"I love you." He hums, I'm too lost in the moment to drink the three words that can never be taken for

granted. In this instant, I can't be without his deep thrusts, I need them for a lifetime and a day.

I squeal as he hits something that blinds my vision, making me lose control of myself and scream, releasing erotic sounds. My eyes roll to the back of my head, as I bask in the eruption happening in every part of me. A tonic warmth pulsating from my head to my curling toes.

He hardens and deepens his thrusts, pounding me like he's been craving for a taste of me. His hands on my body like a paint brush on a canvas to create the best art ever created. As my second orgasm attacks me, my legs tighten around his waist to bring him closer into me

“Ngiyakuthanda Mamthombeni, uyathandwa ngilosiyami.” His words free and uncensored, while repetitively slamming into me, his length diving into all corners of my walls and my witless heart takes the foreign name like poison.

It's her, it's always been her. He thinks I'm Zithobile.

How can he make such a mistake? I look nothing like that little girl, I will never look at her the same now. Not after this, not after what I have tasted and had him call me by her name. I'm such an idiot, we didn't even use protection.

I've been robbed, robbed of my innocence and my first love.

Tears of sorrow burn the corners of my eyes, his eyes are shut, he's not looking at me. In fact, I don't recall him looking into my eyes. What have I done? I should stop this, but I let him finish his spree. I watch his body tense and tremble a little as he shoots his load inside me, dark skin covered in sweat... dreads tied in a ponytail.

I have never seen a more beautiful sculpture, Michaelangelo ought to be jealous of what God has created. A deity, I would fall down at his feet and worship him.

Ask me Khabazela, ask me and I will blindly give you my soul. My body has always been yours. Just say

the word and I will give you all of me.

My soul screams these words, but my mouth is not brave enough to deliver them.

Eyelids drooping closed, brown eyes meet mine. Then; there's a moment where his face washes blank with confusion, like his brain mechanisms can't turn fast enough to take in the information from his abrupt wide eyes.

"Mantfombi?" An incredulous murmur, looking like he just woke from a trance. I'm thankful that he's gentle when he pulls out, although dazed.

"What have I done?" He whispers to himself, throwing his pants back on. Tears know me best and they have made my eyes a play area. Drowning in shame, I reach for my garment and slowly put it on.

"Kenneth." A grouchy sharp voice, distantly calls. We

both turn towards the kitchen entry to see Sipho and Zithobile. The baby is in his arms and a duffel bag. Zithobile is an inch behind him, she wears an aspect of gloom, wide eyes tainted with pain, cast to the love of my life.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Fifty-Nine

ZITHA-

Blood drains from my skin and everything I ever believed in shatters like glass in a fraction of a second.

He sees the shock register on my face before I could hide it, I don't want him to see how much he's hurt me. I'm stronger than this, I have to be. It's the only thing I have left now, I have nothing and no one.

My mother is still angry with me, I saw her again. I thought she had come to take me with her, to tell those old women who were blocking my path, to make way for me to cross over. But she told me to go back and raise my son, the boy in Siphos arms. Tears would stream down her face each time he was mentioned. She's angry, I must've done something wrong. That's why she hasn't protected me from this,

she let this happen to me.

“Zithobile.”

I spin around on my heel, when my name leaves his lying tongue. My movement has become robotic. I can't see where I'm going, unshed tears are blinding my vision. Thanks to my brain, it knows its way to the bedroom. His bedroom, the only reason I'm going there is because my belongings are in there. I need them if I will be leaving this house.

He's following me to his bedroom, yes it's not our bedroom anymore. I'm leaving and never coming back. Not in a million years did I think Kenneth would ever hurt me the way he just did.

“Zithobile wait.” His grandmother will wait for him.

I dash into the bedroom, locking it behind me. There is one way out of this room, Kenneth is standing in it and he's the last person I want to see.

What's left of my heart cracks when I see my

suitcase on the floor, it's open, with my clothes in it.

“Zithobile open the door.”

I will open the bloody door, alright. I want him to look me in the eye and tell me he planned this...

Mantfombi moving in... Leading me on and cheating on me with her.

“You packed my things?” The look he throws me has me repeating myself. “You packed my things Kenneth.” I shout, eyes pointing to the suitcase at the foot of the bed.

“I didn't, I would never... I love you. This is your home.” He's lying. I don't believe him, I will never believe anything that comes out of that lying mouth of his. He gets into my personal space, looking tense from head to toe. I can't have him this close, he smells like her, it's nauseating. I step back, creating space between us.

“Don't you love me, Zithobile?”

He's the one I love more than breathable air, yet he's the one who has hurt me more than anything.

"No, I don't love you. I'm incapable of loving, I can't even love my own son." I scoff. "Thank you for everything Kenneth, I will get a job and reimburse every cent you spent on me."

"Zithobile please."

"You don't have to call me, you have an accountant, tell him to send me an invoice." With a heavy heart, I turn to grab my suitcase.

"Stop, please stop." He's pulling my hand. Why is he touching me with the hands that touched her?

I'm not staying here another minute, he thinks I'm stupid.

Sipho's hint... He was right, I should've known.

Dammit, what difference would it have made? Still, I believed in Kenneth so much, I believed in his love. How did I miss this? I'm so angry I can't breathe.

"Where are you going?"

I'm marching towards the door as he pops this

question, that farm Julia is on my mind. I'm going to teach her a lesson.

"Zithobile?"

Fuck him and that authoritative tone he's using, I'm not going to take shit from this man.

I'm pulled back by arms that have encircled my waist, my feet dangling in the air as I'm carried up like I weigh a bag of peanuts. Gently, he drops me in front of him, his one hand remains on my side. He's looking down at me, menacing appearance on his features and a frown I can't figure out.

"No!" His voice is a chiding buzz.

"What, are you taking her side now? Was she that good, Kenneth?" The hurt in his eyes... Yeah, feel that and choke on it bastard.

"You're not going to fight her, she didn't do anything wrong. If you want to vent, I'm here."

Shit! No, this can't be happening to me. I know he has a soft spot for her, but to fall for that woman would be the biggest betrayal.

“You’re falling in love with her, Kenneth?” An indignant roar erupts from my mouth. “How long have you been sleeping with her?”

“I have never betrayed you Zithobile, what happened today was a mistake. I can’t explain it, but the whole time it was you, it’s always you. You’re the one for me.” Why is he so fucking calm?

This gender thrives on lies, to them it’s like taking a walk in the park.

“I hate you.” My words are shrill and deafening.

He should be hurting, not me.

“I love you.” Kenneth.

“Shut up.” My hand lands with a punch to his chest, then another one and another one. It’s all in vain, my hands hurt while he looks pain free. He grips my wrist to stop my craziness and pulls me to him.

“I love you Zithobile, ngiyakuthanda.”

“Don’t tell me that, I hate you Kenneth.” His arms rope around me, insisting, taking without permission.

They scream all endearments of love, I should be disgusted. I am disgusted by his touch... apparently not enough to push him away. I'm melting, unsteady in his hold.

"You love me." A confident exclamation into my ear. "Your body trembles at my touch, this is how I know you love me."

My life can't be such a mess, things were supposed to go swimmingly after I moved in with him. How did I not see this coming? I wiggle myself out of his arms and take half a step away from him. He doesn't look affected nor hurt, he stands before me with a blank expression.

"Have you ever loved someone, that you can barely breathe?"

Sweet nothings? Really?

"That's how I feel about you Zithobile, we'll never be apart." Argh! "You're mine, I saw you, claimed you as

my own and sealed it the day I made love to you. We'll never be apart, because I refuse to let another man ever touch you... again. You're mine to touch, you're mine to have."

"You hurt me, Kenneth."

"And I'm sorry." How do I believe him?

"How do you expect me to stay with you after what you did."

"It was not intentional, I thought she was you." The audacity to tell me this.

"You bastard. I'm leaving." I yell, the palms of my hands colliding with his chest which is a waste of energy. He barely moves an inch.

He lightly grabs my arm as I take a step toward the door to envelop me in his arms again and I sink in his embrace, I want to push him away but my body and my heart fail me. I hate that I love him this much, that I would blindly be willing to take nonsense from him.

"No you're not." Face pressed to my neck and strong

arms clenched around me, he denies my demand.

“You’re not keeping me here against my will.” I contend into his chest, squirming to free myself from his clutches. He lets me go, giving me a sort of appraising look.

“You’re right, but you’re still not leaving.”

This man does not know me. Swiftly, I manoeuvre past him, quick on my feet as I run toward the door. I guess I’m not fast enough because he grabs me by the waist again, pulling me back into the room and blocks the doorway.

“Let me go Kenneth.” In rage, I sweep our picture from the shelf situated by the door, sending it smashing to the floor. My heart is in so much pain I can’t take it anymore.

“No,” The bastard snaps at me. “I know you Zithobile, you’re wild, daring and audacious. Sometimes it scares me that one day you’ll drive yourself to destruction. That’s why I can’t let you go, I have to protect you at all costs. I know you will go out there

and do something stupid.”

He doesn't just raise his voice, his muscles tense and he gets right in close for maximum impact.

“I'm not a fucking child, and you don't owe me shit. You're not my father.” The shouting is a violence in the air, polluting it with rage. There's a hiatus, in between. Shifty eyes probing.

He breathes in real slow, “I know.”

“Then let me go, stop trying to save me, Kenneth. I'm not a disaster waiting to happen. People just fuck with me and expect me to roll over and wag my tail, you included. You are no different from everyone who has ever hurt me,” Pain flashes in his dark eyes, this is it. This is what I have been waiting for, but it doesn't last. Damn it. It takes a bat of an eye for him to dash out of the room and closes it, my eyes widen as I hear the crack of the key. The son of a gun has locked me in.

“Kenneth, what are you doing? Open the damn door.”
It’s not merely a raised voice, there’s a seething
behind it.

“I will, once you’ve calmed down.”

I am calm, there’s a difference between that and
being angry.

“Open the door Kenneth, let me out. I don’t want to
be here anymore, I hate it here.” I say in a way
matching my frantic pacing of the room, tearing my
hair out because of reasons previously stated.

“Lala ndlovukazi yami, siyobuye sikhulume uma
selehlile ulaka.” (Sleep my queen, we’ll talk when you
have calmed down.)

Through the closed door comes the bastard’s calm
voice. I’m leaving this house one way or the other, if I
have to jump out the window then so be it. I hope
Sipho left the house with my son, I’ll have to fetch
him from him.

MANTFOMBI-

I need to go home, my parents need me. But this woman won't let me go, she keeps insisting that I stay. That she will help me find my family.

"I can't stay here MaMkhize, you tricked me. How will I look at Khabazela now? He will never forgive me." My raised voice matches the ones coming from the room next door, although entertained by MaMkhize, my ears perk, drawn with curiosity to the shouts from within. If shouts were visible, they'd be rippling through the walls.

"Oh please, I did you a favour." Mamkhize snorts, arrogantly so. "You love Kenneth and didn't have the guts to approach him, you can thank me later."

She pats my shoulder, a look of victory on her face.

“I was a virgin ma and saving myself for my future husband.” She cares nothing about the tears streaming down my eyes.

“Suck it up Mantfombi, you’re not getting any younger. Kenneth will marry you. I will make sure of it.” Funny how I believe her. “Listen.”

She gestures with a finger on her lip that I keep my mouth shut. It’s awfully quiet, they must be done arguing. In a way I see a light through their squabbles, a way in for me. Zithobile is a proud girl, she will never forgive Kenneth after what she saw and perhaps I will be here to nurse his broken heart and find my way into it and make it whole.

“Let me go before he comes here.” She alerts.

Sadly, Kenneth only cares about Zithobile, he’s not going to check up on me.

“Remember what I told you, and keep playing with those tears. They always work, men are easy to fool.” MaMkhize advices.

But these are real, my heart is broken. MaMkhize rushes out of my room and shuts the door.

In a minute, and after a knock, the door is swung open at the sound of my voice. My heart jolts in all crazy directions at the sight of him. He's looking at me, the deep stare compels me to divert my gaze and wipe my unsolicited tears as I stand from the bed.

"A word?" He's leaning against the door post, hands dug deep into the pocket of his black pants.

"I didn't know." A need to explain arises, I can't have him thinking I would betray him. No one will ever be loyal to him like I would, I would betray myself for this man.

"MamKhize prepared the food, I'm sorry I didn't tell you. This is all my fault."

"You're crying? Did I hurt you?" He doesn't dwell on the confession, I was worried for nothing.

My head moves to and fro to let him know that he'll never hurt me. He walks in, and does not close the

door. Even before he reaches me, I can recognise his scent baking up from under the black clothes.

Maybe because his skin was one with mine, he now lives under my skin and I love the feeling.

“My family is missing, Khabazela.” I answer his question. “Dumisani’s girlfriend accused him of rape, the villagers went crazy and burnt down my parent’s house. They managed to escape, I don’t know where they are.”

Pain punctures through me, more tears seek attention and they are going to be seen by hook or crook. I bury my face in my hands and sob. I know my brother, he’s a peaceful person. I never liked his girlfriend to begin with, that witch is a sly fox.

“It’s okay.” A warm hand on my shoulder, I take it as an invitation to find shelter in his arms. He doesn’t hold me back, he doesn’t push me away either. It feels so good to feel his body again, my face buried on his shaped chest.

“I’ll ask Mandla to drop me off at Park Station tomorrow, I’ll take the earliest bus if possible.” I tell him, pulling out of his arms. My wet eyes are looking everywhere but his direction, I decide to grab my suitcase from the wardrobe and start packing my clothes.

“Where will you go?” I see from my vantage point how he leisurely folds his arms.

“I don’t know,” My answer is a snorty attitude, somehow his question annoys me. Is he okay with me leaving? I’m not okay with him being okay with it.

“I have to look for my family, Khabazela. They could be dead. What if the villagers found them? My parents are too old to be on the run, my father won’t make it through the night. His limbs are not strong, he had a stroke last year and...”

I’ve tossed most of my clothes on the bed, I don’t want to leave and I have no idea where I will start looking for my family.

“Don’t go MaMthembu.” My heart stops a second then races. Does this mean what I want it to mean or is he being generous? “If the villagers are after your family, they won’t hesitate to kill you.”

You’d swear he cares, I don’t want to lie to myself and believe that look of compassion in his eyes. Feeling content with his decision, my arms find their way around his waist, and my head finds shelter on his chest yet again. I don’t care that he doesn’t hold me back, letting me touch him is more than enough.

“What about sis Zithobile?”

He doesn’t acknowledge my question but pulls out a small packaging from his pocket and hands it to me. “Please take this.” Are his words

“What is it?”

“Morning-after pill, there’s more for tomorrow morning.” Really? So this is the reason he’s here. It hurts that he’s watching, waiting for me to take the damn pill. The stare makes me feel uneasy because of the stern look on his face.

“Are you going to watch me do it?”

“I don’t want any mistakes.”

“So my baby is a mistake?”

“There is no baby.”

“If there was, if I happen to have your baby. He or she would be a mistake?” Why am I hurting myself?

“No.” He doesn’t say anything more, his one word answer is enough, genuine and true.

Hot tears harass my eyes as he holds me a glass of water, it’s not news that he doesn’t love me, but does he have to be an ass about it? He’s watching till I consume half a glass of water, the look of satisfaction in his eyes leaves me painfully gasping for air.

“I didn’t ask for this Khabazela, I was innocent and pure. Saving myself for the man I love, the one who has my heart.” A frown, and narrowed eyes directed at me.

“Did he know?”

You're the one who has my heart... I want to tell him this. I answer his question with a shake of the head.

"Then... he doesn't have to know." Kenneth.

"I doubt he would've cared if he knew." I confess, painfully. In this moment, I can't read him. He's staring with intensity in his eyes, posture perfectly straight like a ruler.

"Get some rest, we'll talk in the morning." Change of topic I see. "Try not to think about your family, they will be okay."

It hurts that he was here to give me that stupid pill, and now he's leaving me like I mean nothing to him. I think he's back when the door opens only to see MaMKhize's unhappy face. I know why she's here, this is a mess.

"And?" The look in her eyes is strict, unrelenting.

Forgive me Kenneth, it's just this once. I promise I'll

be loyal as a dog after this.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Bonus-

A/N: This is a work of fiction, any jabs fired or slurs thrown at bible characters are purely fictitious. Do not take it to heart.

KENNETH-

Sipho is in the lounge when I get there, he must've put the baby to sleep. I know because he's paternal, as stupid as he may be sometimes. He has his serious days, days when he switches on a side to him so creepy you'd think he's possessed, hence comparing him to Styles.

"You're still here?"

He's laid back on the couch, hands behind his head and a lenient content smile on his face. That time I'm suffocating in my problems.

"And you still have your dreads intact I see, I'm surprised your maidens have not pulled them out yet. Do you want me to count them for you?" It's the playful smirk on his face, too rascally for a man his age.

"Excuse me?" I'm ready to go out, so I don't bother joining him on the couch.

"Samson woke up without his hair and strength, you're a lucky bastard." He sits up, raised brows twinkling on his face.

"What are you talking about?" I snap, annoyed by his need to act like a six year old.

"You're a dark knight Kenny, son of the devil. That's why you joined a cult and not church, so it's not a surprise that you're not familiar with the bible."

“Please don’t start.”

“I’m only looking out for a friend,” A shoulder shrug, I don’t know what it means. “The last time you let a woman in your heart, you almost lost your life. Potiphar’s wife cried rape and had Joseph thrown into prison enraged by his refusal to satisfy her sexual needs. Women are a special case, you need to choose them wisely.”

Who the hell is Potiphar and this wife he speaks of? Anyway, I see where he’s taking this.

“I’m not an idiot Siphon.”

“Rephrase that, after I list my top ten bad bitches of the Old Testament. Come closer.” He pats the empty space beside him, I’m not sitting down. “I’ll let you in on some delicious words, and I’m not talking about money, soft life or whiskey. But about sharp-tasting,

overpowering words that you can sink your cult teeth into. I'm talking words like wicked, mix it with 'women' and 'bible' and the results will remind you of Lucifer and why he was thrown out of heaven."

How am I friends with this man? Forget that we've known each other for years, I cannot for the life of me understand how his mind works. Like I said, I would compare him to Styles, sick in the head. A damn ticking time bomb.

"The first one is Eve, the original baddie. Ugabhadiya, the crown wearer. Because of her, evil was unleashed into the world, she made the fatal-for-everyone mistake of listening to your father's lies; the serpent. It told her God lied and like every naïve woman out there, Evelina, Evivo, took the bait. And because women are conniving, she had her husband in on it. Remind me to slap Adam when we get to heaven... that's if you'll be with me."

What he's saying does not make sense, does he know that?

"Number two is Jezelina, Jezifaya, MaJezisto, Jezi-Jezi."

"What the fuck?" He's losing me.

"Haibo! Ken-Ken. Please tell me, you know Jezebel? This one is close to home, you can relate to it. There's no way she could've murdered many Israel's prophets and not have been part of a cult, ask your old boss, the cult leader. He must know Jezebel."

Perhaps I should sit down for this, I'm already entertaining him, so why not?

He grins at my sitting down, it's stupid and childish. My own mouth twitches, threatening a smile, this is the little brother I never had. I'd kill for him.

"She spent the last few moments of her life applying makeup and combing her hair so she can look her best when her servants threw her out of the palace

window, feeding her body to the dogs. Nc, nc, nc...
Je...ze...bel... Women I tell you.”

“Will this take time? I have places to go.” He frowns at my question, silly eyes condemning me.

“I hope you’re not going to see Athaliah,” a witless smile stretches on his face. “She’s my number three, was married to the king of Judah. The bitch grew paranoid after her husband died and murdered her grandchildren in order to secure the throne.”

Sipho needs to know I have no clue of the people he speaks of.

“Then there’s the abominator, Brook Logan has nothing on Herodias. She’s my number four. That little freak was the granddaughter of Herod the Great. Married two of her uncles, sies. Too ambitious and ruthless for any man’s liking. The witch made her daughter strip in front of her husband and his guests, the husband was pleased that he wanted to grant his stepdaughter anything. So Herodias was like ‘baby,

tell your daddy dearest that you want John the Baptist's head. Hey, fear women. Poor John had to meet God without a head, imagine the terror in heaven when headless John rocked up there. Angels screaming because here's this guy... without a head, all dressed in white. John was brave, I would have taken a U-turn to hell."

He laughs like it's funny, I have to wait and watch him convulse in laughter. It's getting late, I need a breather. But he's helping me unknowingly, in a way I have managed to forget my troubles. The two women upstairs, Zithobile being the most I'm worried about.

"Five reminds me of the happy woman upstairs, the one who just tasted the forbidden fruit. She's on cloud nine that one, won't be getting any sleep tonight. Not after you threw her up in orgasmic glory and if she does fall asleep, she'll be gifted with nocturnal orgasm. Wadla MaMthembu." Siphos.

A shake of the head, disapproval, mingled with sarcasm. I don't know with Siphon anymore.

"But be careful, Potiphar's wife was no saint. Like I said." His view on Mantfombi is insane.

"You won't believe my number six, the cutter of the hair. Umadlabantu, uphunyuka bamphethe, inja yegame. Miss Delilah."

"Delilah? Your ex-girlfriend?" I ask.

This is meant to piss him off, two can play that game.

"That was in grade 12 and her name was Deliwé, Delilah was her grandmother." He corrects.

"Yes, that's who I'm talking about." I clap back, he can't insult me and not expect a punishment. Then again, his idiocy won't allow an ounce of annoyance to creep up on him. He's fallen on the couch, vibrating like an overloaded washing machine, as he's laughing his heart out. Zithobile better not hear

his horse laugh, she will think we're laughing at her predicament. I hate it but that's how insecure she is.

"Good one Kenny, I'll take that." He shakes his head. "As I was saying, Delilah was the queen of gold diggers, an ancient slay queen who betrayed her foolish boyfriend Samson. Guy was stupidly in love he told her the secret to his superhuman strength, that his strength would vanish the moment his hair is cut off. After wheedling the secret from him, she told his enemies who had promised her cold hard cash. The man is in heaven with no eyes and a bad haircut."

I stand, simply because I don't see a point to all of this. He's talking a whole lot of rubbish that's giving me nothing but a bad headache.

"Where are you going?" Sipho questions my steps as he stands to his feet.

“Out.”

“But we’re not done yet, there’s number 7, 8, 9 and 10. Lot’s wife is one of them. That one turned into a pillar of salt after she ignored the angel’s warning. That’s why I don’t eat salt.”

“You eat salt.” I think he does.

He’s shaking his head like a little kid, it looks stupid because he’s a grown ass man.

“Nope, I don’t eat other men’s wives. Besides, salt tastes terrible. Goes to show that Lot’s wife was not the best in bed, poor guy.”

“How do you know salt tastes terrible, you said you don’t eat salt.”

“That’s not the case Kenny, I’m...”

“I don’t want to know what the case is Siphon. You’re not even Christian, you’ve never set foot in church.”

“I read, I know the bible from ‘In the beginning to Amen’.

There's no point in arguing with this man.

"I'm out of here, no matter what you do, don't let Zithobile out." I can't have her leave this house, she does stupid things out of anger.

"So you are Hitler now? Imprisoning someone's child." Siphon throws back.

I'm being judged here, but that's okay. As long as Zithobile is safe.

"Kenneth don't go, Joseph's wife is off limits." Siphon halts my movement as he yells after me. Why is he in my house again?

"Who the fuck is Joseph?" The question springs his lips into a ridiculous smile.

"You're going to visit virgin Mary, aren't you?" This man needs a bullet through his stupid skull.

"What?" I have never been a prisoner to confusion.

"This Joseph's heart is as black as the clothes he

wears, has a gun... shoots without blinking and no angel will visit him to make him see reason, he will shoot you again. Stay away Kenneth, you're not the Holy Spirit."

My head is spinning, why is he like this today?

"Would you please talk like a normal person? I'm losing my mind here." I snap to have him stretch the stupid grin on his face into a Cheshire cat smile.

"You're going to see Amara because you're running away from the dragon ladies. Randall will kill you this time."

I hate that he knows me.

"Go home Sipho."

"Nope, I'm babysitting Dlozi. You locked his mother up, remember? What will I feed uKhehla?"

Dammit! He's got a point. My hand swims into my pocket to retrieve a set of keys, one of them opens the door to our bedroom. I trust Sipho to not let her leave the house.

"Go see your third woman, I'll take good care of

these ones. But if Randall kills you, I will leave them alone in this house so they kill each other.” His words are careless yet firm, somehow I think he means it.

“Run Kenny, run.”

He lays down on my couch, his dirty feet spread over the expensive fabric and what he says next leaves me wishing I had never met him.

“Alexa play ‘Ayasaba amagwala by Dr. Mbuyiseni Dlozi.”

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-

SPONSORED BY: Yaaya Yamkela Ningi

KENNETH-

Suddenly everything feels so right, I can finally breathe. Perhaps this is what drew me to her, the peace she undetectably brings into my life. It fills me in, my body suddenly feels light.

She's the risk I was stupid enough to take. This is where I belong.

Thick lashes flap, a slow dance. A Millisecond and her eyes are looking into mine, a delicious moment I would pocket for safe-keeping. Beautiful cinnamon brown, warmth and innocence lodged in them... bringing about a reminiscence of safety and a sense

of belonging. The only eyes I ever wanted to look into, get lost in and never look back. Mouth falls ajar, and my name deliciously rolls from her tongue in a hush.

“Kenneth!”

“I need you.” The words were meant to play in my head, yet here they are exposing my imperfections. I’m not a weak man, and she knows this, hence the shock on her face. Lashes flap and she’s blinked it away, it’s as if it was never there. I would love to see glee in her eyes but intense dislike lies in them.

“Please.” A desperate grovel from me.

She’s my sanity, the only one that keeps me grounded. My demons are laid to rest whenever she is around me and I miss this the most about her, I miss her the most. She tosses once and turns, taking the beautiful sight of her face from my view.

This must be an invitation to lay in bed with her, I need more, but I can’t take without being given. However I know her, how her mind works. She’s letting me in. Hopefully...

The bed shakes when I scamper on it and shift close to connect my body with hers. It's only when I snake her waist do I realise that my hands are shaking. This is what she does to me.

The warmth of her body leaves me winded, wanting and demanding more.

She knows what she does to me, there is no way she doesn't. I press a kiss to the curve of her neck, her body stiffens at the affection.

"I'm tired, not today." Comes a sapped voice, a few kisses on her neck and cheek and I let myself bask in her warmth.

"Good night ndlovukazi." I don't get anything from her, it's okay. Letting me touch her is enough. Having her home with me is enough.

Sipho's lengthy speech sent me on a long drive, it had me thinking about the chaos in my life.

Rethinking why I had pursued Zithobile and that's

when I couldn't drive to the hospital, the love I have for her kept me away from my first love. She's the one now, who holds my heart. My beautiful, audacious Zithobile and it feels divine having to come home to her... having her in my arms like this.

BAMBINDLOVU-

His heart is filled with joy at the sight of his father, this is the only place he gets to be with him, the only place he gets to spend time with him. In his dreams... dreams that seem more real than just what his mind is playing out.

The stars are perfectly hovering under the black canvas, like pale corn into freshly turned ground. God's most beautiful art. Identifiable high-pitched sounds of crickets chirping. A vicious wind singing its songs to stir the emotions, bringing sweet memories of times gone.

"Baba." He calls out to him with his six year old voice.

Sometimes in his dreams with his father, time seems to be immobile, so is his age. His father's appearance is the same as the last time he saw him. Young without a strand of grey hair.

"Baba." He calls out again to the oversized human walking away from him, in hopes that he will turn this time.

His wish is granted, Bambindlovu realises that something is wrong. His father's face is drenched with tears, dark eyes drowning in sadness. The man seems like a giant standing in front of him as he's looking up at him.

"Uyaphi baba? Ngifuna ukuhamba nawe." He tells him, blinking away tears.

The thought of his father almost leaving him breaks his heart. He gets a headshake, no words are said by the disconsolate dad. His hand drops to caress the little boy's cold cheek. He shakes his head in disapproval, pivots and continues with his strolls.

"Baba ngiyacela, ungangishiyi?" The boy is crying, pleading under shuddering lips. The man stops

again, tilts his head back and stretches out a hand towards the little boy. Joy fills his heart and paints his face, he doesn't waste time but runs to grab the senior's hand. A toothless smile on his face.

As the man looks down at him, the boy notes that his father's face looks different. Although his body remains the same.

"Babomncane?"

"Buya ekhaya mfana wami." (Come home my son.)

The deep timber rumbles like thunder under the lethal dance of lightning. The boy doesn't understand what he means, but follows as Mhambi leads him towards a village he's familiar with. He remembers this place, this is where he was born. Where his forefathers are buried.

As he turns to his side to speak to his uncle, he finds no one beside him. Fear and confusion wrap around him, a dam breaks.

"Babomncane ukephi? Baba?" He's shouting, head whipping to all corners of the earth as he searches for the two men he had encounters with.

“Bam-Bam.” A soft voice calls, it soothes his soul.

His eyes snap open and he shoots up to a sitting position startling the woman next to him.

“Are you okay?” She asks, rubbing his back. “You were crying in your sleep.”

“I had a dream,” is his answer.

“You’re trembling.” Her hand covers his. “I’ll get you something to drink.”

A tight grip on her hand stops her from moving, she turns to see need on his features. “Stay with me,” A soft plea. Liyana concedes, she lays down for him to rest his head on her chest. His build is too large, almost crushing her lungs... It feels uncomfortable, but this is her man and he needs her right now. She bears it.

It’s when the birds, start singing outside that she realises she hardly slept a wink and Bambindlovu, well the man is drooling on her chest. It feels good

to have him lying on her like this, a smile captures her face. She lets her hand run up and down his spine and a kiss is given to that mqhele-wearing big head of his. She places it like a crown is placed on a king's head.

"What time is it?" The kiss has woken her king up. Her eyes shift to the window, it's still dark outside. However, the hands of the clock on the wall confirm that it's 5:10am.

"It's still early, go back to sleep." The clingy Ms, answers, placing another kiss on his head.

"Why is your heart racing like this?" His morning voice rasps into the room, it leaves a sway of shivers on her body. "Am I responsible?"

"Arrogant bastard." She taunts and he catches the amusement in the tone of her voice. A smile brushes his lips as he raises his head, chin on her chest and hands slithering beneath the sheets to caress her back.

Lustful eyes look into inquisitive eyes, his, hinting at

something Liyana knows he can't go without. A smile leaps to her mouth at the gesture.

"Good morning my Lili." A lip bite at the salutation.

Bambindlovu shifts his big figure so he's in between her legs and his lips almost touching hers. A warm hand slithers under her night-top to locate her left breast, pushing out a gasp from her half-closed mouth.

"We haven't had sex in a while and I miss you." He almost sounds like a little kid begging for a treat.

"You know what else I miss?"

His mouth is graced with a mischievous smile, a naughty kid who woke up on his birthday to a room full of presents. His hand stealthily, glides down to her nether regions. It almost knocks the breath out of her lungs.

"This baby right here." Liyana shivers at his words.

Hungry for her and wanting to show it, Bambindlovu buries his face on her cleavage.

Ever heard of an excited tongue?

His is sensually tangoing on her bumps, soft gentle hands leading the dance.

“Oh wow Bam-Bam,” shock is found in her voice, which is why he brings his face up to meet an elated young woman. “I’m a master at this teaching thing. Your clinginess is surpassing mine. I should get a reward for best teacher.”

Raised brows, and a smirk. “Don’t get it twisted mfethu, it’s the need for a morning glory that has me acting like Father Christmas.”

“Father Christmas?” A confused Liyana.

“Yes, all this lovely dovey comes once in a blue moon like Christmas. So you better enjoy it while it lasts.” Just when she thought she was making progress.

“In fact” A kiss to her temple before he locks eyes

with hers. "I miss all of you, your smell, your taste, the touch of your skin. The way your chest feels against me, the electricity that flows through me the moment your fingers touch my skin." Someone call a novelist. He's kissing her like she taught him, open mouthed, tongue dancing with hers. He leaves her breathless, stunned and thirsty for more.

"I have a desperate desire for that touch," The whisper is against her scrumptious lips. "The lust and passion that burns inside of me when I look into your eyes. Becoming one with you Lili, feeling the desire through my body. Consuming each other with our passion.

I believe someone was asked to call a novelist.
Sokalisa is on fire.

"Give me all of you mfethu, I want your soul, your body. I want all of you. I want to stain you with my blood, I want my name imprinted on your tongue." He takes her bottom lip with his teeth, an erotic

move that's accompanied by a deep passionate kiss. Suddenly he stops.

"We need some music." He thinks and says before jumping off the bed. Liyana takes this time to collect her breathing. She doesn't take her eyes off of him. His taste of music consists of maskhandi, amapiyano and a bit of Joyous Celebration. At least that's what she's heard him play in his car.

Wait! Is that Kabza De Small's Bopha?

"Really?" Liyana sounds and looks defeated.

"Amapiyano, Bam-Bam?" He nods.

The big smile on his face has her rolling her eyes with a ghost of a smile.

Forget the novelist, call the police...

KENNETH-

My heart thuds against my chest when I wake up and she isn't next to me, the in-suit bathroom is empty, the closet as well. Something tells me that she has left, I don't recall her saying she forgives me.

I'm a light sleeper, how did I not hear her movements and how did I sleep for so long? I must've been tired from the long drive.

It's morning, around 6am to be exact, I flick my tired eyes as I take in the sunrays piercing through the open window.

The curtains dancing to the tune of the morning wind, usually that scene brings me peace but today it's a different scenario. Chills go through my body as I glance at the scene and I can't seem to shake the bad vibes knocking in my conscious.

Frustrated, I close the windows, the sliding door leading to the balcony and the curtains. This is all Zithobile, she loves opening windows early in the morning. My heart jerks at the thought of her leaving me, and something heavy sits on my chest.

'I need to get out of this room, I will suffocate if I stay here.' A thought to myself.

I have to look for Zithobile and bring her back home, make her understand that I'm not that person.

Dammit! What have you done, Kenneth? You have pushed away the only woman you have ever loved. I grab my wallet and car keys and head out before bumping into Mantfombi, she's an early bird.

In Johannesburg, Zithobile has no one but Nokzola. It makes sense that she would go back there, it worries me because that witch will not be kind to her now that she has a baby.

It is thirty minutes later when I drive past her aunt's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of her outside. It would save me the trouble of having to bump into that witch. The streets are flooded with commuters going to and fro.

Impatience has me by the balls, it's been over an

hour and there is no sign of her. Neither has anyone come out of the house. I would call her, but her stubbornness would never let her take my call.

I'm thinking of driving back home when luck calls my name, there she is a few houses from hers with a girl draped in men's clothing. I drive the car toward the house and stop a block away. Her face melts into a puddle of frustration when she sees my car. Hastily she grips the girl's hand and begins lugging her down the street.

Don't panic... I drive a little further and park the car right in front of them, stopping them on their tracks, our eyes meet head-on. An apologetic look in my eyes while hers are filled with frustration and bitterness, arms across her chest. I need to jump out fast before she leaves, I don't remove my gaze from her as I do that. A roll of the eyes when I saunter toward them. My dramatic Zithobile.

"Zithobile!" I don't expect a whisper from me nor a snort from the angry looking lady beside her. She's not a factor, my focus is on Zithobile. I need her to come back with me. My stomach is in knots.

Where do I even begin?

I came here to get her back but now that she is in front of me, her eyes laced with hurt and disappointment, I can't seem to bring myself to offer apologies again.

"What do you want Kenneth?"

She snaps in annoyance and I can't miss the iciness in her voice.

"Is this him?" The angry girl queries, glaring up at me.

"Please wait for me inside Lwazi, I won't be long."
I'm glad Zithobile does not give her an answer as this has nothing to do with her.

"Argh! Whatever." With a headshake, the girl walks back to the house.

"I thought you moved back with your aunt. Where is the baby?"

My words creat an awkward silence, she's staring, raised brows at play.

“Ulwazi’s brother took him to his father,” a chortle.

“Lovely how money can buy you things, the man did not argue whatsoever. Thank you for the allowance, I’ll pay that back as well, once I’m sorted.”

She’s hurt, I see it in her eyes. I messed up big time. And that fool Tshilidzi will never accept the baby, that man is so shallow and selfish.

“You didn’t have to leave, I can take care of you and Dlozi.” I mean what I say, but she doesn’t believe me. She nods, incredulously and sharply inhales.

“Why are you here Kenneth?” Okay, I deserve that.

“Please don’t call me that.” Kenny sounds better coming from her.

“It’s your name.”

“I know but with you it’s different, you call me Kenneth when you’re angry with me or I’ve messed up.” Frustration builds up on her face, as she wiggles her shoulders.

“What do you want Kenneth?” This is going to be harder than I thought.

“Why did you leave?” I ask, keeping a safe distance between us, not wanting to crowd her space.

“You can’t answer a question with a question.”
Zithobile.

Giving me a taste of my own medicine I see.

“You know how I felt when I woke up and you were gone?” Perhaps getting closer won’t be so bad, I expect her to shift back when I do but I don’t expect it to hurt this much.

“You know how I felt when I saw you with her?” Her words sting my bleeding heart.

“I’m sorry.” It’s pathetic I know, but there is no other way to apologise.

“I know.” Zithobile articulates.

She knows I’m sorry, this gives me the courage to take the giant step. My hands find hers, “Then come home with me.”

Desperation is loud in the tone of my voice, it means nothing to her. She claims her hands back.

“I’m not going anywhere with you Kenneth.”

“Zithobile please.”

“Go home.” She sputters.

“I’m not going anywhere without you.”

“I am not your wife,” I barely catch the bitterness in her words when a group of loud young men walk past us. They seem to know this woman I love with the way they salute her. She acknowledges them with a head nod and crinkled brows.

“Can we talk in the car please?” I’m pleading, eyes working hand in hand with me. My request will not be granted, it’s not going to happen. I see it in the way she’s looking at me.

“So you can force me to go with you? Forget it.”

I fail to understand why she would say this, the reason I locked her up was to keep her safe.

“Is that how you perceive me, Zithobile?”

Her eyes flatter shut for a brief moment, before

heaving a sigh.

“Go Kenneth, go back to your MaMthembu. Our time has depleted, I can’t be with you, not after...”

Sometimes I forget how stubborn she can be. Her face is cold, indifferent... no sign of sorrow or anything of the sort. My hand glides to the small of her back, pulling her to me, usually she’d melt under my touch. I have been a spoiled lover, a brat to say the least. Here I am at the verge of throwing a tantrum because I’m not getting my way.

“I said I’m sorry Zithobile, we can’t be apart. I love you.” She’s fidgeting under my touch, angry eyes flicking to my chest.

“Don’t touch me.”

Small body is ripped from me, she gives me a very peculiar look, breaking my heart in the process.

“This is the problem with you men, you think you’ll mess up, offer a lousy apology and we’ll forgive you after? Stay away from me.” She shouts.

I lose hope when I watch her face sag into boredom, my feelings and efforts are so compacted I feel like my chest will go up in flames.

“Piss off Kenneth, I don’t trust you anymore, I can’t be with someone I can’t trust.”

Perhaps going down on my knees would work in my favour.

Only love can reduce you to this, I made a mistake of cheating on her. But have I not served my punishment and that is the thought of living without her. It kills me, I can’t bear it.

There’s a car approaching, I’ve seen it before... The number plates... What is he doing here? Zithobile notices my gaze directed above her head and beyond the busy dusty street.

I want to pull her to the car and tell her not to turn around. But curiosity gets the best of her, her head whips back. A gasp is released, a step is taken and she leans into my side. My hand quickly slips to the small of her back, a grip that lets her know I’m here

and ready to fight her battles.

The bastard parks the car on the side of the road, his big head turns, black sunglasses making him look like a fly. I could squash him and flush him down the toilet.

There's someone on the passenger seat, they jump out of the car after Tshilidzi. Our gaze clash, in the midst of unsaid words, a silent war arises. But I quickly avert my gaze to the woman trolling towards us, the nurse uniform tightly clutched on her body and in her arms is an infant with no blanket wrapped around him.

"Shit!" Zithobile spits, shakily. My grip moves to her hip bone, a promise to protect. She lets me touch her, unless she's too unconscious to take notice. "I told that idiot to take the baby to Lyndhurst. Why is my aunt with them?"

I notice how Tshilidzi has not moved an inch from his car, the coward is keeping distance for safety purposes.

"Au—Aunty?"

Nokzola has not spared me a glance, her puckered brow is meant for Zithobile. The second she gets into her private space, she gently pushes the baby into Zithobile's arms. Instinct is my inner Sherlock but it fails to alert me of the slap Nokzola slams across Zithobile's face.

"You're going to burn in hell you dirty child."

A/N: Eish! Kenneth missed that one... This cliffhanger hurts me as much as it hurts you.

Thank you @Maletsatsi for the reminder that Umalume is the mother's brother.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-One

ZITHA-

Reality has a way of crashing down on you the moment you least expect it. To say I am falling into a dark hole would be an understatement. My ancestors have turned their backs on me, there is no other explanation. My aunt was never supposed to find out about Tshilidzi, the man is old enough to have been married to her for Pete's sake.

Stunned and a little perplexed, I wipe away the stinging pain on my cheek with one hand while the other clutched around the baby. The little human that was not meant to be born, I had a change of heart after the near death experience. The plan was to raise my baby with Kenneth, but life happened and I realised that I am broken beyond repair.

"Au..." My comeback is stolen by the man I love as

he swiftly pulls me behind him for protection. I appreciate the gesture, but now is not the time. I'm too upset with him to accept anything from him.

It was in the wee hours of the morning when he came back home, held me in his arms as if I were the only thing that mattered to him. I leaned into his touch, melted into a puddle like a love sick puppy. The act was unintentional, but there's something about Kenneth that I can't seem to walk away from. Perhaps a pull, a fatal attraction. A poisonous love that I never intended to find myself in. Of course I wanted his attention, I wanted him to look at me and no one else because I was lonely and empty, looking for someone to fill in the gap.

Not even my friends, Liyana and Ulwazi were able to make me whole. When I stumbled upon Kenneth, everything changed. He was this intriguing cryptic man who promised a better tomorrow without saying a word. I just didn't think my entire universe would revolve around him, not the way it does. Now... now I see him with a different light, his infidelity is

something our relationship will never be able to weather.

My gaze travels from the arrogant bastard, Tshilidzi who hasn't moved an inch from his car, to my aunt who looks ready to murder me. I push Kenneth aside to face her, but the man refuses to move.

"Get out of the way Kenneth," I snap, annoyed. The look on his face scares me, my aunt looks just as scared. Eyes like saucers, and chest heaving. Something is going on here.

"Kenneth move, please." Dammit!

He's got his hand spread out, working as wall to stop me from moving forward.

"This is no place to talk about this, let's go inside." He says, and I'm unable to grasp the meaning behind his remark.

Narrowed eyes on Kenneth, my aunt returns, "You know the truth, don't you? That's why you're protecting her."

“What is she talking about?” He knows I’m talking to him.

Swiftly, he turns and doesn’t waste time in cupping my cheeks with the palms of his hands. I search his face, looking for something, anything... a clue maybe.

“Zithobile...” Time stretches, while he’s looking into my eyes. He’s annoying me honestly.

“Why are you protecting this Jezebel? She deserves to burn in hell after sleeping with her...”

“Nokzola, shut up!” Kenneth growls, glaring with blazing eyes.

“Why are you stopping her? I want to hear what she has to say.” I chide Kenneth, pushing his hands from my face.

“Are you going to tell her the truth or should I?” My aunt yells, seemingly annoyed at Kenneth. I’m not in her good books as well.

“Let’s go home Zithobile, we can talk there.” Yoh, this man. How many times do I have to tell him that I’m not going anywhere with him?

“What are you hiding Kenneth?” I can’t anymore. Why does he have to be like this?

His hand wraps around my arm, “This is a public space.” Kenneth pleads and I give him a look telling him without words that this is not the answer I’m looking for.

He is right about it being a public space, people are watching, some stopped the second I was welcomed with a slap.

“Don’t do this again, stop trying to protect me.” I spit, in almost a whisper.

He breathes heavily, gets into my personal space. “Firstly, I need you to know that this is not your fault.” Geez! I hate suspense.

“Just say it.”

Kenneth’s jaw ticks, I follow his gaze that shifts between me, my aunt and Tshilidzi. The coward hasn’t said a word since he got here.

“Your father is here.” My response to his state is a

frown because I don't understand. The palms of his hands cradle my cheeks again, he removes them when the baby starts getting cranky. I don't bother to rock it.

"Where?" I'm confused.

"There is your father Zithobile," her hand navigates to the back. My gaze follows it to see Tshilidzi in stupor. He looks like he's about to have a heart attack. "That man over there, the one you've been sleeping with is your father."

She's loud enough to alert the entire neighbourhood.

"What?" Tshilidzi yells, feet thundering our direction. I'm at a loss for words, I can't even form a bloody thought. Maybe because this is Nokzola Hlubi and her tongue loves tasting lies.

I look to Kenneth for the truth, he's staring back, eyes rapidly blinking. I know this man, he would've called Nokzola out on her trash. Why is he not doing it?"

"What the hell is your problem?" Tshilidzi has a hand around my aunt's arm, twisting with bitter conflict.

“Why would you say something so disgusting? Is this your way of getting back at me?”

“Because it’s true.” Nokzola snaps, yanking her arm back. “This is the child I told you about, your daughter. The one you had with my sister. You’re a disgrace Tshilidzi, you have made a baby with your own daughter.”

Panic, I can feel it all around me. A wisp of unease coils inside my stomach at the words carelessly thrown around. This is not a movie, it’s my life. My fucking life.

I’m unable to look at him, my gaze is on Kenneth. I don’t know why I still trust him, I don’t know why his confirmation matters... and there it is... a subtle nod from him.

Disgust latches on to my skin making me shiver with cold under the scorching sun.

It feels like someone has wrapped me in a blanket of pain, soggy, humid, no air. The next sound that erupts from my mouth is inevitable.

“Mama!” The baby catches it, I have no strength to get him to quiet down, and I’m pretty sure I have no strength to hold him in my arms. This can’t be happening to me.

“Tshilidzi Mulaudzi is your father.” No! I want to scream at Kenneth, tell him to shut up. But my tongue won’t cooperate, I’m numb.

“No, I refuse to accept this.” Tshilidzi deadpans, his eyes narrow into slits sending a hard glare my way and to the baby. He seems to have a question at the tip of his tongue, “No, this is bullshit.” He growls and takes off in furious strides. Ignoring my aunt calling out to him, he hurtles the car driving away in full speed.

I want to run as well, the only thing I have are these wobbly feet, willing me to fall flat on the ground... and a screaming baby that is instantly taken from my arms.

“It’s okay, I’m her neighbour.” I hear a familiar

feminine voice say, probably responding to Kenneth's appraising look.

"Ungakhathazeki mama, we take care of our own." That's Siphos voice, I don't know when he got here. Kenneth must've called him. Through my vantage point, I see him take the baby from the woman and walk off.

Zithobile" Comfort is lain in the sound of Kenneth's voice, it's not enough to erase the pain enveloping me with thick layers of darkness. There's something arising from the deepest core of my stomach, it rushes to my chest, overpowering.

"Aaahhhh!" The roar erupts from my mouth as I sink to the floor, pain etched on it. Strong arms stop my knees from hitting the ground. Warm breath on my sensitise skin, it's familiar, speaks of promises to protect. But I can't accept it, I'm unworthy.

"Don't touch me." I scream, pushing him off me. My heart running a mile a minute. He refuses to let go and I hate him for that, but I also love him for being

here.

In his arms is where I would find strength, where evil ceases to exist. But today, not even a touch of a finger from him would erase this pain.

“Zithobile...” His voice, my weakness... what was once my weakness... maybe.

“I can’t breathe.” Is all my pathetic self can utter, I’m such a pitiful loser.

“She was right,” a confession from me. Eyes cast to the ground, perhaps thinking of digging a grave to bury myself in. Better than this life I’m living.

“Sizakele was right, my mother should have aborted me.”

He doesn’t respond, his arms tighten around me, I’m swallowed in the embrace and I can’t have that. I want to break down, I want to scream and shout. I want my soul ripped out of my body because it fucking hurts. It hurts like hell.

“MaMthombeni...” No, not the endearment, not the

one that renders me weak. “Ngiyacela mama, yehlisa umoya.”

His arms are still around me, dense covers of warmth, but it’s not enough to erase the pain simmering from my bones.

“I hate her.” I never thought I would say this, not about my queen. “I hate my mother for not aborting me, I hate her for giving me life.”

I shout finally slipping out of his embrace, however Kenneth is as stubborn as any Zulu man out there. His arms reach out to me again, an embrace, warmth. However it’s not enough to pull me out of the dark hole, it’s not enough to chase away the cold surrounding my soul.

“Phephisa mama, phephisa sthandwa sam.” His voice echoes in my ear, rumbling from his chest. I remove my head from it, but he pulls me back.

“You can let it all out, I’m here. I’ll always be here.”

I don’t want him to keep this promise or whatever he

calls it. I want nothing to do with him, I want nothing to do with Dlozi. I want nothing to do with my aunt... Tshilidzi and the woman who betrayed me... My mother.

Taking a deep breath, I swipe a hand across my face, wiping the tears away. "I have to get away from here."

"I'll come..."

"No." I pull myself out of his hold and back one step, I don't want him anywhere near me. "You're in my space Kenneth. Would you stop trying to make things better, nothing is okay. Nothing will ever be."

"I want to help Zithobile."

"I don't need your help," I shout. "You knew about Tshilidzi, you knew the truth Kenneth and not once did you bother to tell me."

"I found out when you were hospitalised and I was going to tell you, after you were discharged from the hospital."

I don't care, it doesn't matter. Point of the matter is

that he knew and did not bother to tell me.

See that pity in his eyes? That's what annoys me the most, I hate being pitied. At least Nokzola and her neighbour friends condemn me with their nailing stares, pointing accusatory fingers as if I asked for this, as if I seduced the man they claim is my father. I don't see Sipho anywhere, the baby too.

"Let me take care of you, please." Maybe Doom will get him to back off.

"I want to be alone and don't follow me or I swear to God I will do my worst." I tell him. With my back turned I hear him call out to me, I'm not going to stop. I can't be around him, not anymore.

My wobbly feet lead me back to Ulwazi's house, I'm surprised she hadn't come out after the commotion caused outside her house.

“Gazi lam,” I stop dead in my tracks upon hearing Ulwazi’s brother’s voice, curiosity piques. Instead of walking in, I opt to listen in.

“This is more than enough, it’s going to sustain us for a few months.” That’s Ulwazi, I feel a stinging pang of jealousy at the joy in her voice. How I wish to get a taste of that.

“I thought you liked leopard print.” Her brother speaks again, a glint of humor in his voice.

“Hey, I told you not to call her that. Her skin condition is not something to laugh about.” She’s always taken my side this one, and I will forever appreciate her for that. If anyone, she’ll understand my pain. I’m going to tell her everything that has happened to me, from the second I met Tshilidzi to minutes ago.

“Listen to you defending her after betraying her.”

What?”

“That doesn’t give me the right to ridicule her.” A derisive laughter from her. “Anyway, she betrayed me first by following that taxi driver. I was going to

love her like I've never loved before but she was too stupid to notice me."

What betrayal is she talking about?

"Your plan was genius ngane yakwethu, honestly. I didn't think that old man would give me money after those lies I fed him." Her brother. "The first thing I did was plant a seed of doubt, told him a whole mumble jumble about how his reputation was going to be tarnished because of an overly loose ambitious girl who wanted to pin a baby on him. Told him I had pictures and footages to prove my statement. He panicked and demanded to know who it was, and that's when I knew that Mulaudzi has a string of women gracing his bed. So trapping him was going to be a piece of cake and that, it was."

Laughter.

My pulse speeds up from slow beat to an angry pounding. What the hell is going on? Ulwazi and her brother are talking about me, they betrayed me. I

thought she was my friend, I thought she cared.

“I think it helped that I had the baby with me. I had to play my cards right, money talks is what I told him. The fool was sweating, offered me 20K out of panic. You should’ve seen his face after I told him Zithobile Mthombeni is the girl in question. Being a master manipulator, I convinced him that her aunt would be the one to put a stop to her nonsense and so we had to bring her into the ship. The fool was desperate, danced to my tune without realising it.”

“What if the baby really is his? He will come for us when he realises we betrayed him.” Ulwazi asks, there is no sign of regret in her voice. What have I associated myself with?

“We’ll be long gone by then.” The brother snorts. “Besides, that man is rich. I doubt he’ll want the likes of Zitha and her brat prowling his money and asserts. I have a feeling he’s a selfish bastard, who uses women for sex.”

Having heard enough and feeling betrayed and confused, I show myself. Ulwazi’s eyes flash with

panic, she jolts from the couch. The notes in her hand drop to the table, there's a staring contest between us. Meanwhile her brother has not moved an inch, he doesn't give a rat's arse about me or my feelings. I don't care for him as well, my heart breaks because of what Ulwazi has done.

"How could you do this to me?" I query, not moving from the passageway. She blinks once... twice and a smirk crosses her face.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." Her words birth confusion.

"What are you talking about?" I yell, fighting tears burning my eyes. I can't let her see me cry.

"You chose that old man over me, Zithobile." She yells just as loud.

"You're supposed to be my friend, Ulwazi. I trusted you."

"Well..." she shrugs. "Life is a bitch." Oh my God.

Rage screams my name, taking control of my

emotions. Storming in the living room, my hands crash on her head and grip her ears. She has no hair and it's the only thing I can grab on her ugly face. A scream is released, she screams like a little girl.

"I hate you," Is all I can bark out of anger.

She's shouting, telling her brother to get me off of her. I feel a tight grip on my waist, rough...unkind. I'm not going down without a fight, this bitch will remember me till the day she dies. With new found strength, I lean in to her ear and grip it between my teeth. Another scream explodes from her, this one tells me she's in so much pain. Good, this is what I want.

As her brother pulls me away, cursing me, I make sure to tighten my teeth on her ear. It's not long before I can taste the metal in my mouth. I've got the witch where I want her, something snaps when a force rips me off her. My back hits the wall and I instantly feel something crack. Pain rushes to my back, the stiches on my lower abdomen take a hit as well sending me on a screaming rampage.

“My ear.” Ulwazi, howls. Pinning me with a deadly glare from the devil himself. Her hand works to coat the bleeding ear, I’m no sadist, but dammit I take joy in seeing blood oozing from her ear down to her arm.

I’m not a coward, not in this lifetime. I pick myself up from the floor, it hurts but I am so good at pretending. Gasps resound when I spit out a chunk of my former friend’s ear, with a slush of blood. Disgusting.

“You bitch.” The one eared bitch yells yet again.

“You taste like shit, Ulwazi.” I snap back, and quickly grab the piece of her ear from the floor.

Her eyes widen with horror, “Where are you taking that? Give it back.”

If she thinks doctors will save her ugly face, she has another thing coming. The disfigured ear will serve as a reminder of her betrayal.

“I’m going to feed this to the dog next door.” I announce while dashing out of the house.

Outside, I see Kenneth, he's seems to be waiting for me. The crowd has scattered.

I spare him one glance, toss the disgusting ear next door, I remember there being a dog.

Adrenalin floods through my system, preparing me to run, which I do. People are staring at this person running under the scorching sun, but I don't care. I want to run myself into oblivion, dive into a deep hole and never surface.

I don't know how long I've been running, my feet are burning, knees wobbly. A rise and fall on my chest, breathless... The day holds none of the air I need to breathe, humid, too many voices in my head. Insulting me. I'm disgusting... a whole fucking mess. No matter how much I run, I can't seem to outrun the voices in my head.

No one understands what I'm going through. Who am I kidding? No one wants to understand. That's why they continue to hurt me without a care in the world. I'm tired of life and what it has for me, I'm tired of giving it a chance.

My mother should've aborted me, everyone was right. Look where I am.

I feel an unexplainable, excruciating pain and a big lump on my throat forcing its way out. I've felt pain before, in fact all my life. Pain has become part of me, my daily bread. It loves me dearly and has refused time and time to depart from me. A big part of me believes that I'm a masochist. However, what I feel today though is different, pain mocks me and abuses me.

Unloved, depressed, unworthy. Even the man I gave my heart to played me like a game of cards. He emptied my soul leaving me with a black hole that sucked everything in me.

How do I live after this? How do I face people? I have

to end it all, I want to be free and at peace and the only way is for my soul to depart from my body.

It's almost lunch hour when I find myself at a local tavern, drowning in heaps of alcohol. Loneliness and ache keeping me company. Time goes by in a haze, I lose track of it.

I should be okay, but I'm not. The air is hard to breathe, damaged inside my lungs. My gaze travels around the crowded place, the people here look as sad and lonely. I don't want to be here.

The sun is almost setting when the Uber drops at the cemetery, with one shoe and a blurred vision, I stumble my drunk self to her grave. If I could, I would wake my mother up from the dead and interrogate her. If only she had been obedient... listened to her brother and gotten rid of me.

“Mama.” That’s all my brain can form, otherwise I’m blank... disoriented... My tongue tries for words, chews on them and spews them out in chunks of vomit. The disgusting bile splatters on my mother’s grave, wetting the red soil. Like everyone I depended on, my body gives up on me, throwing me on my own vomit. I’m too intoxicated to move a muscle, so I lie there, face down... explicit scenes of me and the man they said is my father assault me from within, killing me a thousand times each time.

“Zitha.” Sipho’s voice resounds from a distance, I’m too drunk to tell from which direction. In a spilt second, I’m lifted up in tender arms. It’s him, he’s here.

“Si...pho.” His name barely leaves my lips.

A faint smile in place of syllables, warm eyes gleaming with a declaration of fortification.

“Sipho,” With a tanked-up tone, I drag out the word, encircling my arms around his neck. “Make it stop...

please make it stop.”

His eyes search mine, unwavering. Worry marring his forehead, he mumbles, “I’ll make it all go away, I’ll make them all go away. Everyone who’s ever hurt you.”

There’s an abnormal tinge in his voice, one I don’t understand. Perhaps I’m too drunk to get it. I hide my face in his chest, away from the dark world when he leads us toward the exit gate.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Three

LIYANA-

This one should be ashamed of herself, tiptoeing into her father's house so early in the morning.

"Is this the time to come home?" His voice carries from the kitchen, causing her heart to jump at the startle. Turning swiftly, gladness overflows because the man standing in front of her is not her father.

"Uncle Neo?" She drags a smile, while trying to keep her heart at bay. "You're back?"

She'd give him a hug but it would feel weird because she smells like her Zulu boy.

A scrutiny from the man has Liyana on a seat of unease, the puckered brow doesn't make it better.

"Is everything okay?" She asks.

Something has to be wrong for him to look at her in

such a manner.

“Are you okay Liya?” The question catches her off guard.

“I- I am, uncle Neo.” She stammers, meeting him half way.

“You have a good heart Liyana.” Neo drives out the words as if he was bound to say them. A frown from Liyana, confusion surrounding her.

“Thanks...” There’s uncertainty in her voice, surely Neo is taking this somewhere. Eyes probing, she squints them, perhaps debating if the man is fine in the head or has had one too many. “I should...”

“He’s going to replace what she has lost.” Neo interjects with these words

“What?” She queries, tentatively

“God will give your mother what she has lost, but it will come through you. You’re strong, that’s why you’re the chosen one. Don’t keep it for yourself, don’t claim it or cry for it. It was never yours to begin

with.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” He’s got her thoughts and emotions all over the place.

Neo brushes off her remark, the laughter in his eyes got her brain fried. Neo can never be serious even if he were paid to.

“Your husband will want to wage war. It is your job to make him understand.”

“I don’t have a husband.” That and the fact that she’s too young to be married.

“You do, that’s what they have told me. It’s what I see in the spirit. You are your mother’s saving grace. On one side, it’s the blood of her forefathers and on the other a bond so strong no one can break. A perfect combination. It was thought through, whatever is happening or going to happen was thought through. Everything that has taken place in your life has happened for a reason.”

Sheeesh! What a way to start a morning after

spending the night away.

“All this time you thought they have been ignoring you.” His voice holds a tone of a question. “You’re mistaken, they have been the loudest. That’s probably why you couldn’t hear them. They are everywhere Liyana, in your surroundings; the people you come in contact with.”

“Are you talking about my ancestors?” Neo nods his head in response.

“When are you going to tell papa?” A secreted question as he turns to look pointedly up the stairs, Liyana follows his gaze, brows crinkled in confusion.

“Tell him what?”

“That his baby is having a baby.” Her heart lurches and hustles as fast as a space ship.

“Shhh, uncle Neo. Not so loud.” She murmurs, pulling him back into the kitchen. “How did you know?”

I guess this confirms it then. Time for Randall to get

a bigger gun.

“I spend more time on my knees Liyana,” His huff is a bit condescending. “God tells me things he doesn’t tell other people.” She understands, I mean she has a gift herself.

“A little privacy would be nice, he doesn’t have to tell you my business.”

Neo takes her response lightly, the snigger is proof.

“Please don’t say anything to papa, I want him to hear it from me.” A sigh. “It’s bad enough that I’ve dropped out of varsity.”

“Just so you know, I left my funeral clothes in Nigeria. So make sure you soften his heart before you break the news to him.”

Oh wow! Thanks for the scare Neo.

Liyana sighs into the air before rushing up to her room.

RANDALL-

Styles knew Neo was coming and didn't think to tell me, he wouldn't stop laughing when I told him about the goat. How God trusted a careless Tswana boy from Pretoria with a spiritual gift eludes me. We'll never hear the end of it.

I was given strict instructions by Styles himself not to let Neo in on the plan to take down Mkhize, knowing him, he will blatantly dismiss it while quoting scriptures from the bible.

Thunder is heard from a distance before the sound of rain taps on the roof.

Right on cue, Amara stirs in my arms, and a wave of heat washes over me. Her warm back pressed against my chest has me needy and clingy. I press a kiss to her nape, letting my hands locate her breasts. A sweet moan leaves her mouth at the gentle touch.

"Randall." Finally awake.

“Good morning me hemma.” I nibble her earlobe while slowly rocking my hips forward, enough to drive myself insane.

“I guess I should’ve slept with my clothes on.”
Comes a whiny moan.

“You know I love you naked.” I send the answer into her ear, she releases a muffled moan that sends me on a rampage. However, I curtail my sex drive, remembering that she has not completely healed.

My hand glides down to her vag!na, I almost moan from pleasure at how warm and wet she is. I use the same hand to position my erection and gently slide into her warmth. Her head rocks back against my shoulder as her breath hitches.

Her walls clenching around me, once inside, we start to move like partners in a slow dance. It’s so cliché how the rain matches with our movements. Our bodies fit together, skin moving softly together as if we were made for this, to become one. Her lower part feels warm yet cold, it draws me in along with her moans that have filled the room.

The more I thrust the more I feel my erection growing harder and larger, and the more her breathing changes. We've done this more times than I could count and it keeps on getting better.

"You feel so good me hemma." She feels like a dream. I pull out to turn her over so she's laying on her back, my heart leaps with joy when her beautiful face comes into full view.

"Are you in pain?" I can never forget the scar on her back. A bashful smile wets her face as she rapidly shakes her head. I lean in to press a kiss against her sweet lips, before moving my lips down her neck to her baby bump.

For a second I breathe in the sight and thought of my baby in her womb, the little human is growing. So much has happened over the past weeks, Amara has lost a tremendous amount of weight. Everything she eats ends up in the toilet bowl, she's been battling with migraines doctors can't dictate. All tests came

back negative.

“Please... please touch me.” A breathless request, while she bucks her hips up.

With one kiss on her nipple and taking my time to suckle it, my indecision shifts to enthusiasm.

Spreading her thighs open, I place her legs on my shoulders and take my rightful place inside her. Every thrust is gentle, careful.

“ Yes, Ran...”

I know she’s unable to articulate a single word when she lets out another sensual moan. My skin is covered with electricity, my hands mildly caress her skin as if a heavier touch would bruise it. We move in an intoxicated dance of limbs, never making the same slipup twice, not in the years we’ve been lovers.

Our eyes meet, a smile. Unspoken confessions of love, I move my head around her ear with syllables ready to roll off my tongue.

“You’re the only woman on earth for me, Amara, the

only one who can breathe fire into me even when I'm cold." My needy lips find hers, I feel hers stretch into a smile, fighting between grinning and kissing. Smooth hands stroke my shoulders.

"I- love you." I know she does, she loves me with her eyes as much as her body.

"I love you, more." I return, with no tinge of lies in my declaration.

She blows my mind with how perfectly she moves beneath me, hands on their own mission, touching wherever they can.

"Fa- Faster ple- ple." The word gets stuck on her tongue as if it's physically impossible for her to beg.

"You have no idea what you do to me, me hemma."

I'm putty in her arms, it's how she is so introverted and shy in the daytime. It's the thrill that only I get to see my wife, the one who has my soul and body, in such a vulnerable state. Her hands leave my skin,

creating a longing for her touch again.

“Yes, yes, yes...” She breathes, squirming in ecstasy.

“Ra- Randall, I- I need...”

For a moment I’m jealous of the bed sheets that get to feel her tight grip. I know when she’s reaching her climax.

“You sound so sweet when you beg, Amara.” My eyes search hers. “I’d go on the whole day just to hear it over and over again.”

I win in hitting her G-spot repeatedly, erotic screams leave her parched lips.

“There’s nothing that makes me happier than seeing you like this Amara, there’s nothing that makes me happier than seeing your toes curl. There’s no better way to celebrate our love than taking you to this place, our place. To feel your soul one with mine.” I don’t stop thrusting as I dominate her entire being. Her eyes clamp shut, her moans elevate, raiding the steamy room.

Our souls mingling in the heady moment between action and tranquillity. Her erogenous screams and moans sound like music to my ears. The sensation makes her eyes roll into the back of her head, while I'm swept away by the pleasure, not far behind her. I race toward my climax, a flurry of unexpected moans escape my mouth. I'm never this loud, my body feels a little weak as I'm a centimetre closer to my climax.

A few kisses later and flying without wings, I take my position behind her, enveloping her sweaty body in my arms. Our bodies are still, once more, warm and snuggled in as close as two souls can be.

"I spoke to Ayize, she's visiting today." She breaks the silence with her randomness.

"I don't want you doing anything around the house, you haven't healed yet." I remind her.

"I won't, besides, this baby is showing me flames." I chuckle at the familiar saying, Liyana uses this phrase a lot.

“Well, being pregnant is not for the faint hearted.”
Better this excuse than thinking back on the day she was stabbed. “But you, my queen are a strong woman. You have proven that time and time.”

Silence knows us best, I know she’s thinking about her cousin. I’m glad she will never have to see her again. Seconds turn to minutes as we’re entangled in each other’s arms. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

“Can things go back to normal? I want us happy again and free again.” I feel her and the kiss I press on her cheek confirms my understanding. “If I could, I would take my family and run far away from these problems. As soon as it’s humanly possible.”

She had let these thoughts slip out of her mouth once, it’s what I want for us as well. However, I’d rather we don’t talk about depressing matters right now.

“I can’t believe it’s taken so long to meet someone like you. That I’m free to sit next to you, to be your

friend, to become whatever we want to become. I'm free to do whatever I want with you because you're mine." My statement pushes titters up her throat.

"You make it sound like we just met, we've known each other for years Randall."

"Well to me it feels like we only met yesterday, I'm still as excited as the day you accepted my love."

"Mmhh!" A hum is her answer before she nods, she's been nodding a lot lately because at this stage, it's all she can do. Her body is tired, her soul is fighting against it and her mind has declared war with it.

"Sleep my love, the doctor said to make sure you get enough rest."

"Wake me up before you leave, I don't want to wake up without you here."

Her eyes give in to sleep before I can give a reply. I snuggle her closer, wishing her a peaceful sleep.

A blaring sound disturbs the peace in the room, I reach for her phone on the bedside table. There's a text from Petunia, something about Nelisiwe not

coming home last night. She's asking for help, the woman has the nerve to bother my wife so early in the morning and after everything that has happened. I turn the phone off, toss it back on the table and go back to cradling my wife in my arms.

MANTFOMBI-

It's a pity MaMkhize was sent back to her house, I find it strange that she didn't put up a fight. For a second, I thought Kenneth would send me away as well. I'm trying to be as good as I can be, leaving this house would be a huge loss on my side.

I love it here, his room I mean. It's where I spend most of my time when he's not around. I love everything about this room. The dark walls, the high ceilings, the huge bed and mostly his scent that hovers around. I love how it envelops me into a comfortable sheet, how I can just feel his firm arms around me. This is what I live for, Kenneth Mkhize,

my lifeline.

Impeccable joy overwhelms my heart when I stand in front of the wall length mirror and admire his black shirt on me. It's so big that it works as an oversized knee length dress on my body. Strangely he doesn't own a single item of colourful clothing, I love it still. Kenneth is perfect in all his ways.

My ears ring with an annoying buzzing sound, I need to change the stupid ringtone. It's almost 1pm, Kenneth will be home from the rank. He's been working there a lot lately, probably a defence mechanism. Something to help him forget Zithobile, I've lost count of the number of times I have sent prayers to God that he forgets that little girl and focuses on me.

Then I'm reminded that I never get what I want in life, like my family's disappearance. Two weeks later, he hasn't found them. Something is dodgy, they can't have just vanished.

I feel bad for Kenneth, he has to work on locating my

family and chase after a little girl who wants the world to stop at her behest. Zithobile needs a good hiding, clearly her mother didn't teach her any morals. I would call her and tell her where to get off, but Kenneth would hate me and that's something I can't let happen.

I'm in the kitchen preparing lunch when the doorbell nips my attention, odd because Kenneth has a key. He never knocks and we hardly get visitors.

I lower the temperature on the stove and dash to check.

"Can I help you?"

A rugged old man, tall, strange in appearance. He kind of looks familiar, I can't pin where I've seen him before.

"Sawubona ntombazane." Okay, deep Zulu. This one is straight from KZN.

"Can I help you?" I'm not about to smile at him, could be a serial Killer for all I know. These mansions

should have security bars.

“Ngabe uKhabazela ukhona?”

Okay, I’m familiar with a Khabazela. Maybe he’s one of the taxi drivers, he looks it.

“I’m not sure you’re allowed to be here, the other drivers usually set an appointment when they need to speak to him.” I know this because MaMkhize told me.

“I’m his uncle, Jama Mkhize.”

I knew he looked familiar, the dark features, the lankiness and deep timber.

“Oh, he’s not around.”

“When will he be back?” I would know if he told me everything.

“I’m not really sure, he should be on his way. But you never know with Khabazela.”

The man asks if he can wait for Kenneth, I don’t have a solution for him. The only thing left to do is to call Kenneth, his phone rings unanswered. Since he says he’s the uncle, I have no choice but to let him in. He

follows me to the living room and accepts a glass of water.

It's less than ten minutes when I hear the door click and shut. I scurry to the living room. I don't think Kenneth is happy to see this man, his stance triggers fear.

"Khabazela, you're home. Your uncle sai..." He gives me a stare down, that urges me to find the nearest hiding place.

"What are you doing here?" Kenneth deadpans. The old man jerks from the couch, he appears frail in front of Kenneth.

"My son..."

"I am not your son." The harsh response is shocking.

My knowledge of him and his father's family is narrow, I only know that his father died.

The old man's shoulders tense, "Khabazela, please listen..."

"I said get out." Kenneth snaps, it's how calm his

voice is that has me shaking in my boots. Any fool can guess that Kenneth does not want this man here.

“Why is he in my house?”

“H- He said he’s your uncle...” And he looks like him.

“So let me get this straight,” His brows knit in question. “A man you’ve never met comes knocking, claiming he’s my uncle and you believe him and let him in my house? What if he did something to you? I thought you were smarter than this. Usuyasangana MaMthembu?” The anger in his voice sends chills down my spine, chills that wind into my tummy unpleasant memories of a bitter past.

That hurts, I won’t lie. The last thing I want is to disappoint him. But why am I in tears? This is not a crying matter.

“It’s not her fault Kenne...” This old man must not... it’s his fault I’m in this mess.

“You’re still here?” His voice is discreet but carries a deadly threat. “I said get out of my house.”

A trembling mess the uncle has become, he scuttles his lanky body toward the door without another word. Fear lurking in my heart, I watch the poor man struggle with the door. It takes him a minute to get it open, I would've helped but my hands are shaking as well.

“MaMthembu!” He hasn't called me Mantfombi since that day we had sex, not that I'm complaining.

“Ngiyaxolisa baba.” Perhaps this will soften him up, I would know if it's working if I were brave enough to look him in the eye. All I can do is entertain these floods of tears.

My heart dances like king David did before God when he moves closer, oh how I wish he'd shut the distance between us. He's looking down at me, a frown I can't read on his features. In this split second as his hand touches my cheek, every nerve in my body and brain is electrified. It was only for a second, but I can still feel the warmth of his hand.

“I didn't expect this from you,” Disappoint in his

voice. “You’re a woman, MaMthembu. An innocent soul, anyone can take advantage of you. You don’t know that man, the fact that he has my surname means nothing. He could’ve done anything to you, what if I didn’t come back in time?”

“I- I’m sorry.” I’m an idiot.

“I don’t want anyone in my house, not even MaMkhize. Siyezwana MaMthembu?”

“Yebo Khabazela.” I reply, feeling horrible as the concern in his voice feeds my stupidity.

Silence invades our space, a minute too long. He’s staring, intensely.

“Khabazela,” Prying might be a bad idea, but I need to know how far with Zithobile. If she is coming back, it’s been two weeks since her departure.

“Any progress with Zithobile?” My voice comes out as a whisper, dry and frail. There’s no reaction on his face, and I doubt I will be getting an answer from him. I want to inch closer when he steps back a foot.

“Your family has been found, they are on the way to Joburg. You will all be moving to a house in Mondeor.”

What?

A sharp pain shoots through my heart, “I’ll be moving out?” I can’t be away from him, I can’t go back to living with my parents. This is all wrong.

“Yes,” The decisive tone breaks my heart. I suddenly feel lightheaded, but manage to paddle through the wooziness.

“You’re abandoning me?” The words push through my tongue before I could stop them.

“I said you’re moving to Mondeor, I didn’t say I’m abandoning you.” I almost grin at his response, but his next words push me back into suffocation. “Then again, you’re not my responsibility.”

“But I am.” I want to be, I need him to take care of me. To love me and cherish me like he does Zithobile. More if possible. He stares at me, eyes

probing, furrowed brow mode.

“I don’t want to live with my parents.”

“Why not?”

“I- I can’t go back there Khabazela, you don’t know how it’s like to be over thirty and still living with your parents.” I can’t even begin to describe the torture.

“My mother looks down on everything I do, I never do anything right in her eyes. My brother is the golden child, maybe because he’s a boy. I can’t go back to the arguments, the constant screaming; the early morning bickering. Being woken up in the wee hours of the morning to clean the house and cook for everyone. I can’t go back to being a slave.”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as you make it sound, your mother was grooming you. Is that not how young women are groomed?” Where did he hear that nonsense?

“Grooming doesn’t include insults and physical abuse.”

“She hit you?” I gulp as his voice changes from soft to cold. Memories of my parent’s abuse force their way into my head.

“They did, they agreed that I needed to be disciplined like I were a child.” I love my parents, but those two are a terrible team.

A clear of the throat, “Get your CV ready, you have a job interview on Monday.” He drops the mic and walks off, headed for the stairs.

CV? I didn’t think he’d get me a job, I don’t want a job. At least not away from him. I want to be here, taking care of his house and him. A job means a life without Kenneth, he’ll soon forget about me.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Three

LIYANA-

This one should be ashamed of herself, tiptoeing into her father's house so early in the morning.

"Is this the time to come home?" His voice carries from the kitchen, causing her heart to jump at the startle. Turning swiftly, gladness overflows because the man standing in front of her is not her father.

"Uncle Neo?" She drags a smile, while trying to keep her heart at bay. "You're back?"

She'd give him a hug but it would feel weird because she smells like her Zulu boy.

A scrutiny from the man has Liyana on a seat of unease, the puckered brow doesn't make it better.

"Is everything okay?" She asks.

Something has to be wrong for him to look at her in

such a manner.

“Are you okay Liya?” The question catches her off guard.

“I- I am, uncle Neo.” She stammers, meeting him half way.

“You have a good heart Liyana.” Neo drives out the words as if he was bound to say them. A frown from Liyana, confusion surrounding her.

“Thanks...” There’s uncertainty in her voice, surely Neo is taking this somewhere. Eyes probing, she squints them, perhaps debating if the man is fine in the head or has had one too many. “I should...”

“He’s going to replace what she has lost.” Neo interjects with these words

“What?” She queries, tentatively

“God will give your mother what she has lost, but it will come through you. You’re strong, that’s why you’re the chosen one. Don’t keep it for yourself, don’t claim it or cry for it. It was never yours to begin

with.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” He’s got her thoughts and emotions all over the place.

Neo brushes off her remark, the laughter in his eyes got her brain fried. Neo can never be serious even if he were paid to.

“Your husband will want to wage war. It is your job to make him understand.”

“I don’t have a husband.” That and the fact that she’s too young to be married.

“You do, that’s what they have told me. It’s what I see in the spirit. You are your mother’s saving grace. On one side, it’s the blood of her forefathers and on the other a bond so strong no one can break. A perfect combination. It was thought through, whatever is happening or going to happen was thought through. Everything that has taken place in your life has happened for a reason.”

Sheeesh! What a way to start a morning after

spending the night away.

“All this time you thought they have been ignoring you.” His voice holds a tone of a question. “You’re mistaken, they have been the loudest. That’s probably why you couldn’t hear them. They are everywhere Liyana, in your surroundings; the people you come in contact with.”

“Are you talking about my ancestors?” Neo nods his head in response.

“When are you going to tell papa?” A secreted question as he turns to look pointedly up the stairs, Liyana follows his gaze, brows crinkled in confusion.

“Tell him what?”

“That his baby is having a baby.” Her heart lurches and hustles as fast as a space ship.

“Shhh, uncle Neo. Not so loud.” She murmurs, pulling him back into the kitchen. “How did you know?”

I guess this confirms it then. Time for Randall to get

a bigger gun.

“I spend more time on my knees Liyana,” His huff is a bit condescending. “God tells me things he doesn’t tell other people.” She understands, I mean she has a gift herself.

“A little privacy would be nice, he doesn’t have to tell you my business.”

Neo takes her response lightly, the snigger is proof.

“Please don’t say anything to papa, I want him to hear it from me.” A sigh. “It’s bad enough that I’ve dropped out of varsity.”

“Just so you know, I left my funeral clothes in Nigeria. So make sure you soften his heart before you break the news to him.”

Oh wow! Thanks for the scare Neo.

Liyana sighs into the air before rushing up to her room.

RANDALL-

Styles knew Neo was coming and didn't think to tell me, he wouldn't stop laughing when I told him about the goat. How God trusted a careless Tswana boy from Pretoria with a spiritual gift eludes me. We'll never hear the end of it.

I was given strict instructions by Styles himself not to let Neo in on the plan to take down Mkhize, knowing him, he will blatantly dismiss it while quoting scriptures from the bible.

Thunder is heard from a distance before the sound of rain taps on the roof.

Right on cue, Amara stirs in my arms, and a wave of heat washes over me. Her warm back pressed against my chest has me needy and clingy. I press a kiss to her nape, letting my hands locate her breasts. A sweet moan leaves her mouth at the gentle touch.

"Randall." Finally awake.

“Good morning me hemma.” I nibble her earlobe while slowly rocking my hips forward, enough to drive myself insane.

“I guess I should’ve slept with my clothes on.”
Comes a whiny moan.

“You know I love you naked.” I send the answer into her ear, she releases a muffled moan that sends me on a rampage. However, I curtail my sex drive, remembering that she has not completely healed.

My hand glides down to her vag!na, I almost moan from pleasure at how warm and wet she is. I use the same hand to position my erection and gently slide into her warmth. Her head rocks back against my shoulder as her breath hitches.

Her walls clenching around me, once inside, we start to move like partners in a slow dance. It’s so cliché how the rain matches with our movements. Our bodies fit together, skin moving softly together as if we were made for this, to become one. Her lower part feels warm yet cold, it draws me in along with her moans that have filled the room.

The more I thrust the more I feel my erection growing harder and larger, and the more her breathing changes. We've done this more times than I could count and it keeps on getting better.

"You feel so good me hemma." She feels like a dream. I pull out to turn her over so she's laying on her back, my heart leaps with joy when her beautiful face comes into full view.

"Are you in pain?" I can never forget the scar on her back. A bashful smile wets her face as she rapidly shakes her head. I lean in to press a kiss against her sweet lips, before moving my lips down her neck to her baby bump.

For a second I breathe in the sight and thought of my baby in her womb, the little human is growing. So much has happened over the past weeks, Amara has lost a tremendous amount of weight. Everything she eats ends up in the toilet bowl, she's been battling with migraines doctors can't dictate. All tests came

back negative.

“Please... please touch me.” A breathless request, while she bucks her hips up.

With one kiss on her nipple and taking my time to suckle it, my indecision shifts to enthusiasm.

Spreading her thighs open, I place her legs on my shoulders and take my rightful place inside her. Every thrust is gentle, careful.

“ Yes, Ran...”

I know she’s unable to articulate a single word when she lets out another sensual moan. My skin is covered with electricity, my hands mildly caress her skin as if a heavier touch would bruise it. We move in an intoxicated dance of limbs, never making the same slipup twice, not in the years we’ve been lovers.

Our eyes meet, a smile. Unspoken confessions of love, I move my head around her ear with syllables ready to roll off my tongue.

“You’re the only woman on earth for me, Amara, the

only one who can breathe fire into me even when I'm cold." My needy lips find hers, I feel hers stretch into a smile, fighting between grinning and kissing. Smooth hands stroke my shoulders.

"I- love you." I know she does, she loves me with her eyes as much as her body.

"I love you, more." I return, with no tinge of lies in my declaration.

She blows my mind with how perfectly she moves beneath me, hands on their own mission, touching wherever they can.

"Fa- Faster ple- ple." The word gets stuck on her tongue as if it's physically impossible for her to beg.

"You have no idea what you do to me, me hemma."

I'm putty in her arms, it's how she is so introverted and shy in the daytime. It's the thrill that only I get to see my wife, the one who has my soul and body, in such a vulnerable state. Her hands leave my skin,

creating a longing for her touch again.

“Yes, yes, yes...” She breathes, squirming in ecstasy.

“Ra- Randall, I- I need...”

For a moment I’m jealous of the bed sheets that get to feel her tight grip. I know when she’s reaching her climax.

“You sound so sweet when you beg, Amara.” My eyes search hers. “I’d go on the whole day just to hear it over and over again.”

I win in hitting her G-spot repeatedly, erotic screams leave her parched lips.

“There’s nothing that makes me happier than seeing you like this Amara, there’s nothing that makes me happier than seeing your toes curl. There’s no better way to celebrate our love than taking you to this place, our place. To feel your soul one with mine.” I don’t stop thrusting as I dominate her entire being. Her eyes clamp shut, her moans elevate, raiding the steamy room.

Our souls mingling in the heady moment between action and tranquillity. Her erogenous screams and moans sound like music to my ears. The sensation makes her eyes roll into the back of her head, while I'm swept away by the pleasure, not far behind her. I race toward my climax, a flurry of unexpected moans escape my mouth. I'm never this loud, my body feels a little weak as I'm a centimetre closer to my climax.

A few kisses later and flying without wings, I take my position behind her, enveloping her sweaty body in my arms. Our bodies are still, once more, warm and snuggled in as close as two souls can be.

"I spoke to Ayize, she's visiting today." She breaks the silence with her randomness.

"I don't want you doing anything around the house, you haven't healed yet." I remind her.

"I won't, besides, this baby is showing me flames." I chuckle at the familiar saying, Liyana uses this phrase a lot.

“Well, being pregnant is not for the faint hearted.”
Better this excuse than thinking back on the day she was stabbed. “But you, my queen are a strong woman. You have proven that time and time.”

Silence knows us best, I know she’s thinking about her cousin. I’m glad she will never have to see her again. Seconds turn to minutes as we’re entangled in each other’s arms. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.

“Can things go back to normal? I want us happy again and free again.” I feel her and the kiss I press on her cheek confirms my understanding. “If I could, I would take my family and run far away from these problems. As soon as it’s humanly possible.”

She had let these thoughts slip out of her mouth once, it’s what I want for us as well. However, I’d rather we don’t talk about depressing matters right now.

“I can’t believe it’s taken so long to meet someone like you. That I’m free to sit next to you, to be your

friend, to become whatever we want to become. I'm free to do whatever I want with you because you're mine." My statement pushes titters up her throat.

"You make it sound like we just met, we've known each other for years Randall."

"Well to me it feels like we only met yesterday, I'm still as excited as the day you accepted my love."

"Mmhh!" A hum is her answer before she nods, she's been nodding a lot lately because at this stage, it's all she can do. Her body is tired, her soul is fighting against it and her mind has declared war with it.

"Sleep my love, the doctor said to make sure you get enough rest."

"Wake me up before you leave, I don't want to wake up without you here."

Her eyes give in to sleep before I can give a reply. I snuggle her closer, wishing her a peaceful sleep.

A blaring sound disturbs the peace in the room, I reach for her phone on the bedside table. There's a text from Petunia, something about Nelisiwe not

coming home last night. She's asking for help, the woman has the nerve to bother my wife so early in the morning and after everything that has happened. I turn the phone off, toss it back on the table and go back to cradling my wife in my arms.

MANTFOMBI-

It's a pity MaMkhize was sent back to her house, I find it strange that she didn't put up a fight. For a second, I thought Kenneth would send me away as well. I'm trying to be as good as I can be, leaving this house would be a huge loss on my side.

I love it here, his room I mean. It's where I spend most of my time when he's not around. I love everything about this room. The dark walls, the high ceilings, the huge bed and mostly his scent that hovers around. I love how it envelops me into a comfortable sheet, how I can just feel his firm arms around me. This is what I live for, Kenneth Mkhize,

my lifeline.

Impeccable joy overwhelms my heart when I stand in front of the wall length mirror and admire his black shirt on me. It's so big that it works as an oversized knee length dress on my body. Strangely he doesn't own a single item of colourful clothing, I love it still. Kenneth is perfect in all his ways.

My ears ring with an annoying buzzing sound, I need to change the stupid ringtone. It's almost 1pm, Kenneth will be home from the rank. He's been working there a lot lately, probably a defence mechanism. Something to help him forget Zithobile, I've lost count of the number of times I have sent prayers to God that he forgets that little girl and focuses on me.

Then I'm reminded that I never get what I want in life, like my family's disappearance. Two weeks later, he hasn't found them. Something is dodgy, they can't have just vanished.

I feel bad for Kenneth, he has to work on locating my

family and chase after a little girl who wants the world to stop at her behest. Zithobile needs a good hiding, clearly her mother didn't teach her any morals. I would call her and tell her where to get off, but Kenneth would hate me and that's something I can't let happen.

I'm in the kitchen preparing lunch when the doorbell nips my attention, odd because Kenneth has a key. He never knocks and we hardly get visitors.

I lower the temperature on the stove and dash to check.

"Can I help you?"

A rugged old man, tall, strange in appearance. He kind of looks familiar, I can't pin where I've seen him before.

"Sawubona ntombazane." Okay, deep Zulu. This one is straight from KZN.

"Can I help you?" I'm not about to smile at him, could be a serial Killer for all I know. These mansions

should have security bars.

“Ngabe uKhabazela ukhona?”

Okay, I’m familiar with a Khabazela. Maybe he’s one of the taxi drivers, he looks it.

“I’m not sure you’re allowed to be here, the other drivers usually set an appointment when they need to speak to him.” I know this because MaMkhize told me.

“I’m his uncle, Jama Mkhize.”

I knew he looked familiar, the dark features, the lankiness and deep timber.

“Oh, he’s not around.”

“When will he be back?” I would know if he told me everything.

“I’m not really sure, he should be on his way. But you never know with Khabazela.”

The man asks if he can wait for Kenneth, I don’t have a solution for him. The only thing left to do is to call Kenneth, his phone rings unanswered. Since he says he’s the uncle, I have no choice but to let him in. He

follows me to the living room and accepts a glass of water.

It's less than ten minutes when I hear the door click and shut. I scurry to the living room. I don't think Kenneth is happy to see this man, his stance triggers fear.

"Khabazela, you're home. Your uncle sai..." He gives me a stare down, that urges me to find the nearest hiding place.

"What are you doing here?" Kenneth deadpans. The old man jerks from the couch, he appears frail in front of Kenneth.

"My son..."

"I am not your son." The harsh response is shocking.

My knowledge of him and his father's family is narrow, I only know that his father died.

The old man's shoulders tense, "Khabazela, please listen..."

"I said get out." Kenneth snaps, it's how calm his

voice is that has me shaking in my boots. Any fool can guess that Kenneth does not want this man here.

“Why is he in my house?”

“H- He said he’s your uncle...” And he looks like him.

“So let me get this straight,” His brows knit in question. “A man you’ve never met comes knocking, claiming he’s my uncle and you believe him and let him in my house? What if he did something to you? I thought you were smarter than this. Usuyasangana MaMthembu?” The anger in his voice sends chills down my spine, chills that wind into my tummy unpleasant memories of a bitter past.

That hurts, I won’t lie. The last thing I want is to disappoint him. But why am I in tears? This is not a crying matter.

“It’s not her fault Kenne...” This old man must not... it’s his fault I’m in this mess.

“You’re still here?” His voice is discreet but carries a deadly threat. “I said get out of my house.”

A trembling mess the uncle has become, he scuttles his lanky body toward the door without another word. Fear lurking in my heart, I watch the poor man struggle with the door. It takes him a minute to get it open, I would've helped but my hands are shaking as well.

“MaMthembu!” He hasn't called me Mantfombi since that day we had sex, not that I'm complaining.

“Ngiyaxolisa baba.” Perhaps this will soften him up, I would know if it's working if I were brave enough to look him in the eye. All I can do is entertain these floods of tears.

My heart dances like king David did before God when he moves closer, oh how I wish he'd shut the distance between us. He's looking down at me, a frown I can't read on his features. In this split second as his hand touches my cheek, every nerve in my body and brain is electrified. It was only for a second, but I can still feel the warmth of his hand.

“I didn't expect this from you,” Disappoint in his

voice. “You’re a woman, MaMthembu. An innocent soul, anyone can take advantage of you. You don’t know that man, the fact that he has my surname means nothing. He could’ve done anything to you, what if I didn’t come back in time?”

“I- I’m sorry.” I’m an idiot.

“I don’t want anyone in my house, not even MaMkhize. Siyezwana MaMthembu?”

“Yebo Khabazela.” I reply, feeling horrible as the concern in his voice feeds my stupidity.

Silence invades our space, a minute too long. He’s staring, intensely.

“Khabazela,” Prying might be a bad idea, but I need to know how far with Zithobile. If she is coming back, it’s been two weeks since her departure.

“Any progress with Zithobile?” My voice comes out as a whisper, dry and frail. There’s no reaction on his face, and I doubt I will be getting an answer from him. I want to inch closer when he steps back a foot.

“Your family has been found, they are on the way to Joburg. You will all be moving to a house in Mondeor.”

What?

A sharp pain shoots through my heart, “I’ll be moving out?” I can’t be away from him, I can’t go back to living with my parents. This is all wrong.

“Yes,” The decisive tone breaks my heart. I suddenly feel lightheaded, but manage to paddle through the wooziness.

“You’re abandoning me?” The words push through my tongue before I could stop them.

“I said you’re moving to Mondeor, I didn’t say I’m abandoning you.” I almost grin at his response, but his next words push me back into suffocation. “Then again, you’re not my responsibility.”

“But I am.” I want to be, I need him to take care of me. To love me and cherish me like he does Zithobile. More if possible. He stares at me, eyes

probing, furrowed brow mode.

“I don’t want to live with my parents.”

“Why not?”

“I- I can’t go back there Khabazela, you don’t know how it’s like to be over thirty and still living with your parents.” I can’t even begin to describe the torture.

“My mother looks down on everything I do, I never do anything right in her eyes. My brother is the golden child, maybe because he’s a boy. I can’t go back to the arguments, the constant screaming; the early morning bickering. Being woken up in the wee hours of the morning to clean the house and cook for everyone. I can’t go back to being a slave.”

“I’m sure it’s not as bad as you make it sound, your mother was grooming you. Is that not how young women are groomed?” Where did he hear that nonsense?

“Grooming doesn’t include insults and physical abuse.”

“She hit you?” I gulp as his voice changes from soft to cold. Memories of my parent’s abuse force their way into my head.

“They did, they agreed that I needed to be disciplined like I were a child.” I love my parents, but those two are a terrible team.

A clear of the throat, “Get your CV ready, you have a job interview on Monday.” He drops the mic and walks off, headed for the stairs.

CV? I didn’t think he’d get me a job, I don’t want a job. At least not away from him. I want to be here, taking care of his house and him. A job means a life without Kenneth, he’ll soon forget about me.

*

A/N: Mantfombi

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Four

LIYANA-

So much for leaving the house unnoticed, her feet are unenthusiastic as she spots the gateman. He's sixty seven years old, if she remembers correctly from the brief conversation they once had. It's too early in the morning, why is he not having breakfast with the other employees?

"Ms. Liyana." A smile crosses his face, he's new around here. A month in and he's so fond of this young woman who comes and goes in her father's house as if she's selling fat cakes.

"Bab' Zondo." She returns the smile.

"Where are you going Ms. Liyana?"

Not that it's any of his business, "School."

She lies like she's gifted in that field, her response

brings a frown upon Bab'Zondo's face.

No one in this family uses public transport, so let the man wonder.

“Are you not driving today? So many cars to choose from and you prefer to walk?”

Silly old man. Liyana laughs at his one-liner.

“No, Bab' Zondo. I'm taking a taxi today. I don't feel like driving.”

“Oh.” His eyes are distant, probing still. His officious gaze travels east, right outside the gate. A white caravan lies abandoned across the street.

“That boy is very patient.” Great, he's figured her out. Bab' Zondo talks, he's a parrot and one wrong move, Randall will know their little secret. “Does he have cows?”

Liyana winces, she's bothered by the old man's interference. Especially since she wants to make it out of the house before her parents see her.

"Marriage is not in my plans baba," she quickly retorts, managing a weak smile clearly eager to leave. Her gaze trails back to the door, she still has time. "I will see you later, Bab' Zondo. Enjoy your day."

She pounces off, leaving the man mumbling to himself. Her feet cheer her on as she approaches the caravan, the passenger door is locked. She peers inside to see her man fast asleep, one knock on the window and he jumps to a sitting position. Eyes red and puffy, lips a little swollen and pouty. He fiddles until he's out of the car, Liyana doesn't expect him to sweep her in his arms and attack her with various kisses. This is the Bam-Bam she ordered. Is it too soon to give herself a shoulder pat?

"What?" He questions her narrowed eyes, after

setting her back down.

“What was that for?”

“I think, I finally understand.”

“What, Bam-Bam?” It’s in the way she calls his name that pulls a smile to his face. Liyana titters softly when he snatches her hand and pulls her into him. Animated eyes painting her with colours of... love... His arm snakes her waist, he leans in closer and nips at her bottom lip. Liyana can only lean into his touch, mostly because his nearness has weakened her knees.

“Why everyone is so obsessed with love.” His lips pressed to her cheek, he articulates. Her heart sprints, leaps and does a summersault. “I love you Liyana.”

She knows, they wouldn’t be here if that wasn’t the case.

“I love you too, Sokalisa.”

His heart has done plenty of things since he’s met this woman, but not this. He doesn’t understand it yet, but one day is one day. Lust knocks, there’s a deep urge to let it in. Many have called him by this name he’s proud of, but none have said it the way she does. His large hand skates down to mould her butt, a squeeze that leaves her breathless.

“Can we have sex now?”

Liyana almost chokes on giggles. Her eyes dart to her father’s gate, the coast is clear but they should be fleeing anytime now.

“You’re silly, always thinking about sex.” She scoffs but accepts a sincere smile, it’s beautiful and he loves it. At least that’s what he’d tell her.

“Isn’t that what every human under the face of the earth thinks about?” That and money...

“No, there’s more to life than mind blowing orgasms and passionate kisses and lingering stares.”

Pardon me; yes there's more to life than the formerly mentioned.

"Okay." A solemn shadow lingers in his gaze, he's not buying her response. He wants her now, pinned beneath his weight, moaning his name. Her glorious skin sweaty and slippery. He wants her untainted, maybe ripped of her innocence. He wants her exposed in all facets, as he dominates over her.

"What's wrong mfethu?" His brows furrow as he notices the distress lain on her face.

Liyana heaves a deep sigh, stepping away from the man she loves. "Would you still love me if I told you, I'm pregnant?"

His small eyes turn into large orbs, mouth falls open releasing a shaky gasp.

ZITHA-

The neighbours say a candle was left on throughout the night, the police suspect arson. Perhaps it's a good thing she's gone. I want to feel bad for Ulwazi, the friendship we shared, although she turned out to be a total douchebag. Her brother deserved it, that son of a pig. May his fried soul continue to burn in hell. The world is a better place without him.

My heart breaks for her grandmother and her little brothers, they were so young and had their lives ahead of them.

The news as Sizakele told it, is that Ulwazi and her family died in a house fire. When the neighbours noticed the flames, it was too late to put it out. Their bodies were burnt beyond recognition, the news has been on TV for the past three days.

Guilt has been hovering around me since I found out, Siphos says to shake it off. Impassive face at play, sometimes he doesn't act human. Where is the compassion?

“The world is a dark place, those children are in a better place now, and the old woman was going to die soon anyway. It’s a win-win for the takalanis and magriza.”

Sipho blatantly uttered these words when I couldn’t ‘shake off’ the guilt.

He scares me sometimes; Sipho. There’s something playful yet dangerous in his eyes. The promise he made that night at the cemetery... Was it a promise or an oath? Right at the back of my head, something keeps playing. Is he the one responsible for what happened to Ulwazi and her family?

“Muntu ka bafo.” He drops into the kitchen whistling to a familiar song, if my memory serves me right, that’s a funeral song. The words haven’t come to me yet.

“What are you happy about?” He’s too elated lately.

He shrugs, plummets down on the opposite barstool, there's this smile on his face. It's too bright, dubious and... no man... has he found someone? Only love can make one smile like this, and money.

"Oatmeal again?" He judges the bowl in front of him, it's all I can offer.

"What do you mean again? We only had it yesterday."

"And today," Is he complaining? "I'd rather drink Dlozi's baby formula."

Dlozi! He's still around, somewhere in this house. Siphos hired a nanny. Mam' Rose, she doesn't speak a word of Zulu and her Tswana is too deep for me to understand. I try to keep my distance, from her and Dlozi. I'm not ready to face him yet, I will never be able to accept the fact that I had an affair with my mother's sperm donor.

I hate that man more every day, I can't find it in my

heart to forgive my mother and no; I will not kill myself even if I think about death more than I should.

Sipho is staring and it's getting uncomfortable, I don't want to talk about Dlozi. He knows how I feel about him, he knows how I feel about Kenneth as well, and I'm thankful that he never pushes.

I'm saved by my phone ringing. What does Sizakele want now?

"Zitha..." Wrenching cries echo on the other end. She was dumped, obviously. Why else would she be crying like this? "Zitha... my heart is sore."

I roll my eyes at her dramatics, this girl thinks I have time in my hands. Besides, since when do we confide in each other?

"Try wine, it helps." I'm not interested in why she's painfully crying. Sizakele can be melodramatic.

"I'm going to make us some eggs." Sipho excuses himself, he takes his plate with him. He can cook, I can give him that.

“Mama is gone Zitha.” And so she continues. I’m so bored, it’s a sin that I don’t ask what the hell she’s on about. “She hung herself, in her bedroom.”

What?

“When?” Nokzola is dead? That’s impossible.

“She must’ve done it last night, I found her in the bathroom this morning, hanging from the ceiling.”

A whistle snatches my attention, Siphos is whistling to that song again. His back turned to me, while bustling on the stove. People sing along to Beyonce, Bruno Mars or Killer Kau ‘yawn.’ Not... amagugu? Yes, that’s the song that’s got him engrossed. I remember my aunt singing it at the top of her lungs at my mother’s funeral.

A frown creases my face at both Siphos and the depressing news, “Calm down Kele, I’m on my way.”

“Please hurry, the ambulance is taking her to the morgue. I don’t want to be alone Zitha. I’m scared.”

“Give me an hour.”

There goes my plans with Liyana, it's been long since we last hooked up. She'll have to pardon me. We're supposed to be having lunch today, there's so much I need to tell her.

"My aunt is dead." I tell the man who hasn't given me an inspection, a tilt of the head would've sufficed. I believe the tone of my voice worked pretty well in relaying a message that something is deeply wrong.

"You know, they say when a witch dies, you don't attend their funeral."

What is he on about? A hard face considers me, arms across his chest.

"My aunt is dead Sipho." Now it kicks in, a pang of pain prickles my heart. I can't grasp why I'm hurt, maybe it's because she was my mother's sister. A blank face is rubbed, roughly... is he yawning?

"What happened?" Boredom is evident in his voice.

"Suicide." Which is so unlike Nokzola, she is one strong woman. What could have led her to take such

drastic measures?

“People still do that shit?” His eyes dramatically roll to the back of his head, under different circumstances I would have laughed. He’s back to flipping eggs, Siphon and his standoffish behaviour. What’s wrong with men? This one shows no sympathy, and I can’t force him to at least act human.

“Siphon!”

Silence.

“That day at the cemetery... you said something about making people pay.” Why am I asking him this? Yes, his aura would make one piss on their pants. But his heart is soft, I know this because he’s proven it by coming to my rescue, and taking me in. Midrand is not so bad, his apartment is small. Two bedrooms, I feel bad to have taken up his bed. The other room is occupied by Mam’ Rose and Dlozi, Siphon sleeps on the couch, as tall as he is. Shame.

Anyhow, he’s been good to me. Treats me like a

brother would a sister. I enjoy Siphos company, hes funny sometimes and sometimes reminds me of... Kenneth.

"People say things they dont mean, you shouldnt take everything to heart muntu ka bafo."

That 'muntu ka bafo' shit again. Its not the first time. What point is he trying to make? Did I flirt with him, unknowingly? Given him mixed signals? I mean he is beautiful, but hes not... him. My heart can never be split into two, it will always belong to Kenneth. Im not angry anymore, what I feel now is resentment. Im finding it hard to look past what he did.

"Please drop me in Orange Farm." Im standing behind him, waiting for him to turn and face me. The eggs can wait.

"Im not going there." Really? Argh!

"Fine, Ill take a taxi." I dont mean that.

"Good, thats what everybody does." Yoh!

"Come on Siphos, itll take forever to get there. I will have to take a taxi to joburg, from joburg take

another to Orange Farm.”

“Like all citizens.”

I’m not winning with this man.

“You’re so insufferable,” At my grumble he turns, grinning a childish smile that reaches his eyes. I’m spent. “Fine, I’ll take an Uber.”

Is he really letting me walk away? Sigh!

Showers are faster than baths, I’m done in less than five minutes. Maybe one day I will break a record of bathing for thirty minutes like normal people. Siphos room is convenient for me, everything is within reach. There’s no walk in what-what like in Kenneth’s room, no complicated toilets or showers. There’s a double bed, adorned with grey bedding. I’m relieved it’s not red, you never know with men. A dressing table where I can store my essentials and clothes. Most of them are still in my suitcase, which he fetched from Ulwazi’s place the day he brought me here.

“Two weeks is too long to be away from home.”

Gosh, will I ever get over that voice? The inflexible commands it is accustomed to, like this one.

I turn, my heart does a flip over at the sight of him. He looks different, beard unkempt, droopy eyes. One thing he'll never stop taking care of is his hair, the darn mop still looks the same. Neat, clean and well tied in a ponytail.

“What are you doing here?” I turn back to the dressing table, and continue to butter my skin with lotion. I should be covering up, but I don't care; he found me here. The one who should leave is him.

“I'm here to take you home.” He must be crazy.

“Home to Ntombo?”

“Home to our house.”

I was waiting to hear pain in his voice, but the bastard has given me nothing.

“So today of all days, you woke up and said ‘I'm going to bring Zithobile home?’”

If only this dressing table had a mirror, I want to see his reaction but I don't want to turn around.

"I did." Comes a silent answer. "Yesterday as well, and the day before. It's all I've been thinking about since the day you left, you're all I think about Zithobile. I can't think of anything else but you."

Does he have to be so oversentimental? I was expecting him to be the asshole he is.

"Is she still there?" Why do I bother asking? Of course she's still there.

"I've made arrangements, she's going to leave in a few days." He got her a place to stay? Gosh! Can't she go back to the village? Virgin Mary is lucky I've been going through shit, I've got a slap reserved for her.

"It's your home Zithobile, it belongs to you." Yeah right.

"And that couch you slept on?" It used to be my favourite, I want it burnt to ashes.

“We can change it,” He means it, he’s not a man who speaks carelessly. “We can change the entire house if you like, paint it whatever colour you want. We can change the furniture and the curtains and the kitchen units.”

That’s absurd, black is his colour, I don’t want to impose on that.

I turn back around and surprisingly find him two feet from me, my heart reacts to the proximity. His eyes digging into my soul, searching for something only he knows. They are shifty, finding my breast at every chance they get. Yeah, look, Kenneth because that’s how far you’re going to go with me.

“I want a new house.” I tell him, hands falling to my hips. God was stingy in that department, Shakira should’ve sang hips don’t lie before the Almighty created me. That would’ve given him a clue on how I wanted my hips.

His lips twist into a faint smile, he gulps, shifty eyes blinking their way to my lower body. They are

suddenly lustful, red-rimmed and half-lidded. “We’ll buy a new house, we can start from scratch; you and me.”

No. Cut! I didn’t mean it, I’m no gold-digger.

“Come home with me.”

Normal people ask. The answer is no anyway, I’m enjoying being a Midrander.

Unwavering gaze locked on mine with intent, he confines me against the wall. A lot of things rush through my cluttered brain, I don’t know which one to say first.

Don’t touch me. Hold me. Make me yours again. I miss you.

His touch finds me. Plump lips trace mine. Unquenchable. Soft. Fervent. Each kiss sums up into

one powerful word. Love.

I want to believe; I want to believe in his kisses. In this inaudible expression of adoration. Big strong hands worming their way around my body, forcing me to melt in his encirclement.

“Buya ekhaya MaMthombeni, kudala ngkulindile.”
(Come home, I’ve been waiting for you for too long.)

Body pressed against mine, he mumbles against my lips, hand gliding up my neck to choke me, fulfilling my fantasy. My lips are attacked... unappeasable... teeth crashing... tongues fighting... lip biting. Warmth seers my insides, burning a pathway of need and comfort.

A ripping sound... I just bought these with his money that he gives me just for breathing. Imagine being paid to breathe, that’s when I decided death is not an option. Ramaphosa needs a lesson or two, real men give real money, not R350.

Anyone would've sent the money back, but I'm not an idiot. This man has hurt me and he owes me, let's just say his money patches my cracked heart. It's different from the one I got from... Tshi... that old bastard. Kenneth's money has a purpose and that is to take care of me. Perhaps one day, when the gods of employment decide to favour me, I will be proud enough to decline his allowance, and that's a big 'maybe.'

"Those are new." A complaint under a trembling voice, controlled by a swift breath. Teeth graze my sensitive skin, before they grab my earlobe.

"I'll buy you new ones." He groans into my ear, sending electric waves throughout my body. A warm hand grips my thigh, my leg latches on his hip, before two fingers plunge into my entrance. I'm sent over the edge as he strokes me, unhurriedly. "I'll buy you anything you want."

This he says, unexpectedly slamming into me, taking without asking, and because I love him, I don't dare deny him. I am his, like he said, every part of me belongs to him. He grips my other thigh and I curl my

legs around his waist. I put my hands on his shoulders, fingers gripping and digging.

“I am not a prostitute, Kenneth.” I grumble into his ear, following the pace he’s set and fighting to control the moans he’s activated. This is pure fucking, adulterated. Rough. His thrusts are deep, driving me back against the wall. We’re too loud, but none of us seem to care. Mam’ Rose better be sleeping. Her room is right next to this one.

“Ndlovukazi yam, themba lami.” He breathes into my mouth. “You’re my Zithobile. I am your Kenny.”

He grips my hair and finds purchase as he kisses me with just the right kind of desperation. I return them, his kisses; trying not to scream with how he’s plunging deeper into me, hitting the right spot.

“I want you to feel me, so intensely that you know you’re alive. Feel me, MaMthombeni. I am yours, all of this is yours.”

I feel him, every inch of him. Yet dejection, mortification refuse to depart from me.

Tears blind my vision, they stream down my face. He cups my cheek, swiping his thumb over it to wipe away the dam. My head spins and the world vanishes, it's just us two. Nothing else matters but this moment and what we share. His forehead presses against mine, he's kissing me again, unrelenting. Every stroke matches my heart beat, fast, obligatory, right on time. My arms curl around his neck when he goes deeper than I ever thought possible, he's groaning, face tight with pleasure.

"Ken..." I fail in expressing what I feel.

His eyes are dark, pupils blown wide. The stare is too deep for me to hold, although I want to look away, I can't. He's got me enthralled in his gaze.

"I'm not perfect Zithobile, I'm only human and I will stumble and fall. I can't avoid making mistakes, I can't avoid hurting you. It will happen, but like two grownups, we will pick each other up and fix each other. We can never be apart, we'll never be apart again."

Voice non-negotiable. My legs tighten around his

waist, chest against chest. Long fingers gripping my ass, a tight hold.

“Cum for me, sthandwa sam.” He increases the pace, throwing me higher and higher, burying me in consuming passion. “Ngiyakuthanda Zithobile, you’re mine.”

Why do I desperately want to return the words? “You’re going to have my babies.” Deep moans resound in my ear as he shoots his load inside me; again taking without permission. I’m going to hell for this, my aunt just died and here I am having mind blowing sex. Swimming in orgasmic glory.

I have to gather my breathing for the return, “I had my tubes tied.”

His gaze holds, quick breaths leaving and finding him again.

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Five

BAMBINDLOVU-

He would have opted to sell his soul to the devil than live without the woman who gave birth to him, if she hadn't been so selfish and self-centred, if she didn't put her needs before his. She's hurting, he knows that and he should be home, comforting her. Making sure she is aware of his presence in her life, then again, this is Thandikela we're talking about.

"She lied to me, mfethu." It's something he can't get over, something he needs out of his chest. He's taken up a cuddle offered by his, truly, as small as she is, she's good at this cuddling thing. He's never felt so comfortable in his life.

"The story about my father taking a second wife,

leaving her for another woman when she declined. It's all a lie, she was the other woman. His mistress." Repulsion is heard in his voice.

"I'm sorry Bam-Bam." As a woman of little words, this is what she has for him.

"How do I fix this mess? I'm not choosing my father's family over my mother, she's been unfair yes, but she's still my mother."

"Talk to her, let her tell you, her side of the story."

"I tried that once and she almost set herself on fire." The thought angers him even more. He raises his head to find peace in her eyes. His eyes light up with intoxication, her skin sizzles at the regard.

"Shall we go now?" She asks.

He's not sure he's ready to face his mother after weeks of being away from home, to top it off, he's got news for her. There's a Buthelezi bun baking in the Okolie oven, a recipe his mother finds bland.

He stands and helps Liyana up.

They leave the hotel after freshening up and gathering all their belongings. Marshall Street has become their home basically, might as well name the baby Marshall. Or was it made that night at the dam, they could have twins; Marshall and Dam-Dam.

Liyana's phone vibrates as he parks between Kaptain and Quartz, Hoofman Newyorker catches his attention before he diverts his gaze to a puffing Liyana beside him.

"Papa wants me home." She tells him, unsatisfied by her father's watch. Bambindlovu flashes a kind beam, maybe to ease her worries. "I'll be quick, then I'll take you home." He soothes. "How is Amara?"

They; Bambindlovu and Amara don't speak like most siblings do, the last time he saw her was when he had gone to visit her at the hospital. Sure he had to because he was there when the lady was stabbed. Liyana's mood changes at the mention of her

mother, he sees it and wears a frown. "What happened?"

"It's still awkward that you're my mother's brother," Her head finds shelter on his shoulder, it is escorted by a sigh. "I'd rather we don't talk about her."

"Whatever you want mfethu." Of course her wish is his command.

Another sigh leaves her chest, "You know, I thought I was in love with Zwelethu?"

Where is she taking this train? It better not crash. Bambindlovu does not like the course of the ride, he stiffens and offers the silent moment a clear of the throat.

"Only now do I realise that I had no idea what love was, I was this girl running away from the truth. The only thing that was important to me was freedom, finding myself outside my ancestors. I don't know how it came about that we are here today Bam-Bam, but I am thankful to whoever is responsible for bringing us together."

“I’m thankful too, mfethu.” He smiles like she’s never seen before. “... and I want to do things right. We’re going to be parents, we need to tell the elders.”

Liyana sports a half smile, this might not end well. How do they even do this without causing havoc within the family?

“I don’t see them accepting us,” her heart leaks at the realisation.

“We’ll hold each other’s hands throughout, there’s no turning back now Lili. We have a little human coming into the world in nine months, whether our families accept it or not, we’re sticking together. Amathe no limi.” He tells her, chuckling at whatever he finds funny.

Liyana has no reply for Bambindlovu’s retort, and that gives him a ticket to dash out of the car. She’s left behind, a wise idea they agreed on.

When last did he climb these damn stairs? It doesn’t take him long to get to his mother’s flat because he was skipping two steps at a time. His heart is sitting

on his throat as he enters the house, there is no one in sight. Smells like someone had been cooking though, he doesn't follow the aroma rather his feet as they lead him to the room he shares with his mother. It's locked, thankfully, he's got a key.

The dragon... I mean Thandikela is not home, he contemplates on whether to call her or take Liyana home and come back later. It's imperative that he tells her, he's going to be a father. A time will come when he will have to gather his uncles, tell them about the damage he's made and lead them to the Okolie homestead, the sooner the news is out, the better.

Calling Thandikela does not seem like an option, he decides to come back later. Climbing down the stairs is the easy part, but he's worn out by the time he takes the last step. Excitement swirls inside his stomach when the thought of seeing Liyana takes over his mind. He hurries, eager to be next her.

That's odd, there's no one in the car.

He checks the back seat, to find it empty as well. Liyana couldn't have left without informing him. Bambindlovu tries her phone, it rings unanswered, another bizarre thing added to the list. As he's running down the streets of Kaptain and Quarts, in search of his beloved, his phones pings, notifying a message.

"I know my daughter is with you, bring her home now."

A text from Randall, as to where he got his number, he doesn't want to think about it. This message is too loud. Does Randall know about them?

A street vendor situated a street away from his car questions his panic. She might know something. He thinks to himself.

"Sorry mama, there was a young woman in that car."

His hand points toward the caravan. "Did you perhaps see where she went?"

The street vendor is first confused but gathers herself instantly.

"I saw her leave with another man, I think she was drunk."

Impossible, not his Lili.

"Why do you say that mama?"

"The man had to help her walk, she couldn't even stand straight."

His mind trails off, it's not possible that Liyana would willingly leave with someone without informing him. "At first they had an argument, I couldn't hear what they were saying but the man was very angry. I thought they were lovers judging by the way he kept hugging her, she would fight him off. Such couple squabbles are normal around here, some fight each other like cats and dogs. No one dares to intervene."

"What did he look like?"

“Very young, about your age, if not older.”

“Ngiyabonga.”

Something is amiss, he can feel it. However, there is nothing to stand on. He can't turn to the police, they'll give him a 24 hour waiting period. The only person he can turn to is her father, he's seen the guards at her house. Although royalty, the Okolie family can't be ordinary people. The money, the lavish lifestyle, the bodyguards flooding the premises.

Randall must have a clue where to start looking for Liyana.

RANDALL-

“Please son, help me find my daughter.” Mhambi is in tears, a sight Randall would rather walk away from. It's so unlike Mhambi to grovel, he's making things awkward for Randall.

“What if she ran away with a lover? She's not a child

who needs to be babysat.”

Hehehe! Oh Randall!

Mhambi slides off the couch, to fall on his knees. Things were weird, now they are just plain awkward. Son in-law jerks to his feet, gaze chasing a shocked Styles seated across him. They were having a two men convention when Mhambi came uninvited, Randall is annoyed because he has to entertain this man with lies and it frustrates him that he's weeping over that good for nothing Nelisiwe.

“Please get up,” He offers a helping hand and Mhambi reluctantly takes it. “I'll see what I can do, I can't promise anything.”

Sadly he'll never see his daughter again.

“Thank you.” Mhambi looks and sounds relieved.

Poor Mhambi, he should know that nothing lasts forever, not even people.

Like the good son-in-law he is, Randall walks

Mhambi outside. One of the guards is told to drive the old man home. He doesn't want Amara coming down to find the distressed man. She's aware of her cousin's disappearance, not Mhambi's broken heart and once she gets a view of it, with no doubt she will ask her husband to look for the wretched... ahem... her beloved cousin and this man would have to add more lies to the ones he's told her, something he'd rather not do.

Randall comes back to Styles downing a glass of scotch, he looks as dejected as Mhambi. Life hasn't been easy without his daughter, it has taken everything in him not to raid Mkhize's home and get his daughter. But based on what facts? Sure the old geezer is not stupid enough to kidnap his granddaughter and keep her in his house.

That's if he's the one who has her.

"What did you do to Nelisiwe?" Styles knows his

brother like the back of his hand, instead of providing an answer, Randall pours himself a glass as well. He's got more pressing things to talk about than a cracked woman.

"You need to shave, Styles. Your father-in-law is getting married this weekend. Are you going to rock up looking like a hobo?" His voice rough and decisive as he gulps the entire liquid, he gets a chiding stare from Styles when he goes for seconds. "I'm trying to quit smoking."

Undoubtedly, Amara would prefer Randall the chimney over Randall the drunkard. Silently, the two men follow each other to the backyard, a quieter place where they can talk without the walls listening in on them.

"Thanks to Nkomo, killing Mkhize will be a walk in the park." His face hardens, shoulders tensing. His resentment over Mkhize grows every minute his precious daughter is away from him.

"Who would've thought that Thandaza was

associated with him? That smart bastard.” Randall.

The news had come from Nkomo himself, told by his stepmother. His father is taking another wife, a Malawian young woman by the name of Thandaza Chitawo. Daughter of Malawian governor, Chitawo.

Styles scoffs at Randall’s retort, “There’s nothing smart about him. We both know he’s marrying her for money. I hate that this information was hidden from me, they made me believe she was an ordinary citizen. That bitch was working with Mkhize from the beginning. The story about her being married to an abusive man was a lie, pretending she came to South Africa to seek refuge. Everything she had presented about herself was nothing but lies.”

“We’ll finally get our revenge, two days from now, the entire Mkhize clan will be wiped from the face of the earth.” This is the ruthless Randall talking.

Styles closes his eyes only to open them moments later, they twinkle with malice, a type of hunger that almost brings chills down Randall's spine.

A moment of absolute silence passes between them, the air thick with animosity and a glint of evil. Each entertaining diabolical thoughts.

"Remember that maid who vanished without a trace?" Styles takes the random route, Randall pauses the glass of scotch midway, gaze held. "She's one of them."

There's no reaction on his features, he opts to continue drinking like Styles did not just drop a bomb. However, Styles finds an answer in Randall's silence. There is no point in going crazy and climbing the roof, just a few more days, and they'll be dancing on their enemies' graves.

A ringing phone steals the moment.

"Yes." Randall.

"M- Mr. Okolie." He familiarises with this voice, it's the man he'd told to bring his daughter home. The one who's been milking the cow for free.

“Where’s my daughter?” He keeps his voice flat, giving off nothing.

“Sir, someone has taken Liyana.” Not again.

Long legs shoot to a standing position, Styles follows suit, eyes probing, perhaps to read his friend’s facial expression.

“She sent me a location not so long ago, I tried calling her right after, but her phone is off. I’m on my way there.” Bambindlovu sounds distressed, and not entirely in control of his emotions.

“Send me the location.” There’s urgency in Randall’s voice. “You better pray my daughter is safe.”

Okay, that sounds like a threat. Styles has gathered the information from the few words uttered.

“I’m coming with you.” He offers, the second Randall hangs up the call, pulling out a gun.

“Put that away.” Randall chides, under a whisper. “I don’t want Amara knowing anything. She’s under a

lot of stress, she might lose the baby if we're not careful."

See, Styles knows how to take orders from other people. If their name is Randall Okolie.

"I'll sort this one out, don't worry about it." Randall declines his offer, knowing how he's grieve stricken for his daughter. "You focus on locating Sihle and taking care of your wife."

"But..." Styles probes, staring with a piercing gaze.

"I'll take a few men with." Randall interjects, hoping Styles won't pry further. He'd take him with if his mind was not clouded with thoughts of Sihle. The two men set off to different escapades.

*

*...mmmm

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-six

LIYANA-

“You’re going to love my surprise Liya,” The man on the driver’s seat chirps, parking the car in a secluded area.

“Where are you taking me, Zweli? What is this place?” It’s the fear of the unknown that has her feeling suffocated. This man took advantage of the strength God bestowed upon him, drugged her and took her against her will. Liyana is more worried about the baby than herself.

She’s not familiar with many places in Johannesburg, but she knows they are still Joburg because a few minutes ago she had noted the Maboneng banner.

“Welcome to Jeppestown baby.” Zwelethu sings, turning toward the backseat to face her, a humorous shade forming in his eyes.

She's heard of Jeppestown, rather ghost town. The streets are empty, it doesn't look like anyone would walk past these streets. Her gaze meets what looks like an old RDP house.

As she's taking in her surroundings and too out of it to move, a figure comes to stand in front of the window. Liyana is not sure if she's dreaming, if all of this is a dream.

"Na..." the name falls away from her. She tries to blink the blur away, an attempt to make out what's before her. "Nana?"

Finally...

Great-grandfather is there, outside her door. Or it could be a vision, he's never showed himself in this form before. It's always been in dreams.

"What was that?" Her kidnapper.

He looks as confused as hell. Liyana neither spares

him a onceover, nor answers his question, rather her focus is on her great-grandfather. Instinctively, she reaches for the door handle and to her surprise it's now unlocked.

With the strength that had been taken from her, she swiftly opens the door and jumps out of the car.

"Hey!" Zwelethu shouts, shock evident in his voice as he leaves the car as well.

Disappointment snuggles in when she steps out and finds the old man gone.

"Run"

A voice into wind tells her, it's him, she can't see him but he's here. Just as she turns, she's met with another old man. A tailored suit, a hat and a walking cane to match the outfit. The eerie smirk on his face leaves her gasping in fear. This one looks oddly familiar, though she's sure she's never met him before. Her eyes shift to the man who brought her here, he's standing next to the old man.

"Zwelethu?"

“Remember how you’ve always wanted to meet my parents?” Zwelethu grins, eyes dubious. “Meet my father, Bangizwe Mkhize.”

The pride in Zwelethu’s voice.

“You’re still as beautiful as ever Liyana.” A smirk from the old man. Liyana winces as his grating voice pierces her ears, the look he regards her with has her feeling all kinds of dirty.

“What’s going on? Why am I here Zwelethu?”

Of course they didn’t invite her for a party.

Bangizwe tilts his head, “Is this the way to welcome your father’s old friend and your future father-in-law?”

Her eyes widen at the mention. ‘Father’s old friend? Father-in-law?

What the...

Liyana is unable to grasp everything, perhaps the drug Zwelethu injected her with is working in their favour.

“What is he talking about, Zweli?” Quavering lips query.

“Us, my love.” Zwelethu grabs her hand to pull her in, but she’s still strong enough to push him off. Eyes stabbing at the man she once called lover.

Arrogance plays a major role in the Mkhize family, look at this one, standing tall as if he’s the world’s greatest.

Or it could be that his father is here, feeding his confidence.

“We’re getting married Liyana.”

“You and who else?” A snippy return, Zwelethu gleams a creepy smile, seemingly loving the fierce Liyana.

“We’re lovers Liyana, remember? I don’t recall us breaking up. We still belong together.”

“Bullshit!” Another snap. “Where have you been these past months, Zweli? You left without a trace, now you’re here telling me this nonsense.”

“I had to hide from your father, he wanted my blood after he found out that I played his daughter.”

This is news to her.

In an instant, her worry unravels, narrowed eyes engrossed on the young man. “Pl—played?”

“Love is overrated Liya, I’m not about that life.” The bastard leans against the G-Wagon, he’s tall enough to run a hand on the roof of the car. “I’m all about money, I like the finest things in life. Like this baby right here.”

No he’s not talking about Liyana, but the stupid car.

“This was a gift from my dear stepmother,” Grinning a smile similar to that of a Cheshire cat, Zwelethu turns to look at his father. “My father and I, we like the same things. Beautiful woman who have money,

it's never about love. It's the money. So don't take it personally."

His blabbering has given her enough time to gather the nonsense playing in his head.

"You were using me?"

The father and son duo fall into light chuckles. Bloody monkeys sound the same.

"You're smart, I've always liked that about you. Pity I couldn't love you, I couldn't love the daughter of a man my father despises. But it was fun playing Romeo, damn I'm good at this acting shit."

Counting your eggs before they hatch or is it counting your chickens before they... Argh!

"Why do you want to marry me if you hate me so much?"

"Revenge baby girl, revenge." The arrogant Mkhize

calf retorts, eyes filled with laughter and voice humorous.

“You’re not going to get away with this, my father will find me.”

More chuckles. Liyana wants to wipe the grins off their faces, multiple slaps will do.

“Nope, he won’t.” Big Mkhize articulates. “The whole point here is to go as far away from South Africa as possible, Iraq is also an option. Your father thinks he can play god with people’s lives and we’ll sit back and worship him? I’m in charge now, I played that fool Okolie like dices and he didn’t see me coming. Now, you’re going to marry my son and service him like the good little bitch you are. And don’t worry about that brat you’re carrying, we’ll get rid of it. My son is not going to raise another man’s child.”

Her mouth drops, “How did you know about that?” Her gaze shifts to Zwelethu, asking for honesty.

“We’ve been watching you, your every move.”

Zwelethu states in a dark tone, Liyana’s world drops from beneath her.

Her eyes desperately dart everywhere, in search of her great grandfather, he can't leave her now. What is wrong with the underground gang? You can't just show up and do nothing, help is needed here. She thinks of running but knows she won't get far with how weak she is, if she stays, then these people will take her away from her family... the people she loves.

Time seems to slow as she weighs her options. Deciding on the former, Liyana flees, but she doesn't get as far as five feet. Tight arms enwrap around her waist, pulling her back with force. She screams when her back is roughly smashed against the car, the impact leaves her seeing stars and head spinning.

"Careful princess, I don't want to end up killing you. You're too pretty to waste." Zwelethu snaps, clenching her cheeks with his hands.

"My father will find me, and he will kill you."

They are laughing, she hates it, she hates them.

"You don't know who you're messing with Zwelethu,

I belong to my ancestors. You don't touch what belongs to them." This she knows, she's heard the tales. She knows about their wrath, how ruthless they can be.

"Yeah, yeah. They can't touch us, no one can touch us." Zwelethu snarls. With brutal force, Liyana manages to push him off of her.

"Don't be so sure about that," Liyana roars. "You see these streets?"

Like fools they follow the direction of her finger, pointing at the empty streets of Jeppestown.

"These streets will be stained with your blood by the end of this very day, in fact, I give them permission to do whatever they want with you." The declaration has them stepping back with sudden fear in their eyes. "Do you hear that nana? Arise and avenge your daughter, fight those who fight against me."

"Li— Liyana!" Bangizwe stammers a shaky shout, but Liyana is not bothered.

“No, who the hell do you think you are, daring an Okolie? A child of the gods? You threaten to terminate my pregnancy... our baby, a gift given by the gods. How dare you, both of you.”

“That’s enough.” Bangizwe barks, forcefully grabbing her arm.

“Don’t touch me.” These screams cannot be good for the baby.

Bangizwe takes another step back, confusion evident on his face. He doesn’t understand how she’s so confident and has regained such strength.

“Who are you to touch me? Are you unsoiled? Who authorised you to put your dirty hands on me? Do you know who I am?” Acrimony laced in her voice, contorting the words into something eerie. Eyes burning with an uncanny rage. Zwelethu and Bangizwe exchange dazed expressions. This can’t be Liyana, they hear it in the tone of her voice. They see it in her eyes and how her body stands at attention.

“What the hell is going on?” The question from

Zwelethu is directed to Bangizwe.

“Put her in the car.” Bangizwe grinds out a stammer. His son is shaking like a leaf, too afraid to take a step toward the girl shuddering with rage. “Do it now, Zwelethu.”

Her blood boils when Zwelethu grabs her arms with both hands, he seems to be using all the strength he’s got. Being a fighter she is, Liyana kicks him on his groin, he drops to the ground groaning in pain and that gives her a chance to escape.

Today must not be a good day for her, something collides against her head. She screams, sending a hand to cup the attacked area. As she gradually turns, she finds Bangizwe with the walking stick held high.

Not wanting to risk anything, he uses both arms to grab her waist and locks them. He carries her kicking and screaming for help, trying with all her might to escape his clutches.

“Shut up you bitch.” Zwelethu sputters, opening the

back door for his father to throw Liyana in.

The ground under her feet shakes, there is no turning back once she's in there. Her life will be over, her baby's life.

She'll never see her family again, her unborn baby. She'll never get to hold it in her arms. Her Bam-Bam, he'll never know how much she loves and appreciates him, she'll never say goodbye to him, nor look into his soft eyes. This Mkhize tag team will make sure of that.

Her head throbs at the realisation, it pushes her to put more effort in fighting her attackers. They work as a team to shove her into the car, she's told to shut her mouth when she screams louder.

"Nana where are you?" She knows he was here, she felt him. He lives in her that, she knows for sure. Where did he disappear to?

In a split second, crows are heard from a distance. The piercing sounds nearing with each caw. Everyone pauses, eyes skyward. Birds as black as night and bigger than a man's hand are headed their

way, with enough speed to make one run for their life, but these people.

Bangizwe uses his cane to shoo them away the second they start attacking him and his son, the noise is almost deafening. There's nothing spookier than being attacked by a large number of crows, hearing them caw births fear in men.

"Zwelethu hurry." The old man's shout is swallowed by the angry cawing black birds. His son gets multiple scratches that have him bleeding, Bangizwe receives his share as well.

Liyana continues to put up a fight, determined not to go down without a fight. The pain growing on her face comes out of nowhere, driven into her with the force of Zwelethu's fist. She falls back on the seat, dizziness taking over her. Terrified and aching, she stares at the thick drops of blood dripping from her mouth.

She'd get up and attempt to run again, but she's

unable to gather up the strength she was left with. All she can do is lie on the seat, and pray for a saviour.

All of a sudden, there's a loud bang. It resounds again and again... countless times. Due to her detached state, it takes a whole minute to realise that those are gunshots. The Mkhize's are in a shoot out, perhaps someone saw them and called the police. She can't hear the birds anymore.

Liyana hates that her body is failing her, she needs to get up and get out of the car. Clenching her eyes and covering her ears, she decides to travel somewhere else, somewhere deep inside herself where Bambindlovu and her unborn baby flare alive.

It's hard with how loud the gunshots are. A massacre in Jeppestown! She can imagine the news headlines tomorrow. That's if she makes it to tomorrow.

In her heart, deep where no one has ever reached, a

silent prayer resides. A plea to God, the gods, her ancestors or whoever is listening and willing to answer.

Death upon those two men, Bangizwe and his son Zwelethu. She doesn't want them alive, she's never wished death on anyone before.

A strong wind embraces her as the backdoor swings open, it must be Zwelethu checking if she's still in the car. Liyana loses all hope, remembering Zwelethu and Bangizwe's confidence. The bastards are sure of themselves.

Not bold enough to open her eyes lest she meets disappointment, she starts kicking and screaming and flailing her arms in defence.

"Liyana, it's me. It's papa, I'm here." Her body freezes as her father's voice ripples through her, his familiar gentle touch holding her down. Her eyes shoot open, never in her life has she been glad to see this man. Finally, the princess sheds tears, tears of happiness. He came for her, her father came for her.

“Did they hurt you?” An incensed tone, eyes and fingers inspecting her bloodied mouth. Liyana nods vigorously, tears of sorrow taking over the joy she felt from seeing her father’s face. As he wipes away her tears, she wants to do the same with him. It’s rare to see Randall in tears, it’s never a nice sight to behold.

“You’re safe now, they are gone. They’ll never hurt you again.” A seething assurance and promise. Randall pulls his daughter into his arms, she holds on for dear life.

“Papa.” She cries, at the calming feeling of safety.

“It’s okay princess.”

Liyana clenches herself around her father, never wanting to let go as he scoops her in his arms.

Fighting through fear, she lets her eyes dart around, searching for Zwelethu and his father. The question, if they are dead or ran off is there, but the will to ask

has not found her yet.

So far there is no sign, the dents in the car Zwelethu was showing off are the only proof that there was a shooting, and she wasn't imagining things.

A few steps later, Randall stops for a brief moment. "Cover your eyes."

Nuzzled in her father's arms, she glances up at him and for some odd reason, drops her gaze downward. There lies Bangizwe's body, in a pool of blood. Zwelethu's dead body is not far from it, painted with blood. The curse replays in her head like a broken record. 'These streets will be stained with your blood.'

Nausea threatens far too close to the surface, her focus swinging back to Randall, and finds indifferent eyes staring back. Randall kicks Bangizwe's body out of the way, and continues walking towards a car Liyana is familiar with. There's another car parked in front of it with two men leaning against it, guns hanging from their hands. She recognises them as

the guards who work for her father.

Neo is seated on the driver's seat, in her father's car, dressed like a priest. A 23 calibre on his lap, he hides it but not fast enough. This has Liyana confused, as far as she knows, Neo is a man of God.

"Randall is here, he's got Liyana." These are Neo's first words when the door clicks shut after Randall.

"Styles?" The question is for Neo, he nods in return and tells Randall that Styles is on speaker. "You need to check on Sethu, Liyana's bleeding. My grandfather won't have mercy on anyone."

"Is she okay?" Styles.

Liyana is too shaken to answer.

"She'll be fine." A response from Randall, pulling his daughter in the warmth of his arms.

"Sethu is a Sishi by marriage, I doubt the Okolie curse will affect her. Nkomo is the one I'm worried about, he was in fatal accident. His mother-in-law was with him, she died on the scene." Styles.

“How is Nkomo?” Randall asks, no emotion found in his voice. His concern is Liyana, her bruised lip bothers him. But it’s not more than he can handle. The guilt of putting his daughter through this trauma is far heavier to bear.

“It’s not looking good,” Styles sounds shattered. “The doctors said he might not make it. Sethu is not coping, Randall. Nkomo is her brother. There has to be something we can do to appease the ancestors, get them to pardon Nkomo.”

Liyana might be disconnected from reality, but she hears and understands everything. She knows Nkomo, he’s a good man from what she’s observed. It’s shocking though to find out that he’s related to Zwelethu.

“I don’t know Styles, their reaction has never been this fast. Mkhize messed up this time, unfortunately, his entire family will pay with their lives.” Everyone in the Okolie family knows that Liyana is a gifted child,

highly favoured amongst the rest.

“Eyy, but he’s lived yoh.” Neo interjects, finally starting the car. “I say mo tlohele a tsamaee, let him go. You know the saying, injure one- injure all. The Mkhizes have touched the untouchable. Good riddance to bad rubbish.”

Randall is defeated by Neo’s statement, Styles has no answer for him and opts to drop the call.

“When the sun sets, ngizobambelela. And how we met, kyohlala kung’jabulisa.” Liyana knows the song Neo’s singing, she’s seen it in passing on the 1life funeral advert. Only Neo can be this stupid during a sad moment.

“There’s a party in hell tonight, the Mkhize’s are home. It’s falling diheleng vandag.” Neo finishes, adding a chuckle at the end.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Seven

BAMBINDLOVU

He hates that he was made to wait, he should be there; fighting for the woman he loves. But her father wouldn't have it.

'What will I tell her if you die?'

Randall's words left him confused, flabbergasted and guessing if he's accepting their relationship. That's if he's aware of it. Of all people, Randall should be the one against this union, his blessing would mean the world to Liyana though. In Bambindlovu's world, it's all about Liyana. Her needs come first, she matters more than anything.

There was no other place he could go but this hotel,

where they have a temporary residence. Two gnawing hours have gone by with no word from Liyana or Randall. He's growing impatient, not knowing if the woman he loves is dead or alive. He stands from the bed, and for the millionth time, reaches for his phone to check for any messages. He wants nothing more than to let out his frustrations when he's met with one of those annoying texts from Cell C.

"Dammit." He grunts, stomach clenching with the force of his restraint. Like the gods understand his restlessness, a knock at the door is heard. It must be room service, he figures and hurries to open.

The hotel staff in this place don't look like Hulk Hogan, he's sure they don't tower over him like this tower-light in front of him.

"The boss requests your presence." The big man grates, his menacing attitude has Bambindlovu gulping. He's confused, hence the staring. "He found

the princess.”

Relief surges through Bambindlovu, the giant would have said if something bad had happened to Liyana. Grabbing his car keys, he follows behind the errand guy. Heart racing against time, he's nervous, not sure what to expect when he gets to the Okolie mansion.

It takes more or less than thirty minutes to arrive in Houghton, his nerves are laughing in his face at this point. Parked, the man tells him to go through the big double door like he doesn't know his way.

Whispers welcome him as he enters the house, reluctantly, he follows the sound that leads him to the lounge, each step heavier than the previous one.

The room is occupied, but he's able to spot his beloved perched next to her father on the couch.

He wants to call out to her as she has her head on his shoulder, eyes cast down, but there are angry convicting eyes on him. Two more men are present,

glaring. He remembers Nqaba, Randall's twin. The second man is a stranger . He's not sure about his race, his light skin colour confuses him.

“Go—good morning.” A clear of the throat, his salutation earns him deadly glares.

“It’s after 3pm sdididi.” Comes a chiding tone from the light skinned guy, his voice carries humour despite his threatening aura.

“Bam-Bam.” Now here’s a friendly face he knows, she’s on her feet in a jiffy running up to him. In that instant, with their arms wrapped around each other, everything is forgotten. The room and everything in it falls away.

“Are you okay?” His arms are tight around her, too tight the father might have a problem. “And the baby?”

“We’re both okay now.” Liyana.

“I’m sorry I left you alone in the car, this wouldn’t

have happened if..."

"No." She interposes by covering his mouth with her hand. "Don't blame yourself, it's not your fault."

Bambindlovu rakes his fingers through her hair, kneading her scalp with his tender touch. Liyana purrs, pressing closer to his hand.

"I love you." His lips touch hers, once, twice, the third one is denied by a man pulling Liyana away from his arms.

"Yey lona, a le swabi? Sies. You didn't even try for a church hug." It's the man with the confusing skin colour, he's glaring at Bambindlovu. Now he's sure he's not liked in this place, just when he thought things were going to be easy. The man's eyes travel down to his pants, by the time they reach his face again, he's holding a disgusted face. "These are results of dating a heathen, le li hormones tsa Christian Grey. Mo shebe."

He's pulling a confused Liyana back to her father who is now on his feet. Bambindlovu sees nothing

wrong with his pants, he's not turned on like this man is implying.

"Neo, you're scaring the boy." Says Nqaba. Bambindlovu finds it strange that Nqaba adds a chuckle into his retort. Are they making fun of him?

"That's the point Mzi, he should run and never look back. Ke tlo mo chopper ma grapes oo a nahana hore ke masende." (I'll chop off his testicles.)

"Uncle Neo please." Liyana looks embarrassed to the limit, and done.

"Go to your room Liyana." Randall.

Liyana is reluctant, her eyes are on the man she loves.

"Please be gentle with him papa, I love him." A kiss on his cheek, before she treads toward Bambindlovu.

"Yey, church distance." Neo reproaches. If nervousness had a face, a name and ID book, Bambindlovu Buthelezi would be it.

"Don't let them scare you, they are barking dogs

without teeth.” She whispers only for him to hear, but someone forward catches it.

“Nna ke a loma, mgogo or Pit Bull. I bite.”

Nqaba finds the joke and swallows it, causing him to laugh at Neo’s comeback.

There’s something about Neo that reminds Bambindlovu of himself. The way Neo carries himself, the tsotsi taal and his way with words.

That Bambindlovu is still there, somewhere deep inside, seated at a corner because the men in this room are intimidating as fuck.

“You’re leaving me alone with them?” Bambindlovu murmurs under his breath, his bones probably shuddering under that Zulu skin of his.

“They won’t let me stay, you’ll be fine. I promise.” She puckers to press her lips against his before walking away.

“You’re grounded Liyana, stay in that room and think about these kisses you keep showering this boy with.” Neo’s words trail after Liyana, she turns with a

frown on her face.

“Neo shut up.” It’s Nqaba, smacking him on the head, and gestures for Liyana to leave.

“Huh ah Nqabayomzi, ba busy ba sunana mona.”
(They are busy kisses here.)

“Ngiyaxolisa baba.” Bambindlovu sounds apologetic, if only neo cared. “Ke Taima oa hau saani?” (Am I your father?)

“N—no, I’m sorry.”

“Are you going to stand there or sit down?” The man of the house finally speaks, voice distant and flat. Hesitantly, Bambindlovu settles on a two seater. He’s facing the three intimidating men who in unison, position themselves on a large couch, eyes engrossed on him. It’s silent a while, he doesn’t know where to look as they are scrutinising him under their gazes.

Randall sits back, hands crossed across his chest and one leg over the other. “What do you want with my daughter?”

His voice so thoroughly disengaged that Bambindlovu wonders if he has a soul or not. His stomach bottoms out as he realises that his assumptions were right, Randall knows about them. How did they think they would hide such a heavy secret? Feeling uneasy and sweating under the mblaselo, Bambindlovu shifts to the edge of the seat.

“I- I love your daughter sir.”

Randall’s eyes wander across the younger’s body, evaluating him from head to toe. His nostrils flare, if only he could be less intimidating then Bambindlovu would tell him that he and Liyana are destined to be.

“This is what’s going to happen, you’re going to tell your uncles what you did. I want this mess fixed.” Clearly it’s non-negotiable.

“Yes sir.”

“You do know it’s not going to be easy? Amara is your sister, your uncles will never accept this.” The

distaste in Randall's voice.

"I know, I'll talk to them."

"Se ke oa shaya gwaragwara so soon saani, just because you're not dead yet, doesn't mean we accept this nonsense. We tolerate you because of Liyana." Neo had to add.

It doesn't matter to Bambindlovu, the father of the woman he loves is not against their relationship. Curiosity has him by the throat, he wants to ask how Randall found out. Then again, that would be signing his death warrant.

"I understand," Joy is found in his voice. "Thank you sir."

He gets no response from Randall, but a cold shoulder.

"Shayisa twana." Neo dismisses him, Babindlovu is reluctant. He wants to see her before leaving. In fact, he thought they'd be spending time together.

“Ca—can I...”

His query is cut short by the ever so talkative Neo, “No you may not. We give you a bone, you want the whole cow?”

“Neo is right.” Nqabayomzi has finally found his voice. “You have no right over Liyana, not before you do the needful. Our child is not going to be born out of wedlock.”

The declaration jars him, eyes popping out of their sockets.

“Umshado?”

“What did you think I meant when I said you need to fix this mess? Liyana is a princess, she’s not going to cohabit with you or anyone for that matter. My daughter will never stoop so low.” Randall and his cold voice. “And don’t think she’s going to be a house wife and bear you children while you're out there living life. After this baby, you will wait at least

ten years to have another one. Liyana had a life before this pregnancy, she was studying towards a good career. She will continue when the baby starts learning to be independent.”

This one must be Hitler’s long lost twin.

He wants to tell them they are too young to get married, that they can do it at a later stage in life. Perhaps when the baby is five or six, but that would take him a thousand steps back. These men are not playing, if they could, they’d stop this relationship in a heartbeat.

“I hear you sir, I will speak to my uncles.” Like he has a choice.

“Go, get back to me by the end of today.” Randall.

Talk about pressure, it was bad that he had to tell his mother. Now he’s given the responsibility to face Jonas and Mhambi sooner than he's prepared. Thankfully, Mhambi is soft, Jonas though is a

different story. He bids them goodbye, and leaves with a heavy heart. Desperate to hold his woman once more and declare his undying love.

RANDALL-

“Johannes o tla bolaea that fool.” (Jonas will kill that fool.)

It's not a second since Bambindlovu left and Neo is on gossip mode.

“It's Jonas.” Nqabayomzi corrects, adding a shake of the head.

“Who's that?” Squinted eyes filled with confusion.

“His uncle's name is Jonas.” Nqabayomzi answers Neo's question, clearly wasting his time. He should learn from his brother Randall, who does not bother entertaining the likes of Neo.

“Then who's Johannes? Does Jonas have a twin?”

Nqabayomzi scratches his stubble, frustration

clawing at him. He doesn't know how he's able to laugh when Neo is annoyingly seeping through his bones.

"Geez Neo, you're unbearable."

He is, that's why they love him. He wouldn't be their Neo if he was any different.

"Ohho, Uze." Neo's attention shifts to the wrong person. Well, it depends on what he plans to say.

"Are you going to let that laaitie marry our daughter? A whole princess?"

It's not something he wants for Liyana, but she's in love with him. Keeping them apart would hurt her, that's something he would rather avoid.

"He loves her." Yes, he does.

"Yeah ke twana e grand." Eh! Is this Neo talking?

"I thought you hated him," Nqaba searches, unable to keep up with Neo's mood swings. Neo looks up, meeting his eyes. A mischievous grin taking over his features.

“I don’t hate him, but he doesn’t have to know that.” He rejoinders, eyebrows pinching together as his face fluctuates to a serious one.

A sharp knock disturbs the atmosphere, Randall, Nqaba and Neo rise to their full height when a man with the same stature as them walks in.

“Nkosi!” Randall meets him halfway, the hug they share shocks Neo and Nqaba. This man right here, is one of his reliable men. Over the years, their relationship blossomed, he went from an employee to a trusted friend. Without a doubt, Nkosi would take a bullet for Randall.

“Mhlonishwa.” His greeting hasn’t changed.

“You finally decided to come back to South Africa. What, Namibia isn’t your thing?” Randall queries, leading Nkosi to the patio. Nkosi’s response is a soft laugh.

Randall is glad that Neo and his brother respect him

enough to give him privacy, it's not always that he wants them in his business. He was shocked though when Neo tagged along to search for Liyana, the priest's outfit was too dramatic if he may add.

"Do you have anything for me?"

There was no other way but to call Nkosi back to South Africa, he's good at what he does. You can say he's an uncertified private detective

"I'll need a list of the people Styles killed, the child might have been taken by one of the victim's loved ones." Nkosi states.

Finding the suspect might be harder than he thought.

BAMBINDLOVU-

Fifteen minutes have gone by, he's still sitting in the car, thinking of calling Liyana and asking her to come down. He's about to do so when his phone rings. An unknown number is displayed on the

screen. Thinking it might be her, he answers but says nothing. Quiet sniffles resound on the other end.

“Mr. Elephant.” Sindi, she’s crying. His ears perk, and body poise stands at attention.

“Sindi? What’s wrong? Why are you crying?”

“I don’t want to be here anymore, please come and get me.” Her voice coming as an undertone, secretive and frail.

“Are you alone?”

“I’m in the closet, baba is not around. My stepmother is in the kitchen, I broke one of her plates and she locked me inside the wardrobe. She said she’ll let me out when I have money to replace her plates. I stole my stepbrother’s phone when she was dragging me inside.”

The world spins in its axis, his jaw clenches and unclenches. Not once has he maltreated his sister, for someone else to dare do such a thing angers him.

“Can you believe that brat has a phone but he’s

younger than me?” Is this not the girl who was crying seconds ago? “I hate it here bhuti, I’m hungry and thirsty. I see the McDonald’s sign every time I close my eyes, if I die inside this smelly wardrobe, burry me at McDonald’s so I can eat all the fries I want.”

He tries to suppress a chortle, but fails dismally. “Are you sure you’re locked up or prank calling me?”

“I would never lie to you, Mr Elephant.” He misses her calling him that, although he never acknowledged the name. “NomaRussia is evil, she treats me like a slave when baba is not around. Come get me please, or don’t come to my funeral.”

“Sindi stop talking about death, you’re not going to die.” The thought burns his heart.

“But I feel it, I think I see Jesus. He’s very close, he wants to take me to heaven. Heaven is not ready for me, what will I converse with the people there? I’m always sleeping in church.”

“You mean you’re not ready for heaven?” He hears a snort, and pushes back the urge to roll his eyes.

“No, heaven is not ready for me.”

Sindisiwe can never be serious, he can't help but wonder if she's telling the truth or cooking up a story due to boredom. Anyway, this is his chance to get his sister. That fool who fathered her wouldn't tell him where they were and he'd monitor Sindisiwe's phone calls with him.

“Where are you? I'm coming to get you.” He starts the car, waves to the gate man as he drives out of the premises, heart still heavy.

“Windmill Park...”

Finding a pen and an old receipt in the dashboard, Bambindlovu jots the address down.

“Please hurry, Khaya will be lonely without me.”

“Who?”

“My boyfriend.” It's out there and by the sound of it, Sindi is not worried about her brother knowing.

“What the hell, Sindi? You're twelve.”

“Put your shield down, Mr. Elephant.” She cuts, not forgetting to add an attitude to match her sassiness. “His father is rich like Mpiyakhe Zungu, I’ll buy you anything you want. Let me date him, please, please.”

Whitewashed, Bambindlovu shakes his head. “Are you sure you’re locked up? You don’t sound like someone who is in trouble and scared for their life.”

“Because I’m not Cinderella.” A snap. “Just come, pray you don’t find me boiled in my own sweat looking like an outdated rainbow chicken from Boxer. If I don’t make it, please tell mama that I love her. I’ll be watching over her from heaven. And you too... you’re somewhere there, at the door of my heart, as a security guard. I can’t let everyone in, it’s already crowded with Khaya occupying most of the space.”

He’s concluded, there’s no other explanation that would justify the things she’s saying to him. They are giving his sister something, if not drugs, then it must be black magic.

“I’m coming sis wami, and the first thing I’ll do is take you to a sangoma. What have they done to you? My poor baby.”

“Eww, don’t ever call me that again. Now I’m going to need therapy.” Sindi throws back, sharply.

“I will turn this car around.”

“Sorry bhuti wami, please come fetch your baby before NomaRussia does her worst.” She pushes out every word, trying to be someone she’s not.

Bambindlovu understands, hence the chuckle resounding from his chest.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Eight

Neighbours walked miles and miles from where she was taken, sinking deep into the woods, while police searched from the air, looking for little Sihle. It's been a while since this happened... since her disappearance and still nothing. In a way Styles knew, he knew alerting the nation was a waste of time.

The part he hates the most is having his daughter's face plastered all over town. Every time he leaves the house, he is reminded that his Sihle is not with him.

They came all the way from the hospital after a detective summoned them to the police station.

'We found a size 11 shoe in a bush in Nasrec.'

The detective had said over the phone.

The shoe doesn't belong to their child. They confirmed it. Coming to the police station was a waste of time.

They leave the detective's office with slumped shoulders, bleeding hearts and more distraught than when they got here.

Styles is the first one to see her, he thinks of grabbing his wife's hand and rushing out of the station. Instead, she's the first to take his hand, stating her claim. Forget that they haven't sorted out their differences, they are still married and living together under the same roof.

Sethu sees her as well, seated on one of the benches in the waiting area.

"What is she doing here?" She asks to no one in particular, perhaps she hadn't meant to say it out

loud. Sobering up from the shock, Styles tilts his head downward, throwing a glance at his wife.

“I wouldn’t know.” An inquisitive response from Styles.

“She’s your ex, you should know.”

Her daughter is missing and her brother is on his deathbed... this one is excused.

Her words though, poke at his heart. Choosing peace like he always does, Styles keeps the comeback to himself.

“Styles!” Comes a distant cry of a distressed woman, the couple doesn’t know what to do when she runs toward them. Without warning, she throws herself in Styles’ arms. He tenses at the unexpected contact, his breathing picking up.

No. No. This is all wrong. Khethu cannot affect him like this, he’s married and his wife is standing right

next to him.

“Styles, please help me. I know you have connections. My parents are missing, it’s been three days.”

Her actions and pleas wash over Sethu, penetrating through the deepest parts of her being. The man trapped in an uncomfortable hug feels his wife’s hand slipping from his and holds on tight, their eyes meet. Tears fall to the floor, he hates it when his wife cries.

“Khethu, detach yourself from me.” Moving back is futile, the woman is holding on way too tight. Small hands roughly grab her, she staggers back after one push.

“Get your hands off my husband.” Sethu hisses, eyes sharp with hatred. She remembers every single thing Khethu did to her. Forgive and forget for what? Not

in this lifetime.

Shame envelops Khethu, shifty eyes drop. "I'm sorry, I'm just overwhelmed." Tears? Really?

"What does that have to do with you throwing yourself at my husband?"

Give Sethu a round of applause, she's got a voice.

"I'm sorry," Khethu drops, mostly to Styles as her gaze won't leave him. "My parents are missing and I don't know who to turn to. I feel so lost and lonely."

Sethu's eyes reach the ceiling, not buying the woman's story.

"Not my husband," her voice comes out snappy. "You're at the police station, they'll help you with whatever you want."

Khethu looks mortified for a while, then all of a sudden she looks sad. There was a time when Styles would drop everything for her, she remembers those days. The best days of her life, and now she's alone

as she mentioned, and she can't help but look back. If only she... sigh! What's the point? He's married.

"I can't help you, I have a missing child to find."
Dladla is the least of his worries. He'd say more but he receives a phone call.

"I have to take this." Off to a corner he goes, after accompanying Sethu to a bench, away from Khethu.

"Randall."

"I spoke to granduncle, there's a way to save Nkomo. Something about an ancient root found in Aburi, a town in Accra. He's sent for someone to deliver it. Plus, Liyana is willing to appease the ancestors."

Good for Nkomo.

"Sethu will do with a bit of good news." A sigh leaves

Styles, showcasing both relief and sorrow. The depressing feeling is almost banished by the good news, but it's not enough to make him jump for joy.

"We're going to find Sihle." Randall assures, sounding determined.

"I'm losing hope Randall, it's been too long. What if she's..."

"No," An interjection. "Sihle is fine. Nkosi is looking into it, you know how he functions."

The rock turner, is what he is.

Having to list down people he killed took a toll on him, he found himself on the side of guilt. If he hadn't been the person he was in the past, the person he is now. His baby would be with him.

Meanwhile, Khethu's presence is making Sethu extremely uncomfortable. The lady manages to get under her skin just with her existence.

“Sethu, right?” What?

She did not see her come up to her, now she wishes she had waited for Styles in the car. The smile on Khethu's face must be fake, at least that's what Sethu thinks. This is the same woman who was so bent on wiping her off the face of the earth; all for a man. Sethu heaves a sigh as she stands to her feet, and backtracks a step.

“Look, I know we have a sour past together.”

Sour is taking it lightly. You tried to kill her, woman.

“I'm not that person anymore, Sethu. I've changed.”

Another clear sigh, loud enough for Khethu to know she's not wanted.

“What do you want Khethukuthula?”

Every second, her gaze averts to Styles. It's a bit

calming to see him in the same room. But he's taking too long to come back, that phone call has been going on for too long.

"I want to apologise for the hell I put you through."
Ah! She's still here, talking.

"Okay, apology accepted." Sethu shrugs, not meaning the words.

Kethu doesn't dwell much on the topic, her eyes have ran to Sethu's 6-month baby bump. "You're also pregnant?"

It's more of an observation than a question, Sethu nods folding her arms on her chest.

Dammit Styles, come back already.

"How far are you? I'm seven months and I can't wait to meet this little man." The world's friendliest smile latched on her face.

“Five... six months.” Note the distaste in her tone, she’s neither interested in Khethu or her baby, hence the indefinite response.

“That’s great,” Her enthusiastic voice catches Sethu by surprise. “Our babies are going to be twins.”

Is this weird, or is this weird. Sethu seems to think it’s weird.

“A month apart is nothing basically.” Khethu.

“We’re not friends, and we’ll never be.” Sethu sputters, in hopes that Khethu would remember her vicious past. The smile on Khethu’s face does not waver, nor does the sociability found in her voice.

“I thought we could call it truce, maybe hang out or something like that.” Her voice is soft and serious, a candour anyone would fall for.

“That’s not going to happen.” Styles is back, sporting crinkled brows. “Stay away from my wife, Khethu.”

Relieved that he’s back, Sethu finds her place beside him, letting her hand slip into his warm touch.

“We were just talking Styles.” Defence swims in her voice. “I’m trying to make things right.”

“The past belongs in the past.” Yet, his eyes are filled with pity, pity for Khethu. “You belong in the past, I don’t want you anywhere near my wife. I don’t want you befriending her. Sethu has enough friends, she doesn’t need more.”

Suddenly, his words make it harder for her to breath. She’s only asking for friendship. He doesn’t have to be hostile toward her. Hand in hand, the couple walk out of the police station, leaving behind a hurting pregnant woman.

BAMBINDLOVU-

It turns out his sister was telling the truth, they left her stepmother in a muddled, dazed state. To think she would be happy that Sindisiwe's brother came to get her.

"I can hear you chew, calm down. That burger won't run." It's not entirely annoying him, he's just frustrated that his sister was starved. Now she's feasting on a McDonald's meal like her life depends on it.

"Let me make my stomach happy, please." Mouth full, with bits of the food gushing from it.

"That was my last R50, eat it with respect." It's a tease. However, he's not lying, his pockets have been left with holes after purchasing the food. He could only afford a kiddies meal, Sindisiwe complained from the moment he placed the order until she dropped the first chip into her loud mouth. She's been quiet since, well until a few seconds ago.

"I can ask baba to give you a job, I think he has a

business. I'm not sure, but his wife and her son live like royalty." Sindisiwe.

"I don't want anything from that man," He's the last person he would seek help from.

Sindisiwe looks over her brother from the passenger seat, "Please don't let him take me away again, I like living with you and mama." He hears the pain in her voice, a pain so fragile, ripping through his soul.

"No one will ever take you away from us, I promise." This time he's keeping his sister, this time he'll kill to keep her with him.

6:30pm finds them entering their mother's premises, he can hear the news anchor from the passageway. With Sindisiwe fast asleep in his arms, he treads to their room. He must be crazy to still be nervous, talking to his mother can't be as bad as talking to his uncles.

Their eyes meet as he enters, flurries of emotions emanating in her eyes. She's seated on the bed, a plate of food on the table beside her.

“You’re home?” Her voice is cold, challenging the emotions seen in her eyes.

“I brought your daughter home.” Her eyes find Sindisiwe, they flicker with relief, mostly love. This is the look he’s been wanting to see, maybe her daughter’s presence will soften her.

“What happened?” Thandikela stands, hands reaching out to take her baby girl in her arms.

“She’s heavy maOlady, I’ll put her to bed. She sleeps like a log, this one. You’ll talk to her in the morning.”

Thandikela lingers a second, as if she wants to take her still, despite his warning about her weight. Bambindlovu manoeuvres past her, and tucks the little sister under her mother’s blankets.

“Can I get you anything to eat?” She asks after a while, hugging herself for some reason. She looks as nervous as him, it’s understandable; her son hasn’t been home in weeks.

“I’m fine, maOlady.” He returns with a tense voice.

“You’ve lost weight Sokalisa.” She’s observing his body, concern carved on her wrinkled features.

Wrinkled because these kids of hers want to send her into an early grave... they are giving her grey hairs.

“Where have you been?”

The question comes after an elephant has invited itself into the room. Somehow, he thinks she knows where he’s been. He knows she knows. He just won’t say it though.

“Does it matter?” This answer is better than lying to her, but dear old Thandikela is not happy.

“Can we talk?” The dreaded topic begins. She sighs as if she knows what he wants to talk about. It takes a little longer to settle down on her bed while he remains standing.

“I made someone pregnant, now I need to do right by them.”

Thandikela’s question takes time to arrive, “Who?”

“Liyana Okolie.” There’s no time to waste, Randall is waiting for him. He still has to go speak to his uncles.

Her emotional eyes aren’t emotional anymore, they are burning like lava, burning with anger and resentment.

“I want nothing to do with any of this.” Not this again.

“I love her maOlady.” Her unrelenting firm gaze has him looking away, she is his mother who’s always been intimidating.

“Despite my warnings, you went and got her pregnant?”

Yhu!!! Thandikela, have mercy.

The lady raises her hands in surrender, a sour face at play. “Do whatever you want, continue with this abomination? I want nothing to do with any of this, I want nothing to do with those people.”

He's exhausted, another argument with his mother will drain the life out of him.

"We are not blood related maOlady, there's nothing wrong with our relationship." She doesn't look convinced, it's that bloody headshake she's giving him. He slumps against the wall, feeling and looking fatigued.

"I'm going to talk to my uncles, they will have to go to the Okolies and ask for their daughter's hand in marriage."

Her eyes glaze over like she's lost in memories, bitter memories that pull a frown to her facial features. The minute they jolt back into focus, she bursts into uncontrollable laughter. Her reaction breaks him beyond measure, he wants to tell her to stop but that would come across as disrespectful, according to Thandikela.

“With what money Sokalisa? You have nothing to your name.” It hurts that she of all people would say that to him, of course he’s broke, but shouldn’t she be encouraging him instead of laughing at him?

“My father’s brothers are alive, I’m sure they have livestock somewhere in Pongola.”

“You wouldn’t.” Shock laces her voice and paints her eyes.

“Family helps family, you taught me that.”

“I won’t let this happen, you can’t marry your sister.” He can’t do this, the fighting has to stop at some point.

“I love you maOlady, but this time I’m doing me. I’m doing what’s right for my child, for Liyana.”

He’s ready to leave when her words clog his path, “If you walk out that door, don’t bother coming back. Ever.”

He could turn, change into his nighties, accept a plate of food from his mother and go on with life as

a transport driver: as if Liyana and his baby never happened. Or he could walk out, drive to Vaal and talk to his uncles about the matter at hand. That, knowing he'll never see his mother again.

The latter seems to be a reasonable thing to do, he grew up without a father and he'd be damned if he lets his child grow up without one as well.

Heart aching, he walks out of his mother's house, her pained voice carrying curses, chasing after him.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Sixty-Nine

Liyana-

After that day in Jeppestown, she knew this day would come. She knew her great-grandfather would summon her. Took him a lifetime to get over his anger, it doesn't matter anymore. She's here, with him. The feeling of belonging enveloped around her like a warm blanket from Aziz.

She could tell him; complain actually about how much his silence and absence frustrated her. She could ask him why he let certain things happen to her and her family. Why he stood back and watched Kwame suffer. But she knows better than to question him.

“Who are these people nana?”

Women and children are splattered everywhere, playing by the river bank. None of them look familiar to her, the only thing she can familiarise with is the traditional Akan attire.

She finds it strange that this place connects with her— soul, body and spirit. She loves it here, she's always loved it. The still river that never runs, it remains silent as if hushed by the gods, themselves. The blue skies reflecting in it adds a picturesque extract to it.

“Don't worry about them, you're here for a different purpose.”

“A different purpose?” A shard of confusion grasps at her from deep within.

“These are the final stages Liyana, your journey begins and ends here.”

“I don't understand nana.”

He walks until his feet touch the water, plump lips smile at her as the old man extends a hand to Liyana

who trusts him enough to accept it.

“You do understand that you have a gift. Am I right?”
He smiles like he always does. “From the beginning, you were the chosen one. The one who will be our vessel, for a certain period of time. We needed a way to communicate with our King, or else he would have perished. The life your father had chosen for himself was going to lead him to distraction, the only way to help him was to go through you. A pure innocent soul, untainted.”

Okay, he’s starting to clear things.

“The Okolie children, need guidance. Our king and his twin brother have given us grandchildren, but we are not content. We need one who will watch over them and the future generation, a son of the gods. That’s where you come in.”

“I’m lost.” A myriad of questions arise in her facial expression.

“Our queen is carrying a child that belongs to the gods. Her baby will be taken, she belongs with us.”
Nana.

“That’s what you had said about uncle Nqaba’s son, you wanted to take Zulu from us.” She was thirteen years old when it happened, yet the memory remains fresh in her mind.

“Yes, you pleaded for Zulu’s life and we gave you what you asked for. The time has come for us to collect the debt you owe us. Your grandparents, Segun and Barbra are out there, with no place to call home. They are angry lost souls, and they want to destroy what we have built; the kingdom. We simply can’t allow that, the seed in your mother’s womb will be your shield. He will be your advocate, your voice when you have angered the ancestors.”

This is all too much to grasp for Liyana, confusion twirls around her head.

“We chose a man for you,” The smile on his face broadens, it’s as if he’s proud of his work. “No one was worthy but him, he’s the one for you and those who stand in your way will be removed.”

She knows, she loves him like he’s the only one.

“He and our queen are from the same fraternity, the same bloodline.” He pauses, making sure she’s listening. “You’re strong Liyana, you will overcome every obstacle coming your way. You will be a wife soon, and a mother later. It’s been decided, your destiny is with him—the man who lives in your heart. He was chosen because of our queen, the one who restrained our king and raised his children. The twins you are carrying were chosen because of the queen. We can’t leave her heart empty and shattered, the one you will bear will make her whole again.”

“I’m pregnant with twins?” She looks at him with furrowed brows, her chest tightening uncomfortably.

This has to be a joke, a cruel one for that matter. She's barely a woman herself.

Nana places a hand of comfort on top of her head, that's when calmness seeps through her.

"Am I not always with you?" A rhetorical question.

"Don't fret, everything is going according to plan.

This will bring you and your mother closer. Give her what belongs to her... because of your husband, her blood runs in your son's veins. Give her what belongs to her, let her hear the cries of a baby once more. It's the only way her heart will heal. It's the only way the kingdom will stand."

Her confused thoughts finally fall into place, and in this instant she's reminded of Neo's prophecy.

"I will have to give Amara one of my babies?" She's a bit shocked by the savagery intoned in the expressed concern. How do you carry a baby in your womb for nine months then give it away?

“Amara is pregnant nana.”

“My dear Liyana,” The warm smile again. “You have ears, but you cannot hear. You have eyes, but you cannot see. How will you handle this gift?”

“I hear you nana, I hear everything. I don’t understand why I have to give my baby away to its grandparents.”

“I have explained, time will clear everything out. I have done my part.” He laces her hand with his, before holding it. In pure silence, Liyana unwaveringly follows him as he leads her into the still river.

“Kwame?” Linaya mumbles.

The question mark at the end is more of a remembrance, surely they know what he’s been going through. Nana stops dead on his tracks, turns

to face Liyana with that smile he likes to wear.

“Kwame is our future king, he’s not forsaken. The evil doers have been dealt with.” His response is so casually articulated. “He will be fine, the gods are with him.”

He continues to lead the way.

“Today is the day our son will come home, and after this day, no one will be able to touch the Okolies. Those who have set an evil eye on you will be defeated, whether spirit or human. We will fight for you, and you won’t have to do anything. If anyone comes to you and tells you that you need to become a traditional healer, they are not sent by me. Do not believe them, do not follow them. Your ancestors have chosen a path for you, the ones who do not know you have been told about you. However, you need to know that there will be things you can’t prevent, things you can’t change.”

Liyana figures he must be talking about Amara's baby, she doesn't want her mother going through pain when it happens. Can't they make it peaceful? She's about to ask when the water covers her head. She holds her breath, fearing she might suffocate.

"Breathe." Nana's voice sweeps into her ears. How does one breathe under water? Her eyes shut, as she prepares to take a deep breath that will set her breathing back to normal.

AMARA-

The Chala genocide shocked the nation, the family of five was killed execution style. Mrs. Chala was found tied to a chair in her bedroom, naked and half of her face burnt with acid. The autopsy revealed that she suffered multiple beatings and was brutally raped before her untimely death, she was the only one tortured.

The husband and three children all under the ages of twenty one were found in the living room, hands and legs bound, with gunshot wounds to the head. The grisly scene found at the Chala residence is all over the news, apparently men broke into their house during a family gathering.

It's sad how it happened, TV has been restricted in the house. It's easier to keep a watch on Kwame with Liyana around, she's around a lot lately. I'm still shocked that my baby is going to be a mother, and a wife. It's a week after we found out about her and my brother and the baby. She's happy, she looks the happiest.

My uncles have been told, apparently there's a delay. No letter has been sent. Uncle Jonas is behind it, like we all expected. He won't accept the relationship, calls it an abomination and his solution is that Liyana terminates the pregnancy while there's still time, before the wrath of the ancestors comes upon Bambindlovu.

I want this for Liyana, Randall wants it too, although he would never say it.

I see how he's trying to keep the family together, like he should. He gives both his children the same amount of attention, Kwame is slowly healing under his father's watch and Liyana... er.. well... she's become a clingy princess who wants to be around her father 24/7. I think it's the baby, and it's cute.

A déjà vu sensation hits me when I find a note on the bed in our bedroom. There's a black off-the-shoulder split thigh, bodycon dress beside it. A pair of simple stud earrings and a necklace. He knows I like my sneakers, heels are not my thing. A smile grazes my face, thinking how thoughtful and romantic my husband is.

'Dinner at 7:30pm, put this on and be ready by 6pm. I'll see you then. I love you Mrs. Okolie.'

His handwriting has always been terrible, he should've been a doctor.

I think I look beautiful in this dress, beautiful because he makes me feel it, with the little gestures he does. The look in his eyes when he looks at me, the way his hands would trace my skin leaving no spot untouched. His warmth, his touch, his vulnerability. All wrapped up in one.

We need each other and that's what pushes us forward, our love holds us together even if life sometimes seems to want to pull us apart.

The dress is perfect, I love it and can't wait for him to see me in it. The baby bump seems to pop out more than it should because of the scrawniness, the weight loss bothers me. But it matters not, when Randall looks at me like I'm the most beautiful woman.

It's after 5:47pm which means he's on his way home. I take one more look in the mirror before marching

out of the bedroom to wait for Randall, and just as I reach the staircase, I spot him at the bottom of the stairs. My heart melts into a puddle, my king looks dashing in his black tux, he substituted a collared shirt with a black round-neck t-shirt.

We exchange smiles as I unhurriedly walk down to him. Flattering eyes fixed on me. Randall offers a hand and helps me with the last step.

“Wow.” It’s the astounded expression on his face that brings a blush to mine. “You look amazing.” He breathes into my ear, after slipping an arm to the small of my back.

“Thank you. You look amazing too, I love the dress.” I compliment him and his taste.

“I love you in that dress.” His reply is expected. “Shall we?”

Why not? I’d go anywhere with him. Stealing a look into the living room, my eyes catch a glimpse of Kwame and Liyana engrossed on the TV screen. She said they’d binge on cartoons the entire night, I trust her to keep Kwame away from the news channel.

“You didn’t have to book the whole place.” Booking an entire restaurant for the two of us is something the Randall I know would never do. This is probably mid-life crisis. It’s insane that he went to such extents just for a Friday-night date.

There’s a private chef and his team lined up in the kitchen, I recommend them on the cuisine they prepared. It was exceptionally tasty. The rooibos tea though, left an odd after taste in my mouth which I keep diluting with water.

Since the unknown sickness, I’ve lived on healthy eats. Food which tasted like cardboard, I had to stay home, and limit my movements while at it.

The headaches are slowly fading, it’s the weight that refuses to find its way back to me. When I asked my gynaecologist, she said it’s not affecting the baby.

Something tells me, she lied. Randall says there's nothing to worry about. I guess I should trust him.

"That's what you said last time I did this." Randall.

I'm shocked now as I was last time.

"You know I'm not impressed by fancy things."

Maybe it's living in luxury, I don't remember a time we went to bed worrying about bills, the next meal or the children's education. I will forever be grateful to this man for the life he's given me.

I'm taken aback by stone cold Randall acting a clown, hand on his chest as if it hurts to breathe. The wittiness in his eyes makes up for the stoic expression. "Three years later, you're still not impressed by me, Amara?"

He tries to sound somewhat annoyed but misses the mark.

"You're fancy?"

He laughs, and it's so breath taking. A beautiful sound I seldom hear.

"I was impressed by you the moment you started to win me over and every day with you is a mystery, Randall Okolie. But you don't have to do this, I appreciate you and who you are."

"If you appreciate me, then you should appreciate all this because this is me from now on. I would rather be alone in the room with you than have the company of the whole world, after all, you're all I see. What have you done to me Mashenge?"

I almost cringe at the name, as it reminds me of my aunt and Nelisiwe. She's missing apparently, I couldn't care less. Aunt wants me to speak to Randall, ask him to use his 'skills' as she put it and look for the woman who tried to kill me. I tried to bring it up, for my uncle's sake. He's been more of a father to me, and seeing him in pain is somewhat

agonising. I plan on bringing it up again tonight because I was dismissed last time.

“What Happened?” Is a question that seeks answers, as to why I have fallen into a train of laughter.

“Flattery becomes you,” And suits him well, in a strange way, only I understand. A smile lingers on his lips, sending me on a jealousy route. I’d like to get a taste of his lips as well.

“Ouch! I thought I was being romantic.” He states, bringing titters up my throat.

“My romantic husband, dance with me.” If only I knew how to dance, having him close is the only way I’ll be able to melt his heart. He’s only sensitive with me and recoils from other people.

A chair is pulled for me, you’d think we’re going to war with how he’s suddenly become serious.

I scramble on my feet and almost trip when I stand, I would’ve fallen on my face if he were not here to

hold me.

“Careful.” He snaps in frustration. The coldness in his eyes makes way for concern. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just a little dizzy.”

“Sit down then...” No way am I missing a chance to dance with him, something that rarely happens.

“I’m fine Randall.” I think I am.

Warmth seeps into me when Randall presses his body against mine, arms squeeze around me as he pulls me closer and leads me to the dancefloor. The warmth from his hand penetrates through the thin fabric. Forget butterflies, I have a whole swarm of bees in my stomach.

The slow song switches to one I’ve heard many times, one of Liyana’s favourites. I believe Ellie Goulding outdid herself here, Still Falling For You is too beautiful a song.

I’ve got awkward feet, dancing is not my thing. But

Randall takes the awkwardness away, although the dance feels strange because of my left feet.

Our chests pressed together and his lips against my ear, he starts humming to the song, letting me slip my arms around his neck.

“Your heart got a story with mine... Your heart got me hurting at times... your heart gave me new kinds of highs... Your heart got me feeling so fine.”

I’m stunned by the unspoiled pitch, furthermore, his goofiness. This man of mine is full of surprises. I want to laugh with joy at how he’s serenading me, but there’s this feeling I can’t shake. Like something bad will happen.

I’m in his arms, the best place I’ll ever be, but the dark blanket finds a way to surround me. Perhaps I’m overthinking things, that it’s even giving me a headache. I should tell him that we stop, but he looks so happy and content. I don’t want to ruin the moment. We haven’t been this happy in a while.

“I’m still falling for you, me hemma.” He purrs, staring down at me. Heat rushes to my cheeks, he chuckles at how sheepish I have become.

Unexpectedly, lack of breath is felt through my body the minute his lips touch mine, that feeling of drowsiness and exhaustion. I feel my lungs closing in as Randall deepens the kiss. I try to enjoy it and forget the agitation scraping at me.

The insatiable kiss is gloriously diverting, taking strength from my knees. I won’t be able to walk to the car if he keeps this up. He takes control of my whole being, and I surrender to him... putty in his arms.

Every nerve in my body is ignited. Every kiss is always different, every kiss feels like the first. This one is just perfectly consuming as the others. I whimper as he takes me into a slow kiss— I moan as his tongue takes mine into an exotic dance— I

tremble when he tugs my braids and grumble when he pulls away again.

I want to express my love, tell him how much I love him. My throat won't let me, it's on fire. I feel beads of sweat form on my temple, a few drops drizzling down my spine. When did it become so hot in here?

Feeling nauseated, the world spinning in all its axis, I cling on to Randall. Even in his tight hold, I feel as if I'm drowning in the air.

"Are you okay?" Randall asks, concern sharp in his voice.

My stomach agitates and grumbles like an off-balance washing machine. I let go of Randall and nestle my baby bump.

"Something's wrong," I try to breathe in slowly, thinking I'd feel less pain and that proves futile. A sharp pain pierces through my belly, and leaves my mouth in a horrific scream. I sag, clasping my arms

around my belly.

“Amara.” His arms don’t leave my body. The pang of pain hits me the second time, I shriek this time around. Tears streaming down my face, tears for my baby. Everything around me flickers and waves.

“Call an ambulance.” I hear Randall shout to no one in particular. At this point I’m convulsing on the floor, choked breathes leaving my mouth. I’m in excruciating pain, watching a dreadful expression on his face.

“Blood!” The word slips past his lips in a whisper, as if he’s saying it to himself. “You’re bleeding.”

My muddled brain takes a while to blend the declaration together so it makes sense, then I feel it. A warm sensation on my nether regions, and some parts on my thighs. Instinctively, I send a hand to find the heart palpitating sensation. My ears ring with panic when it comes back stained with crimson red that sends me wailing like a widow.

Why am I bleeding? I can't be bleeding, I shouldn't be bleeding.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-

RANDALL-

Something I never imagined was possible has happened, we lost our baby. The baby's heartbeat stopped before we reached the hospital. That's what doctors said. It's an hour after surgery, my wife has not regained consciousness. She was poisoned.

I ordered a lockdown in the restaurant after Nkosi brought forward a woman who was trying to sneak out through the back door. The head chef is in his custody as well.

Someone will explain who poisoned my wife.

This is how the nana takes my baby from me? By

hurting my wife, there had to be another way.

Liyana called, she told me everything, after I delivered the sad news. The dream she had... grandfather's prophecy.

The waiting room feels too crowded with Jonas giving me deadly stares, he hasn't said a word to me. I don't care what these people think about me, I married their daughter, not them. Maphikelele threw insults my way from the time they arrived. Apparently, I don't deserve their daughter. Mhambi is not on anyone's side, he's too quiet lately. He reminds me of the time he first met Amara after her uncle sold her off to me. Clearly, it has everything to do with Nelisiwe.

My brother and his wife Thandiwe are here, it feels good to have support during this hard time. Neo and Ayize wanted to be here, I had to ask them to come tomorrow because Amara will not be in the mood to

see people.

“Mr Okolie.” A nurse standing in the doorway calls, the look on her face tells me, Amara is awake. “Your wife is asking for you.”

My heart lurches, a crazy move that almost knocks the breath out of my lungs. The family agrees to stay behind. The nurse leads the way, I stride in and find Amara seated on the bed, legs open and hands searching for something on her belly. She feels the weight that’s been removed. She feels that the baby is no longer there.

Confused eyes snap up, it’s the tears in them that force me into a dark place and arouse a blazing vengeance within.

“Randall, good you’re here.” The smile on her face is forced. “Come closer, the baby kicks when you’re

around. He hasn't moved since I woke up, the nurse won't tell me why. That's kind of weird, don't you think? Nurses should know it all."

I thought I could do this, but it's harder than I thought.

"The nurse won't tell me why my stomach feels so light, it's not hard like it was earlier." Her hands roam the plump flesh.

I know Amara. That look in her eyes. She knows, she just refuses to accept and won't until she hears me say it.

"Please tell her to check the baby, he hasn't moved since I woke up."

I should be holding her in my arms, why can't I move?

All I can do is try to fight back tears that threaten to bully me. She's looking into my eyes, I don't know what she's seeing. I hope she doesn't see right through me.

"Randall, why are you standing there?" Her question comes in a strained voice. "Why are you quiet? Come on, tell her to examine me. We need an ultrasound, call the doctor."

I doubt she realises that her voice is skyrocketing. Standing over five feet from her, I spot tears welling in her eyes and drown her dilated pupils. I shoot the nurse a glance, gesturing, she gives us space.

"Where is she going?" Amara shouts, unshed tears ready to fall down her face.

"Amara!" My heartbeat fast-tracks when she diverts her gaze, avoiding my eyes.

“I love the name Adekunle, there’s something majestic about it. Like Kwame. He’ll need a Zulu name as well, I was thinking ZuluKhaya. We’ll call him Khaya because there’s already a Zulu in the family. We don’t want Nqaba thinking we’re stealing his son’s name.” Her face falls in sadness, but the smile on it remains.

“Ama...” I swallow her name as a lone tear traces her delicate cheek. She’s shaking her head, vigorously. Welcoming more tears. My feet are heavy and dizzy as I trail towards her, this is the first time I have been rendered weak. Unable to move or say anything sensible.

“I’m sorry.” It’s like I’ve started a wild fire with this apology. Amara takes a long shaky breath, and bursts into tears, thrashing her hands in frustration, as if she doesn’t know what to do with herself. Her heart breaking cries, shredding me into pieces.

I practically toss myself on her, catching her arms and pinning them down.

“We lost him Amara.”

She cries harder, pushing against me with diminishing strength. I lock my arms around her, burying my face on the curve of her neck. I feel her chin on my shoulder, her body shaking tremendously.

“I want my baby.” Tears damp my t-shirt, painting me with her heartbreak and grief. With gladness, I receive them, desperately wanting to take away the pain.

It takes quite a while for her breathing to calm. Prepared to deliver consoling words, I lean back, cradling her face with my palms so she’s looking into my eyes.

“I was not careful enough, I failed my baby.” Her vocabulary takes first place.

“It’s not your fault Amara.”

I can’t tell her, she was poisoned, it will deepen the pain. Maybe Liyana’s explanation is better, Amara will be able to live knowing our baby is with the ancestors.

“I should’ve done things differently, I should have eaten healthier. I should’ve...” I know she’s about to break down again when her lower lip quavers.

“Amara stop.” I shake my head, it is to say we’ll get through this together. “Don’t do this to yourself, I won’t let you.”

Her headshake is violent, my thumbs catch a few tenacious tears.

“I’m so tired of everything, I feel so useless.”

I feel useless too, I’d rather carry the load than have her do it. She will never be able to handle it.

“It hurts.”

Her palm is pasted on her heart, she’s crying, the ugly cry. Tears... snort... dishevelled hair and red rimmed eyes.

“I’m in so much pain, and I’d rather die Randall. I can’t take it anymore, it feels like my heart is on fire.”

I shift on the bed, and pull her into my lap. My heart

feels like it's been thrown on shards of glass,
hearing my wife's wrenching sobs.

It took a while for Amara to succumb to a deep slumber, I can't stand the thought of her going through pain. Jonas, Mhambi and the other one are not in the waiting area when I walk in. I'm not complaining. It saves me the trouble of having to tell them how Amara's doing.

"How is she?" Thandiwe's concern is appreciated.

"She's going to be okay." Nqaba comes to my rescue, I don't have an answer for Thandiwe. I have unanswered questions myself, and no one to answer

them for me. Abruptly, my brother pulls me to the side.

“Whoever is at fault, don’t go for the entire family.” His warning is whispered, as if walls have ears.

“Don’t tell me what to do.” How do I feed an unquenchable anger without spilling enough blood to make me feel alive again?

“I’m serious Randall,” his lips spread into a thin line, tone chiding. “I know you took out Chala’s family.”

“She hurt my son.”

“Her children had nothing to do with it.”

Nqaba is pissing me off, I don’t have time for this.

“You should know by now that, I’ll do anything to keep my family safe.”

“Your nonchalance pisses me off, Randall. You’re going to burn if you continue along this path.” He can’t reproach me like a child, I don’t care that we’re twins.

“Glad to know I’m not the only one who’s pissed off, I could punch you right now.” His lips warp into an impassive smirk like he doesn’t believe I would do it.

“Go ahead, take it out on me.” He slams his hand on my chest, enough to shove me back.

“Leave me alone Nqabayomzi.” My voice refuses to carry the conviction it usually does when addressing people.

Nqaba grabs hold of my wrist, tugging me back as I had started to walk away.

“You’ve got pent-up rage, take it out on me. Not someone’s child.” I hate him for this, I hate that he knows me so much.

“Stay the hell away from me!” I yap, slamming my hands on his chest. The bastard doesn’t move an inch. I hear Thandiwe gasp behind me, she must be terrified. My brother and I; we don’t fight. Our arguments are as playful as a toddler.

“No.” Nqaba growls, voice cold.

“F*ck this shit.” I turn my back and begin to head down the hallway, there are footfalls tailing me. He’s purposely riling me up, wanting a reaction. He thinks punching my own brother senseless will make me feel better? Hell no! I need to smell blood for this

truck sitting on my chest to move.

“You’re a coward, taking your anger out on innocent people.” He doesn’t mean it, there’s a tinge of apology wrapped in the tone of his voice. But it does nothing to keep me calm. I turn around, rage deforming my face.

“What do you want me from me?” My voice sounds too brutal, a tone I don’t use when addressing my brother.

“I want you to act human for once, I want you to feel. God! React Randall, mourn if you have to. Don’t go on a killing spree, taking God’s people like you have claim over them.”

“They give me claim over them the moment they decide to touch the ones I love.”

“You’re wrong.” I’m not wrong, I’m never wrong.

“Nqaba stop please, Randall is going through enough.” Thandiwe pleads beside him, stroking a hand down his spine. He’s lucky his wife is sane, mine is slowly losing her mind and I don’t know if she will make it through the night.

“You’re not going anywhere Randall.”

“Do you think you can stop me from leaving?”

His eyes are daring me to move as he takes a step into my space. I feel myself almost giving in, throwing in the towel like he wants me to.

“Enough killing people,” He mumbles only for me to catch it. “You’re a family man. It’s time to stop greeting your children with blood stained hands. It’s

time to grow up.”

I shrug off a hand he places on my shoulder, a spasm of irritation crosses my face because of his stubbornness. I want to punch him, take it all out on him like he said.

“F*ck off Mzi, get out of my face.”

The first punch lands on his left cheek, Thandiwe gasps loudly. She shouldn't be here, witnessing this. Her gasps turn to cries when I start punching all my frustrations and anger on my twin brother. By the time I stop, unsatisfied. His lip is bleeding, left eye twitching. I backtrack, heaving, hands fisted.

“Don't ever tell me what to do again.” The pain in my voice pierces me, I sound like a wounded animal.

He's in my space again, and does the unexpected. His arms encircle me, pressing me into a bear hug, forcing me to stay. I don't hold him back, we don't hug. This is not what I want, hugs don't sooth me. Blood does.

"Get your hands off me, Nqabayomzi." I struggle in his arms thrashing, kicking and whimpering. From my vantage point, I see Thandiwe walking out of the waiting room. I'm thankful, I wouldn't want her to see me like this.

"No, you're my brother. Let me be here for you."

I stop at his declaration, if feels strange that he's stroking my back. Hugging me like I were a weakling. I hate that my body is not objecting this stupid embrace, it betrays me as it begins to shake. There's a wetness in my eyes, I can't be crying. Why can't I control this overwhelming emotion? I want to wipe the damn tears away, but he's got my hands

restrained.

“I hate you.”

I shouldn't have said something, my voice has told on me. It was okay that he couldn't see my face, now he knows that I'm crying.

“I'm here.” He doesn't say anything more.

“My son is dead Mzi, he died and I couldn't do anything to help him.” My voice trembles with every syllable, while my body continues to shudder. I'm unable to control the damn emotions, and burst into tears. Tears that relentlessly fall on his shoulder. My brother's hold tightens around me.

“Why did they give him to us if he was going to be taken away?” This is why I never wanted to believe,

why I ran from them. They control people's lives, shake us until we're upside down or confined into a corner. Then they dish out demands and expect us to do their bidding.

"You know the reason Randall."

"No," I shout, crying softly in his arms. "I refuse to accept that. He didn't get to see the light of day, he didn't get to see his parents. They took that away from him, we had plans for him."

"I know."

"Let me go." I tell Nqaba after taking control of my emotions, nippily, I wipe away my tears and back away when he releases me. The quietness in the room does not sit well with me because my mind is filled with voices, so loud that they've given me a headache. I'm not okay, I'll never be okay; not when I

have failed my son.

“Randall...”

“Mhlonishwa, we found something.” Nkosi’s throaty voice cuts through Nqaba’s. I didn’t hear him come in. Nqaba doesn’t break his stare, I want to break mine and turn to Nkosi. But there’s something in his eyes that’s glued me on the floor.

“We found Sishi’s little girl.” Nkosi continues.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-One

ZITHA –

“Turn left at the robots.” I tell the standoffish man in the driver’s seat. I’m not affected by his rudeness, but I feel for his husband.

Bulelwa is such a great guy, how is he married to this unfriendly man? He seems almost lifeless, stoical expression, cold- empty eyes. Not once have I seen him smile since he fetched us at Harem, a club in Rosebank.

Today was the only time I could meet up with Liyana, since it’s a Friday. My timing was bad, her mother lost her baby.

With Liyana busy and going through so much, life in

Kenneth's big house got too boring. Yes, I went back. A week after Kenneth came to get me. The babysitter and Dlozi came with, Mantfombi was gone when I moved back.

I decided to go partying, explore the north, using Kenneth's money. He was at work when I left the house.

He's left so many missed calls, I don't want to deal with him right now. We'll talk when I get home. Hopefully, I'll be sober then.

I met Bulelwa at the club, drinking alone. Apparently today is his sister's death anniversary. I despise death, I despise talking about it. Bulelwa offered to buy me free drinks after I bent my back trying to make him laugh.

One thing led to another and we found ourselves dancing our problems away on the dance floor.

Compared to the gorilla driving us home, Bulelwa is soft, looks almost brittle to the touch. He's gay, he didn't have to tell me that. His flamboyance gave him away and my assumptions were confirmed when his husband Zizwe came to the club, fuming like a raging lion, asking why he went out without informing him.

"Baby, Zitha said to turn left." Bulelwa reminds him.

This black man did not just drive straight, purposely passing my turn?

"I'm not driving to places I don't know." Pompous bastard.

"Are we taking her home with us?" I'm as confused as you Bulelwa.

"I'll drop her at the mall, she'll take a taxi home."
What? Who does he think I am?

"At this time?" The bastard refuses to meet my gaze,

no matter how loud I shrieked, unless he's one of those careful drivers who don't blink while driving.

"You can't do that Zizwe, she's a girl and it's late."
Yes Bubu, tell him. I'm not taking a taxi.

"Bulelwa is right. In case you haven't noticed, I'm a girl." What's wrong with men lately? "I have a Mandla who was going to fetch me and take me home. But no, you let me get into your car and made me think you'll take me home."

"Buttercup!" Zizwe snaps, continuing to ignore me as if I'm not here.

"Please Zizwe, let's take her home." He better listen to his Buttercup. Zizwe snorts, yep. I see myself counting change in a taxi.

"It's okay Bubu, the mall is fine. I'll call someone to fetch me."

I would call Kenneth, but I'm not in the mood for one of his lectures. Sometimes he acts like my father, must be the age difference getting into his head.

"What's going on there?" Bulelwa's inquisitive tone forces me out of my thoughts, I follow his gaze to my right.

There's a woman struggling against two men... a live kidnapping in Johannesburg. I knew my life was a movie. That's Mantfombi, fighting for her life. She's on the ground, rolling and yelling for help, clearly refusing to be taken.

The car stops at the robots, I take this chance to jump out. I don't know what the plan is, but I can't let them take her away. I've been a victim of woman abuse, men who manhandle women disgust me.

"Hey, leave her alone." I shout, running across the street.

The men stop, faces twisting with anger. These chimpanzees can star on Lock Down. Do women still give birth to scary looking creatures?

“Piss off.” One of them growls, pushing me harshly so I wobble till I collide with one of the spectators, watching like there is a wrestling match going on.

I’m stunned when one grabs Mantfombi and starts his journey to their car. I can’t fight these goons alone, my screams will have to do the fighting for me. People give me looks when I let loose, acting as dramatic as I could. What in God’s world is wrong with Africans? I want to smack the one taking a video next to me.

“Help.” I yell, when Mantfombi’s screams elevate, she’s kicking and fighting with the best of her ability. Feeling helpless, I do the next logical thing that comes to mind. Grab a brick and toss it, it hits the big head who told me to piss off. They stop and turn to me with deadly stares.

My aunt must be lonely in hell, she wants me there with her. These thugs are going to kill me.

“Uzofa sisi, you should learn to mind your own business.”

It's some rubberneck telling me shit, useless prick. Mantfombi runs to stand against a fence, trembling with fear.

“At least I'm trying to help, you people are watching these men take a woman against her will. What happened to Ubuntu?”

“Ubuntu for what? We have families to fend for.” A man answers my question.

This is just great, I'm going to die because of a woman who slept with my man.

In a flash, Zizwe slides in front of me, gun aimed at the men. Nigerian movie... I have said it, I have said it.

“Yhuuu!” Some idiots in the crowd scream, it must be because of the gun. No one cried when they were manhandling Mantfombi.

“Zitha run.” I hear Bulelwa shout, he’s standing beside me in a jiffy, and grabs my hand.

“Ntombo lets go.” I yell out to her, thank God she’s sane enough to move. I grab her hand as she approaches, we’re headed for the big car parked on the side of the road.

Bulelwa takes the front seat, leaving me and Mantfombi to enter at the back. Once in the car, her battered face comes to full view.

“What happened Ntombo? What the hell was that?” She virtually throws herself at me, sniffing.

“Thank you sisi, you saved my life.”

Her fingers tighten on my clothing, her hug resolute.

The door to the driver’s seat opens, Zizwe pops in and is instantly attacked with a hug by his husband Bulelwa.

“Sisi,” Mr Grumpy calls, as he drives us drives away.

“Would you like to tell everyone why I gave those men my money?”

Mantfombi drops her head, blinking her tears away.

“My father sold me to those men for R5000, they dragged me out of the house and my mother did nothing to stop them. I managed to escape when the car stopped at the robots, but they caught up with me. That’s when you came sisi.”

No, I didn’t come. It was a coincidence. Jehovah! She’s crying again, I don’t push her off when she uses my shoulder to lean on. Her parents are stupidly cruel. Hearts of men have grown cold. How does a father sell his daughter off?

THE SISHIS-

The message from her father that he’s leaving the country without so much as a goodbye matters not. Her heart has sunk to the deepest parts of her stomach, her daughter has been found after months of looking for her. In what state she’s in is unknown,

the man who called Styles wouldn't tell him.

"They found Sihle." He had said to her back at the house, the couple grabbed whatever they needed, jumped into their car and are now heading to the designated place. Some river in Voslorus.

Shouldn't she be at the hospital? Is their question. Randall has called plenty of times. But Styles can't muster up the courage to take his calls, afraid Randall might have bad news for him.

"Styles." Sethu pushes out his name before she could think what to say next. Styles wants to respond, but fear has him by the throat, choking him. Making empty promises is not his thing, he can't say Sihle is fine without knowing for sure.

Cars are parked by the dusty road, an ambulance and police cars have beat them to the scene. Nkosi is the one who found the child. Why would he call the police knowing they don't work with them?

“Why is it crowded?” Fear echoes in Sethu’s voice, the sound digs deep into Styles’ stomach, settling at the core. His gut knots tighter than a hangman’s noose round the neck of The Big Show.

No one is brave enough to leave the car, they sit, staring ahead. Hearts pulsing faster than usual.

“I love you, Kitten.” He hasn’t told her this in a long time, a small amount of weight is lifted from his shoulders when she returns his endearment, though, through a shaky breath.

“I love you too.”

She misses an inhalation when his hands lace hers, if only he knew how much she’s been needing this. He leans over, to peck her lips with a soft kiss. Once... twice... thrice his tongue plunges through the seams of her lips.

Sethu snivels, letting herself go in his arms. Her

tears smudge his face, he pulls away from the kiss to wipe them away. Forehead against forehead, breathing the same breath. The Sishis stay in this position until a knock on the window on the driver's side lugs them back to reality.

Neo, is here. Styles didn't know he was going to be here.

"Stylos." Neo calls, motioning that Styles opens the door. He does as Ayize strides towards the car.

"Where is she?" His daughter he means. Neo drops his head, shaking it. Styles would do anything to hear Neo crack a joke, he finds them lame but he'd do with one right now. Ayize is on Sethu's side of the door, her pregnant sister is shuddering in the seat. It doesn't look like she'll step out anytime soon.

"Styles." What the hell did Neo just say? He doesn't call him Styles, he never calls him Styles.

"Don't call me that, I'm Stylos to you." Styles snaps,

pushing his friend with new found anger. He doesn't know why he's angry.

Tears? Why is Neo crying? It annoys Styles so much that he manoeuvres past him and ambles towards the others. He can't grasp why his feet are heavy and unwilling to move. He pushes either way, heart racing faster with each step.

From a distance of seven feet, he spots Randall, Nkosi right beside him. Two policemen are with them, scribbling something down on a note book.

“Stylos.”

Neo calls him by his rightful name this time. But Styles refuses to acknowledge it, his eyes are engrossed on Randall. Like he feels eyes on him, Randall's head snaps up. The stare forces Styles to stand down, he knows his brother. He probably knows him better than anyone and that look in his eyes.

“Styles” Randall mumbles between a whisper and a gasp.

“Where is she?” His question is directed at Randall

when he's within earshot, the dark skinned man's eyes move to the left, Styles follows. He can't see anything but a blue toy storage trunk. A police line has been drawn around it, prohibiting people from coming closer.

Unconsciously, Styles follows the line. Heat covers his body, it feels like he's in a furnace.

"You can't go through..." A uniformed police officer attempts to stop him, but Sishi pushes him out of his way and like he lives on noodles the tiny man loses balance and reels back.

Randall is behind him, Styles hasn't turned but feels his presence.

"I don't think you should open it." A warning from his brother, he could listen to him like he always does or shirk his advice.

He'll never know if he does the former, slowly he flips the box open. The first thing he's met with is a

tiny hand, a shocked gasp sashays through his quivering lips, as if poured with iced water.

His brain tells him to shut the box, his hand does the opposite, pushing the lid wide open. A thousand needles prickle his heart, draining all the blood in it. This can't be real, it can't be his baby lying in there. A firm hand lands on his shoulder, it's Randall, making sure his friend doesn't crumble.

"No. No"

A whispered breath... pained... ragged. Styles' knees give in to the pain surrounding him, he drops down incapable of looking away from the tiny lifeless human in the trunk.

"Aaaahhhh!" Comes a horrific scream, it's so loud that Sethu hears it from where she was left behind, too cowardly to follow her husband.

"Sethu, stay please." Ayize pulls her into her arms, locking her so she doesn't move.

“No, that’s Styles.” She’s already weeping, painfully. Her cries are contagious, sending Ayize on her own crying session. Sethu’s wet eyes widen at the sight.

“Why are you crying?” With shaky hands, Sethu grabs her sister’s shoulders. “Why are you crying, Ayize?”

She shouts, almost grinding her teeth. Ayize fails to control her waterworks, instead smacks her mouth, winning in stifling a sob.

Sethu is getting frustrated by her sister’s silence, a waste of time, really. Styles’ loud cries call to her once more.

“Styles!” Pregnant as she is, she’s running towards the direction he went, shouting his name through a trembling breathing and tears that won’t leave her alone.

“Styles!”

She finds him slumped on the dirty ground in Randall's arms, wailing like a man who's lost everything.

"Styles."

A whisper this time, fear has her paralyzed. She wants to move forward, to see what's in that box. Deep down she knows, but she's not brave enough to take a peek.

"Sethu, please come with me. Styles will tell you everything." A crying Ayize pleads, it's not helping that she's also in tears.

"Sihle." Logic has knocked some sense into the mother. "Sihle."

She screams like a crazy woman, and gaining her strength, her feet pounce towards Styles who turns at the sound of her horrific expression. She can't see this, he can't let her see her daughter in such a state. Chest tight with pain, Styles' feet accelerate. His arms stretch to grab a hold of Sethu, but his wife dodges him. Her cries turn to painful screams when

she finds Sihle's body inside a box in a curled position.

"Sihle, Sihle, my baby." Hands on her head, Sethu yelps like she's losing her mind. Her body is enveloped from behind, it's the man who fathered their first born. He's pulling her closer and closer into him as she continues to thrash and fight him. Desperate to get to her daughter.

"Get her out of there, Styles. Get my baby out of that box, she's in pain."

He wants to get her to stop yelling, she might lose the baby she's carrying if she doesn't curtail her emotions. But he doesn't know how when he's hurting as well and wants to scream his pain out.

"She hates confined spaces Styles, you can't let her stay in there." Her voice cracks, strains and elevates. Styles has no words for his wife, he doesn't know what to say to her.

It hurts to speak, it hurts to breathe. Dammit! It hurts all over.

The river sight is filled with sounds of lamentation, Ayize trapped in Neo's arms, she hasn't stopped crying. Randall's pain has doubled, from losing his son to losing his niece in a space of a day. The stars bearing witness to this must report such cruelty to their deity.

"No human should go through this kind of shit," Through gritted teeth, Neo grumbles, gently stroking his wife's back.

Eyes Skyward, he questions the God who speaks to him in riddles, the One who found him worthy to be His vessel.

"I don't care how powerful You are, you don't do that. You don't break people like this." At the sound of his complaints, Ayize weeps louder, clasping her arms

around her husband.

Sethu is losing all the strength she had, finding it hard to stand. Slowly, she extends her hands towards the trunk detaining her daughter.

“My baby,” the cries of a mother echo into the thick darkness. Seeing her in there, immobile is torture. Sethu finds the strength to escape Styles’ arms, with that tiny strength, she scurries to the box and grabs her daughter's arms.

“Get up Sihle,” More heart piercing screams.

The last time she picked up her 9-year old, she wasn't this heavy. The last time she touched her 9-year old, she wasn't this cold. The last time she held her 9-year old, she wasn't this stiff.

“Baby, please. Mommy is here, get up. We need to go home.”

“Sethu.” Styles is too weak to stop her.

“I know you’re angry at mommy because she let the bad people take you.” All this while she’s crying. “I’m sorry my baby, forgive me.”

The tiny stiff arms are slippery, it doesn’t stop Sethu though. She’s determined to get her baby out of there.

“Sihle get up, let’s go home please.”

“Sethu... stop.” Styles finally speaks, his voice not strong enough to get her to listen.

“I don’t like it here Styles, it’s too dark. Let’s take Sihle home, she’s afraid of the dark.” She’s kneeling in front of the trunk, upper body slumped in the box. The police have moved closer, wanting to do their job.

“What are you doing?” She questions one of the officers, who grabs the child’s body.

“I’m just taking her out, we need to do an

investigation.” The officer.

“No,” Sethu jolts to her feet to push him away. “My baby doesn’t like strangers, don’t touch her.”

“Sethu.” Randall’s voice seeps through her ears, his arms wrap around her from behind. This is when her legs lose the battle, she sinks to the floor, weeping. Randall lifts her up before she crumbles like spaghetti, her cries remind him of Amara’s earlier today. He’s never carried any other woman in his arms but his wife, nevertheless, Sethu is his brother’s wife. She is no different from Ifeanyi, his father’s daughter.

Her sobs start to diminish when Randall walks away with her.

“Sishi.” Nkosi can’t help but interrupt, he’s witnessed too much agony to last him a lifetime. First his boss, now Styles. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Who did this?” Styles’ voice degenerates into a guttural rasp, nails digging into the palms of his hands, raging eyes engrossed on his daughter.

“Just say the word and I’ll bring them to you.” Nkosi returns, the tone of his voice that of a man who’s ready to spill blood.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Two

We are all born for love, so how does one become a person so devoid of compassion and empathy that torture becomes even a possibility?

RANDALL-

Adekunle Zulukhaya Okolie.

You were too precious to live on this earth, so God changed his mind and took you back.

The engraving on his tomb stone reads. He's left a void in our lives, a void no one will could ever fill.

Do not cremate him, bury him in the garden, under the big tree, on the seventh day from his death. His

mother will mourn him for seven months, then she can continue with her life.

These were the instructions from nana, relayed to Liyana. Amara is not yet comforted, she spends her time with our son, Kwame. She would sit with him for hours without saying a word to him, watching him play or whatever he might be doing at that time. We didn't enrol Kwame at a school, he'll continue his studies in Ghana next year.

We're going home after the birth of the twins, these are also nana's orders. Separating them is going to be hard for Liyana.

The calamity that had befallen my family happened because I had not appeased my ancestors and told them that I was not ready to take over. Neo's cleansing did not happen, it's not needed; they have my son like they wanted. His death has cleared everything for us.

Looking at Liyana today, I can't help but feel proud. She's come so far, her maturity is something to be proud of. She told us she was taken under water by nana. That she doesn't have to go through training anymore. I've always known they do as they please.

Sihle was buried three days before Adekunle, I will never forget how Styles crumbled and cried like a baby, watching the coffin go down. No amount of hands of comfort could get him to calm down, not even his wife.

I will never forget that imagine, it's imprinted in my head. Saying goodbye to your baby, the feeling of failure. The what if's, the trips of guilt. Those bring suicidal thoughts into a person's head.

Sethu collapsed quite a number of times, she had to be taken to the hospital. The baby is fine, I can't say about her. No one would ever dare say this, no one will ever say she's losing her mind. They don't talk, her and Styles. He told me, he tells me everything now. Leaving nothing unsaid, he does, so he doesn't

lose his mind. No one wants to witness a crazy Styles, he's crazy enough as it is.

"Did Sethu buy Mkhize's message?" I want to ask him how Sethu is doing, how he's doing. Usually, I wait for him to speak first, not wanting to make him feel suffocated.

"She did," Styles is always soft spoken, but now it's kind of worse. His calmness scares me sometimes.

"It's a good thing his body will never be found, the crocodiles really feasted on that son of a bitch."

I get a chuckle from him, it's light like his voice.

"Yeah." Styles.

Was it a good idea to let him drive? Now I'm not sure, his head is probably in many places, but here. The rest of the trip we remain silent. How do I pacify a man who has lost his daughter? Nine years is what she was given. How does God take after giving? I will never understand this concept.

Thirty minutes in, we park outside a building in NewTown. It's a basement of some sort. Don't know where Nkosi gets these places.

We find him and his colleague waiting for us outside the gate.

"Mhlonishwa."

"How is everything going?" I ask, eager to hear if we've made progress in the space of more than a week.

"They are ready to talk," A sadistic laugh sways from his chest. "After many days of torture those bitches have grown tired. It's funny how humans fear death, after acting brave for days, now they are ready to sing like birds."

"Good Job." I tell him, gaze cast on Styles. I wish he could say something.

"Let's do this." Styles orders, leading the way into the

basement. It's late in the night, perfect time to commit the perfect murder.

Styles' face contorts with anger, a mixture of pain fighting its way through as we stand in front of two toy trunks. A shoulder squeeze is all I can offer my brother.

"You're strong Styles, you can do this." Cheering him on is probably bad, especially knowing how he unravels. When he self-destructs, all hell breaks loose.

"Open them." Styles orders Nkosi, he does as told, excitement playing on his features.

In the first trunk lies the woman who is suspected to have poisoned my wife. The head chef was let go after Nkosi failed to pin him to the crime. The second trunk reveals the woman Styles once loved, Khethukuthula Dladla. Like her partner, she's curled up inside the trunk, small enough to restrict her movements, bound with shackles and a gag in her

mouth.

For over a week these two women were held captive. It took that long because Khethu and her accomplice wouldn't admit to their crimes.

I wasn't shocked when Nkosi revealed who the mastermind was behind Sihle's kidnapping, the evidence he gathered pointed to her. Now we need to hear it from the devil herself.

No one who hurts my family lives, they don't deserve to live. All those who have died by my hand will attest to it, with Thandaza Chitawo being the latest. Unfortunately, Governor Chitawo's private jet crashed. It's said to be lost somewhere in the Indian Ocean.

It had to be done, Mkhize is the perfect example that you never leave an enemy behind. They always come back to settle scores, bringing along their kin.

Thandaza was going to avenge Mkhize's death, she had to die. She had to die for what she did to my wife. Her father unfortunately got caught up in the mess. Someone had to accompany Thandaza to the afterlife.

"You should have been here mhlonishwa, I've never had so much fun in my life. We tried it all, stressed position... water boarding. They were shackled to a chair with a bucket underneath it and a bag over their heads. This one was the most stubborn." His playful eyes point at Khethu. "We had to keep pouring water and concentrating on her nose and mouth until she really felt she was drowning and her chest about to explode from lack of oxygen. It was fun watching her gag for air, depriving her of air was the best part about this torture."

He's telling me everything Styles did in my absence, I couldn't be here. Granduncle wanted me present for the visitors from Ghana who came to mourn with us,

he said it was important they came.

I don't blame Nkosi, I would have found joy in seeing it as well.

“Her head was repeatedly banged against the wall, she was dragged with a towel around her neck, the bleeding was a bonus for me.” Another sick chuckle from him. “Waterboarding session is my personal favourite. At one point, she became completely unresponsive, bubbles rising through her full mouth.”

Chills rush through my body, I knew Styles was capable of this, I didn't think it was this bad.

“Can we do this? I need to go back home.” That's right, Sethu shouldn't be alone for too long.

“I don't see why not.”

Nkosi smiles, a head bow which is so unnecessary and exaggerated. With the help of his colleague, they take the women out of the boxes and place them in stressed position, tied to a beam. He proceeds to grab two buckets of iced water, pours one on the first lady. Her body shudders, before her eyes shoot open. Red and swirling with fear. I love what I'm seeing, Nkosi's vicious chuckle says he does too.

"Don't be shocked by their weak states, these two were deprived of sleep. The punishment involved painful shackling and being doused with water. That motherf*cker hurts like a b*tch. I was a victim of it once. It feels like an eternity, to the point that you find yourself falling asleep despite the water being thrown at you."

"You did well Nkosi, you're a true soldier." Singing his praises is like reciting his clan names. A proud look etches his features.

"Dankie, siyabonga." Dramatic as always.

Khethu is poured with the second bucket of water, her arousal matches the same as her accomplice. Her red fear-filled eyes meet Styles first. Lower lip quavers, eyes widen. Showcasing the puppy look that always had Styles by his nostrils. Not today though, today he's cold. Inhumane, ready to taste blood.

"Styles, why are you doing this to me?" Typical Khethu, playing with tears.

"Why did you do it?" His voice is cold... ruthless. The devil himself.

Dubious eyes shut closed, in a minute, they open with a different aspect. The fear in them gone in a wink, this woman is a psycho.

"You left me, Styles, you left me." Really? I should've known. "I couldn't get over what you did, for years I planned my revenge. I wanted to make you suffer the way you made me suffer. I wanted you to pay for breaking me after making me love you. I hate you, I

hate that woman you married. I hate that she gave you a baby, and I hate Randall.”

She looks at me with spite in her eyes, I'm not deterred.

“It's all his fault, he drove you away from me. Supported Sethu over me, the woman who loved and took care of you for four years. I planned it all, the hotel incident with Amara.” She laughs. “That was part me and part Mkhize, I found him while planning my revenge on all of you. He was as bitter and I knew I had Randall where I wanted him. The plan was to destroy him and Amara like he destroyed what I had with you Styles.”

A dozen needles dance their way around my heart, “You crazy bitch.” I could kill her.

She's not put off, her eye balls hit the roof. I'd do

anything to wipe that smirk off her face.

“I enjoyed playing all of you like puppets, I had you all in the palm of my hand. You’ve lost your touch grandpa Randall, Naledi was under your nose, but you missed her.” Her eyes shift to the lady beside her.

“She was there at the hotel, I’m sure Amara told you about her. That wife of yours tells you everything, bloody fool can’t keep her mouth shut. She’s been following her and Sethu around, watching their every move.”

A boiling fury swells inside of me. So this is the woman from the hotel, the stalker. If I didn’t hate Khethu, I would applaud her for a job well done. She played us like a game dominoes.

“I realised I should’ve let Naledi go when she let

herself get caught after poisoning Amara. I hate incompetence. The poison was meant to kill both Amara and the baby, at least I got one of them.”

Anger curls hot and unstoppable in my gut, like a hot blazing inferno that wants to burn me from the inside. I take a step closer, itching to choke the life out of her.

Nkosi moves faster, his fist collides with her cheek when she bursts into an annoying hoarse laugh. Blood spews from her mouth, and splatters on the floor. She’s dizzy a while but quickly regains herself.

"How could you be so evil?" Styles.

“Oh please, you're no better than me. You and Randall play in the devil's playground. I lived in anguish every day, for years Styles, I couldn't breathe without you. The only way I could feed my wrath was to kill, so I took every woman that reminded me of

your wife. I hated them, like I hate Sethu. I wanted that baby in her womb, I was going to take it, kill her and raise it with you. And for my plan to work, I faked a pregnancy. Which was fun by the way. Sihle was not meant to die, I didn't know she was going to suffocate inside that box. But oh well, heaven called her too soon. At least I saved her from having a mother like Sethu. My parents found out what I had done and threatened to have me arrested, so I killed them. You have to love money, it was easy to get two desperate guys to dig a hole in their bedroom, under their bed. That's where they are buried."

"You did all this because I left you?" Styles grunts, a look of bittersweet swept across his face. Khethu has suddenly become quiet.

"Answer me." He's too calm, but anger still has him, I can tell by the way his hands are shaking. This is how I know he's about to explode.

“Yes.” Her answer trembles from her patched lips.

Nostrils flaring, fists clenched at his sides, he growls driving them into the wall.

“You killed my daughter.” Styles yells directly at Khethu, veins bulging out of his head. “You fucking killed my baby.”

“It was a mistake Styles.” The sound of her voice is remorseless.

“Untie her.” He grunts, making hostile demands.

Excitement laced on his features, Nkosi gladly unties Khethu. He lets her fall to the floor when the ropes are no longer holding her up. Styles grabs a handful of her hair, and begins dragging her across the floor.

Her faint screams are music to my ears. He stands her up and shakes his fist in her face, it sends Khethu back down with a loud thud resounding from the great fall. She’s rolling on the floor, weak from

the torture she was subjected to and the blow she just received.

“You’re dead.” Eyes narrowed and teeth clenched, Styles delivers a deadly threat. He means what he says, he’s a man of strong conviction who never backs down.

I want to hand him a knife so he can slit her throat like I plan on doing with that Naledi woman, her tears have gone to waste. She’s dead anyway.

Styles is breathing heavily, almost as if he would burst as he grips the front of Khethu’s throat, forcibly bringing her up to her wobbly feet. She’s pinned against the wall, eyes bugling out.

“Can’t breathe.” Says a raspy voice.

“That’s the point sisi.” Nkosi simpers, crossing his arms across his chest, he’s loving this.

With her throat closed, no air is able to reach her lungs. Her voice cannot be found and movements become slower and slower until she succumbs to

death. Her unmoving body sagging from his hold, Styles continues to choke her.

“She’s gone Styles.”

He’s not listening to me, he’s heaving, tightening the grip. Tears prickling the corners of his eyes. I wrap a hand around his shoulder to pull him back, Khethu’s body falls when Styles leans into my touch. The Naledi woman is crying, fear loud in her voice.

Letting go of Styles, I target her, a knife in hand. The fear in her eyes and face fuels me, pushing me to do this.

“Please, I’m so...” Blood splatters on my clothing as I slit her throat, she gags before giving in to the hands of death.

I can’t say I feel better, it hurts. The agony, the grief, the loss. It’s there, sickly sweet. I turn to Styles, to find him staring back. I catch something from him, a faint whisper, “Thank you.”

My arms wrap around him.

“We’re going to be okay, you’re going to be okay Styles. You will heal and live again. Your heart will beat again.” His response is an exasperated sigh.

Even though grief and loss have nearly destroyed my brother, he presses on. He presses on for his family, he’s f*cked up and not doing well, but he’s still on mission. He soldiers on, carrying out his mission in life because he is tough. I can see how tough he is, precisely because I can see the depth of his grief.

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Three

ZITHA-

That night, I booked Mantfombi into a motel, no way was I going to take her back to the house I share with Kenneth. I had R175 to spare, she was lucky we found her a place to stay.

Now a working woman, able to pay her bills, and not wanting to go back to the house Kenneth got them because of the bad memories; Mantfombi found a comfortable apartment in Ormonde View estates, away from her father's wrath.

Turns out she didn't lie about her father selling her off, apparently the man has a drinking problem. Kenneth somehow found out about it and sent the family back to KZN, a village near the one they stayed in.

He continues to protect Mantfombi, I can't say it doesn't bother me. It's too soon into the relationship to change the man.

All the same, it's hard to see the man you love care for another woman, maybe that's his nature, caring, compassionate.

I'm made to sign at the gate, present my Identity document. The guard makes small talk, asks me what's inside the Shoprite plastic bags. I don't know why he asked if he was going to check. I leave him with a packet of snacks when he tells me about the special he saw on the newspaper this morning. Buy three for R37.99.

Mantfombi lives on the second floor, the stairs aren't straining, so I climb them with ease. I'm met with a smile when the door pulls open.

"Sisi, you made it." She didn't think I would actually come when she called and asked to see me.

“I was at the mall and got this for you.” I’m given a grateful smile. I can’t say we’re friends, we just talk. Mostly about work and future plans. She doesn’t say much, gives off that sheepish attitude she had when I first met her.

Mantfombi takes the plastics to the kitchen, an open floorplan. The apartment looks cosy. I’m offered tea on a hot day, it’s bloody 34 degrees outside.

“Don’t you have wine? I’ve always wondered why participants on Date My Family bring wine, it’s for people like you.”

The sound of her laughter sways into the room, I almost forgot her timid nature. Her cuteness was clouded by her betrayal.

“Why are you so kind to me, sisi?”

I wouldn’t call it kindness, I don’t have it in me to shun people because of the bad choices they make in life. I don’t take nonsense but I’m not a bad person. God, please make note of that.

Like I helped Sizakele, after my aunt's funeral which I didn't attend because of that uncle, that one who is evil and twisted. Sizakele didn't want to move in with one of our uncles, with no plan on how she'll pay for rent, she opted to live alone. Sometimes I help with electricity and groceries. She's still family.

"I don't deserve your kindness."

I know where Mantfombi is taking this, I don't want to talk about Kenneth with her. He's not up for discussion, however, there are things that were left unsaid.

"I'm sorry Zitha, I didn't mean to hurt you." Like hell she didn't. "I love him too, possibly more than you ever could."

I'd be damned... the audacity... the liver of this woman.

"Is this why you called me here? To insult me?"

"No, please hear me out." She grips my hand, halting me from moving from the sofa. I meet pleading eyes,

apologetic. The look places me back down. “I’m not your enemy sisi. MaMkhize brought me to Khabazela’s house with the intention to separate you two. I didn’t know her plot until she came to me and told me she had added something to his food.”

I’ve always known that witch didn’t like me.

“Somehow, she knew he was going to give me a morning after pill. She told me not to take it or she’d send me back to my father’s house. I couldn’t go back there, my parents are very abusive and controlling. They don’t love me like they should their daughter. She promised to make Khabazela love me if I gave him a child and I was desperate for him to love me. To be honest, I still am.”

My heart thumps so loud against my chest, I’m sure she can hear it. The entirety of my being bursting with trepidation.

“Please tell me, you’re not pregnant.” She’s shaking her head, I’m not sure what that means.

“I thought I’d fall pregnant, I desperately wanted to give Khabazela a son. I wanted to have a piece of him, but he’s not mine, and it would’ve been a mistake. He doesn’t love me, he’ll never look at me like he does you.”

Yes, and don’t you ever forget that.

“Why are you telling me this?” Surely there’s a reason.

“You saved my life sisi and I will forever be grateful. What you did for me gave me a change of heart, I realised that you are not a bad person. You’re like me, a girl in love. I was willing to fight for Khabazela.”

“I wasn’t going to let you win.” It was going to be a darn ugly fight. “You were never going to win.”

“Maybe.” What the hell does she mean? For someone who is not loved by “Khabazela” she sure

is too brave.

“I think that’s enough.” Things are getting strange for me. “We’re done talking about Kenneth.”

“You’re right, I crossed my limit. I’m sorry. Can we at least be friends?” Yeah hey! You greet them and they want a full conversation.

“You did me dirty Ntombo. I can’t look past that, whether he was drugged or not, you should’ve told him no. You knew we were together but you slept with him. Friendship is a strong word, I’m careful with who I let into my personal space.”

I’m basically breaking my own heart here, I should stop taking things to heart.

“For now, we’re okay just talking.” I stand, grabbing my bag, ready to head out. “I have another appointment, maybe I’ll see you some other time.”

It won’t hurt giving her a chance, one day, not now.

“Sure.” She stands, heaving disappointedly. “I don’t have anyone here, you and Khabazela are the only people I know. He’s taken care of me, Zitha. Got me a job and although my parents are toxic, he still takes care of them. I’ve never met anyone so genuine and compassionate.”

Enough with the praises already, I’m the jealous type and it’s never cute.

“I know, he’s a good man.” He took me in when I had no one, treated me like family.

“Please take care of his heart.” She sounds like the first wife who’s leaving to look for greener pastures. People must know their place.

“I am his heart, so you bet I’ll take care of it.”

We part ways without another word said. I’m meeting up with Bulelwa, we’ve become quite close, amidst the age difference. The man is ageless, he

does not look a day over twenty five.

Apparently Liyana knows Bulelwa, he's her aunt's best friend. I think Thandiwe is her name. I've seen her pictures, she gives off snobbish vibes. However, Liyana vouches for her kindness.

Bulelwa's husband still scares me, I try to avoid him when he insists on tagging along to one of our dates. Bulelwa says he doesn't trust him alone out there because there are wandering eyes waiting to snatch him from him. Absurd I tell you.

I find Mandla parked at the gate like I asked him to, we exchange pleasantries as he drives us away.

"Mr. Mkhize called."

Yeah, Mr. Mkhize is calling a lot lately.

“Really?”

I don't hide the boredom in my voice, don't get me wrong, I love Kenneth. It's his interference that's got me running in all directions but his, I keep my phone on silent mode. Airplane mode is out of the question, he'd send a search party to look for me.

He says he's protecting me from Tshilidzi, yes that bastard has been sending me hate mail. It started two days ago when I posted a picture of Bulelwa and me on Social Media, he left a disgusting comment. Calling me whatever dirty name he could find from the face of the earth. He must be miserable to be wasting his time on me. It bothers me greatly, he's disturbing my peace.

The next time I visit my mother's grave, which I did last month, I'll be sure to remind her of her ex. The sperm donor... Striking him with lightning wouldn't be so bad.

“Kenneth.” I had to call him back.

“Where are you?” Argh!

“With Mandla.”

“Go home now.” He can’t be serious.

“Bulelwa’s waiting for me at Tasha’s, I’ll go home when I’m done.”

“Which mall?” No way am I telling him this.

“Forget it Kenny, I know you. If you don’t send Sipho to get me, you’ll show up yourself.”

“Sipho was shot, he’s in the hospital.” This is why he sounds sad? I feel bad for Kenneth, just weeks ago, his friend lost his daughter. Now Sipho is hospitalised.

“What happened?”

“His father is missing, Sipho suspected his boss.”

Sipho once mentioned that his father works for an Afrikaner in Mpumalanga. His family is based in KZN, his mother and siblings live there.

“When he went to confront the boss, he shot him under the pretext of trespassing. There are witnesses, but the white man seems to have a strong case. He might walk free.” Kenneth continues.

Holy Ghost fire to white privilege. I distaste that shit. This is South Africa, a strange black man in a white man’s land spells trouble. The authorities would never take his side.

“We need to get him a lawyer.” Listen to me saying ‘we.’ With whose money?

“I’ll see what I can do.” Kenneth.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.” Which is not much really.

“Come home, I need you.” The seductive tone births shivers throughout my body and has me writhing in the seat.

“It’s around 2pm, the sun is on a mission to burn us alive and you’re thinking about sex?”

Mandla must not look at me like that, I know he’s married with kids. He and his wife had to save sex in

order to bring those kids to life.

“We have an A.C.” I change my mind about wanting a man, they are a lot of work. “Please.” Now how do I say no to that plea?

“Fine, I’ll see you in a few, daddy.” No response. “I love you, Kenny.”

“Nam ngiyakthanda ndlovukazi.”

Ahh Jesus! You have done it. If he continues loving me like this, maybe, just maybe I’ll tell him that I lied about having my tubes tied. I wanted to punish him, make him hurt like he made me hurt.

Texting will be better than telling him face to face, there’s a picture I took a few days ago, wearing red lace lingerie. I bought it while shopping with Bulelwa, Kenneth hasn’t seen me in it as I’m saving it for a special occasion. Now would be the perfect time to let him see me in it, it will go well with the message I’m about to send.

'I lied about having my tubes tied, I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me.'

My heart stops as I press send... Two ticks are good. Blue ticks are bad when he's taking his time to reply. I messed up, he won't forgive me for lying to him.

What, was he trying to survive a tsunami? Took him too long to start typing.

'I know, hurry home. I need to be inside you, now.'

Men! Lord give us strength.

BAMBINDLOVU-

Mhambi has approved, Jonas is Switzerland. He

doesn't know where he stands, it's not his biggest dream that his entire family be involved with the Okolies. Then again, he's not God.

Bambindlovu is happy that he's going to be a father, moreover, he's going to be with the woman he loves. But what's this talk about giving his child away?

They are in Vaal, an urgent meeting was called to discuss Liyana's visions. Nana's demands to be precise. Bambindlovu is finding it hard to believe what his wife-to-be just recited, it all sounds like a dream.

"Don't you think this is a curse that needs to be broken? Your father and his twin were separated at birth, I can't let the same fate happen to my children." He argues, face hot with anger.

It's not like him to give in to this dangerous emotion, Liyana understands him though. She wants so bad to stand from that reed mat and pacify her man. But Jonas would send her back like he made her sit when he found her comfortably seated in a couch.

“There is no curse.” Nqaba articulates. “This is what the ancestors want, the reason your paths met was because of this. We can’t continue to explain one thing as if you’re a child.”

Someone is not happy, Bambindlovu respects Nqaba hence the faint headshake. He’d tell him all the nonsense running in his head if he wasn’t Liyana’s uncle.

“We understand Nqabayomzi, Sokalisa will have to do what the ancestors want.” Bless Mhambi.

“What about what I want? We’re talking about my children here. How do you expect me to give one away?”

“We have no choice Bam-Bam, the ancestors will take him back if we keep him. He’s not ours to keep.” Since her mother’s miscarriage, more visions have come to Liyana, she’s more aware of her surroundings than anyone. Sees things that are about to happen, or things that happened. Her third eye is very much clearer than her natural eyes.

Bambindlovu looks to Jonas for guidance, he's the eldest, but Jonas is too quiet. He has not given his opinion, it is so unlike him.

The father-to-be stands, "I'm sorry, I need to think." He grabs his phone from the table and finds his way out. No one calls after him, he's glad because he doesn't need to be pushed. The people in there are asking him to give away his baby. Where have you ever heard such boloney?

Once outside, he leans against his source of income, the caravan. Thoughts of driving to a quieter place visit him, he turns back to glance at the house and can't imagine going back in there.

As he starts the car, he hears a knock on the window. If anyone, then Mhambi would be the one who cares enough to go after him. They do look alike after all. Mhambi opens the front door and jumps in.

“I’m going with you.”

“I don’t even know where I’m going.” What he means is that he wants to be alone.

“You were alone from the time you were a child, I refuse to let you go through life alone again. I’m here Sokalisa, let me be the father you never had.”

It’s all he’s ever wanted, like the Zulu wristband on his wrist. It’s been a long time coming, the ritual went well. Now he can proudly call himself Sokalisa, he wears it with pride. He so badly wanted his father present, his mother as well. But life has to go on. You don’t wait for the dead nor do you wait for the ones who don’t want to move forward. They will meet you along the way, if they are willing.

“Can I call you baba?” Yeah! He’s forward like that. He almost smacks himself across the face when the old man in the passenger’s seat allows tears down his face.

“I would love that, ndodana.” Mhambi returns. No hugs whatsoever, just smiles and tears and sniffles and... there they go, driving away. Hopefully with plans to come back. Liyana would lose her mind if he doesn't, he knows that.

From Vaal to Southgate. Damn!

“They sell pap at KFC.” Bambindlovu tells his uncle... that he can afford, thanks to the stolen trips he does with his boss' caravan.

Southgate is packed as usual, Mhambi suggests they take a lift to the top floor, too lazy to ride the escalators. But there's a long queue from the moving stairs, trailing towards Checkers. Grumpy and hungry looking people, waiting with their huge trolleys to enter.

About three people are waiting for the lift, each with a trolley full of groceries.

“Month end is a crazy time, people spend forgetting there’s a tomorrow.” Mhambi has observed and concluded. Bambindlovu wouldn’t know how it feels, his family is not privileged enough to have experienced crazy month ends, full groceries or eating out at eateries.

“It’s how it is, baba.” He hasn’t forgotten, this boy... excuse me; this man sure knows how to make his uncle happy. There’s a smile on Mhambi’s face, one that’s been AWOL since the disappearance of his daughter.

They move aside to make way for the people departing from the lift.

“Sokalisa?”

This is what happens when you don’t let your eyes wander in crowded places. What in the devil’s world is Thandikela doing here?

“MaOlady?” Bambindlovu is as shocked as his mother, her lips twitching, trying for a smile. He knows she can’t deny that she misses him. Once upon a time, they were best of friends.

“Thandikela?” A deeper voice calls.

Her eyes divert, snapping to Mhambi, standing next to her son. The atmosphere is suddenly thick with tension and bitterness. First her eyes are wide, then they are glaring within a split second. Thandikela’s face turns cold, if eyes shot bullets, Petunia would be adorned in black and made to sit on a mattress come Saturday.

“Mhambi!”

Yep! She definitely vomited his name out.

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Four

BAMBINDLOVU-

Look at Thandikela. Now look at Mhambi. Yes, yes. They are sharing a table at KFC, the credit goes to Mhambi. Don't underestimate the power of a quiet person.

"When is he coming back? He's been gone for too long." She refuses to call him Sokalisa when talking to Mhambi, not when they didn't do right by her. For years her son lived in exile, away from his father, when they could've done things differently, played by her rules.

"How have you been MaMbele?"

Hehehe! Mhambi, not every man is Musa Mseleku.

Addressing women so lovingly.

Thandikela has not looked his way.

“Ngikhuluma nawe MaMbele.” Someone call Petunia and tell her to bring a frying pan, this sweet talk can’t be right.

Angry eyes rush to Mhambi, “Don’t call me that.”

But why? Oh prey tell dear Thandikela.

“Why not?” He’s smiling, not affected by her rudeness.

“This is a waste of time, I don’t know why I agreed to come along.” She’s too snippy for an oldie. Mhambi grips her hand when she jolts to her feet.

“Don’t go.” No please. Just a command. “You’ve run away for way too long, don’t you think that boy deserves to know the truth about his father?”

Her eyes narrow, shooting invisible lasers at poor Mhambi.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Thandikela snatches her hand back from Mhambi.

“You’ve always been selfish Thandikela, that’s why you’re in this mess.” Mhambi clearly knows this woman too well. His eyes move to the long queue, people must love KFC to crowd here. He spots his nephew in the crowd, eyes on the screen of his phone. Mhambi’s eye sight is not on his side, he can’t tell whether Bambindlovu is number five or seven..

“Sit down, people are staring.” The warning from Mhambi compels her to search her surroundings. People are minding their own... but she sits just in case she causes them too much attention.

“Bambindlovu is a good kid, he’s like a son to...”

“He’s not your son...” Her eyes are wide and shifty,

hands fidgety. Mhambi frowns upon her response, this woman might have lost her marbles throughout the years.

“I know, you made that clear years ago.” Mhambi must have said something terrible for Thandikela to choke on her saliva. “You showed me proof, remember?”

Ehhh! And then?

“Shut up.” Thandikela whisper shouts, fortunate for her it’s not too loud to get black people to stare.

“Don’t talk about that.”

“Why not? Are you ashamed of your past Thandikela?”

“No, I’m not.”

“Then tell Sokalisa about his father, tell him his father was married when you met. Tell him you were my brother’s mistress.”

They say when a husband is away from his wife, he

loses focus. Something must be wrong with Mhambi.

“Stop it.” Her eyes drown in tears, she’s not one to cry in public. There must be something about Mhambi that’s causing all these emotions.

“I can’t stop and I won’t, Bambindlovu needs to know the truth from you. You need to forgive and let go, stop punishing him for your mistakes.”

“What about you Mhambi?” Thandikela hisses.

“What about your mistakes?”

“What mistakes?”

“You don’t remember what you did to me? What you and your brother did to me.”

That’s it, who put the cooktop on 6. The food might burn.

Confusion grazes Mhambi’s features, his brows nearly touch.

“What did we do to you?”

Her head whips back and forth, in search of any eavesdroppers before whispering what seems to be top secret.

“Your family hated me, I gave them a son and yet they threw me away like I was yesterday’s trash.” She murmurs for him to grasp, he’s shocked alright.

“What are you talking about, Thandikela?”

“I’m talking about you not taking my side when your brother wouldn’t choose me. You lied about loving me, Mhambi.”

Turn down the heat.

“That was never a lie, I loved you, Thandikela. But like a fool, you always chased after my brother. You

found him better because he was well off.”

“You were married to Petunia.” Hurt in her voice.

“My brother was married too, besides, I wanted you as well.”

“Knowing well I don’t share a man?”

“Yet you shared brothers?”

Where is Mhambi? This can’t be Petunia’s Mhambi.

“How dare you?” Thandikela seethes, through clamped teeth. Pity she’s not a 2000, Mhambi would be nursing a throbbing cheek right now.

“It’s the truth, I declared my love to you. Promised you a better life, you said no. I had to chase after you for a year. While you hopped in and out of my brother’s bed and when he told you he wasn’t going to leave his wife nor take a second wife, you came to me for comfort.”

“You make it sound like I forced myself on you.”
Thandikela.

“Whatever happened between us that day was consensual. I was blinded by my love for you and thought that one nightstand will finally bring us close. But you went back to my brother’s bed, leaving me to nurse a broken heart.” Anyone could tell that this man is not over whatever happened.

“For a while, I thought Bambindlovu was mine. You broke me when you showed me the DNA test. I was never the same after that.” Shame, where’s Petunia?

“Your brother was capable of taking care of us, he was going to give us a comfortable life.” Thandikela.

“So you were after his money, that’s why you trapped him with a baby.”

“I didn’t trap him with a baby.”

“Yes you did, you’ve always been conniving and

manipulative. You thought giving him the son he's always talked about would make him leave his wife for you."

"That is a lie." A balled fist slams against the table. "I didn't trap him because Bambindlovu is your son." Mhambi's eyes widen, slowly they crawl over Thandikela's head.

Someone is behind her, that cologne hits her nostrils and churns her stomach. Leisurely, she turns to find her son. He's carrying a tray with food in it, unshed tears in his eyes.

Quivering all of a sudden, Thandikela shoots up. "So... Sokalisa."

Her Sokalisa moves back when trembling hands try to touch him.

He places the tray on the table, and turns to leave the eatery.

"See what you've done?" Mhambi doesn't respond,

he's paralyzed by shock.

"This is why I wanted you far away from us." Shaking with anger, she sputters and storms out of the restaurant.

Bambindlovu bumps into a few bodies on his way out of the mall, his mind is too disarrayed to stop and offer apologies like he would normally do. It wasn't this crowded when they entered KFC, like ants on a hill, people seem to swamp around him; stifling his space. Weaving through the crowds is suddenly difficult, yet he presses, desperate to get out.

BAMBINDLOVU IS YOUR SON

The confession is on replay in his head. Thandikela lives on 'Lies Street' she eats lies for a living. What other conclusion can he come up with? How did he

miss this? The signs, the hints, his mother's hostility towards the Buthelezi?

"Sokalisa." A desperate womanly voice calls after him, chills ripple through him at the sound of it. He should be turning to face his mother, it's not what he wants though; he doesn't want to see her face or hear any more of her lies.

Who does he tell this to? He would burden Liyana but he'd rather talk to someone who would relate, like Amara. They are not there yet, but are working in building their sibling relationship.

'Please meet me at Southgate mall, it's important.'

His chest is rising and falling by the time he presses send. He gets a response within five seconds.

'Okay.'

It's not much, it also means she cares enough to travel all the way to the South just for him.

Sokalisa please wait.” It sounds different when Mhambi calls him by the name he cherishes so much, not only that but it drains all the strength from his knees. The feeling of wanting to turn and throw himself in his father's arms overwhelms him. His voice is thick with authority, parental. It's what Bambindlovu needs, what he's always needed. His feet waver, dragging towards the car parked just three rows from the exit.

No human is spotted around, this will give them time to talk. They have to talk. Running is never an option, it's Thandikela's favourite extreme sport and he hates it.

Mhambi is allowed into the vehicle because he's not at fault, he was also kept in the dark. The reason Thandikela has joined them in the back seat is because she has a lot of explaining to do.

“Why?” The question comes after a long moment of

silence. Shame envelops the elderly woman, tears come to parade down her cheeks. Hers are forever on standby and they do wonders, never disappointing her. Thandikela has failed to look into her son's eyes, she's got nothing to offer but a lousy apology.

"Don't hate me please." Comes next and irritation crawls under her son's skin. Annoyance shows itself on his face, full and unashamed.

"Answer me, maOlady." Today he meant to snap, to drill some sense into her thick skull. Her tears know how to play this game, they've been loyal all her life and no way will they accept defeat.

Sobs join the party, a smile is shown on Mhambi's face. He's rather accustomed to this side of Thandikela.

"Why did you do this to me? Why would you lie to me all these years?" Hurt is found in his voice. "All my life you had me thinking I was fatherless, you kept me away from my father. Do you hate me that much

mama?"

"No!" Her diction is accompanied by a headshake.
"You're my son, I love you."

"You don't know anything about love, you're selfish mama. You don't care about anyone but yourself."

"I'm sorry Sokalisa." She tries to speak through the tears. A mannish voice begs Bambindlovu to calm down, his father places a hand on his shoulder.

"She's your mother, don't talk to her like that."

Okay, where the hell is Petunia? This one won't let his son vent.

"How do I look past what she did baba?"

He blinks away tears, trying to keep his sanity because it's about ready to flee. Bouncy hands touch him, they are warm, a mother's touch in which he

once found comfort. It's not the same anymore, now her touch makes him cringe. That's why he shrugs them away.

"She lied to me, told me my father died." Seeing the tears in his eyes, Mhambi lets him yell. But his anger does not find Thandikela well. "She purposely kept me away from you, she told me she'd disown me if I ever associated myself with you. All this while she was running from the truth, from you baba."

"It's me Sokalisa, your mother. Are you going to speak about me like that?" Emotional blackmail-train on standby.

"No, you have no right to call yourself that."

"Please don't say that to me." Panic forces more tears down her face. "I did it for you, to protect you."

"Protect me from what?" He shouts.

“Them,” A short finger points towards a shocked Mhambi. “You don’t know these people my son. They are selfish, they don’t love you. I’ve known them long enough to attest to this.”

“That is a lie Thandikela.” Way to go Mhambi, it’s nature that he stands up for his family. “What did we do to you to make you think like that?”

“You refused to acknowledge me and my son, your brother refused to...”

“To what? Choose his wife over you?” Ouch Mhambi. “I don’t remember a day Bambindlovu was not welcome in the Buthelezi homestead, my brother acknowledged him as his son. Yes he was married, and it was stupid of him to have affairs outside his marriage with no plans of taking responsibility for his actions. But not once did he ever deny this boy his rights, he accepted him and did his fatherly duties. You know that damn well. You wanted my brother all to yourself, you wanted him to leave his

wife for you.”

“I had a right over him as much as his wife did, she couldn’t even give him a son. When he found out he was going to have a son, he should’ve left that woman and her daughter. What good is a girl child? I did what his wife couldn’t, I gave the Buthelezi a boy child. I did what Petunia couldn’t do as well.”

True colours are beautiful, you’ve got to love them.

“I was the only one able to give the Buthelezi an heir, someone who would carry their legacy. You were supposed to worship the ground I walked on, made sure your brother left his wife for me. The only woman capable to birth an heir.” She’s settled on the edge of the seat, pointing accusatory fingers at Mhambi.

Pure disgust latches Mhambi’s features. “Do you hear yourself Thandikela? What you’re saying does

not make sense. What is wrong with you?"

Please, someone tell Petunia she is not needed anymore. Mhambi is handling this well.

"Nothing is wrong with me, everything is wrong with you and your family. You're all a bunch of ungrateful hypocrites. This is why I took him away from you, I had to punish your family for not putting your brother in place. Taking their only heir, and I believe none of your wives were able to give birth to male children."

What is that smile on Thandikela's face? Such a prideful woman.

"So I'm right?" Due to anger, Bambindlovu's presence in the vehicle was long forgotten. Eyes as big as saucers, Thandikela turns to her son. It is in this moment that she realises, she has revealed more than she should.

“You used me, maOlady, you used me to take revenge on my father and his brother. Why are you so evil?”

“I’m your mother, watch your mouth.” The tears on her face... yes those ones, they stem from years of anger.

“I did not dispute that, I also don’t have to tolerate you.” Bambindlovu.

“What are you saying, Sokalisa?”

“I’m saying I want nothing to do with you.” Not this, he can’t disown her. He’s everything to her.

“You can’t do that, I’m not at fault here.” Thandikela snarls, voice trembling. “It’s their fault, I told you the Buthelezis are toxic. Look what they are doing to us.”

Bambindlovu shakes his head, he’s seen the light.

“It’s the fact that you refuse to see your wrongs that irks me, you messed up mama. You lied to me, you lied to my father and uncle, and you still have the pluck to put the blame on innocent people. All

because you feel you were not acknowledged for birthing a male child. You disgust me.”

A tender pain shatters against his face, tears find a way to invade his eyes. The slap is nothing, it’s what she’s done to him that has devastated him.

“Thandikela.” A little too late, don’t you think Mhambi? The elder woman’s eyes rise with the mission to go through the ceiling.

“It’s okay baba,” Bambindlovu interposes, an indignant tone. “My mother finds pleasure in slapping her son.”

At this, he leaves the car. He’d rather be away from this woman, perhaps distance will calm him down.

There’s an urgent need to trace her son’s footsteps, apologise maybe. Her hand is gripped, forcing her to sit back down. These eyes she’s looking into are not the kind eyes she once knew,

“Don’t you ever lay your hand on my son again.”
Mhambi sizzles, tightening the grip on her arm. “His father is here now, he won’t have to put up with your nonsense anymore.”

A tongue click complements Mhambi’s threat, and with that he jumps out of the caravan. Headed to god-knows where, leaving Thandikela in the company of her ego, her crocodile tears and recklessness.

*

*

.

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Six

ZITHA-

Over the past weeks, crowds came together, marched the streets of Johannesburg to fight for justice for Sipho. A black man was wrongly shot at by a man who thinks the world owes him something because of the color of his skin.

*JUSTICE FOR MNDENI

*PRAY FOR SIPHO

*BLACK DOES NOT MEAN DANGER

*AMABHUNU AYIZINJA

*SIPHO MARRY ME

*LET ME TAKE YOUR PLACE MNDENI

*RAMA FIGHT FOR MNDENI

The news about Sipho spread all over the country, thanks to his sister Sbahle who went to all social media platforms to spread awareness. The response was unexpected, people going crazy over the case.

Sipho has been titled a hero, his face is plastered all over TV. He regained consciousness about a month ago. One thing has changed, he's not the Sipho we knew. He's become well known all in a space of four months, he's on every news channel, TV programme, game shows. He was once featured on one of the daily telenovelas as himself.

It's crazy how one person can go from nothing to something in a twinkling of an eye. Sipho Mndeni has become South Africa's most sought after bachelor.

Funny how he continues to drive taxis, you can imagine the chaos in his taxi. Kenneth had to ask him to step down to avoid trouble, but the man is

stubborn. Perhaps he enjoys the attention he gets from fans. Women are at the top of the chain, embarrassingly throwing themselves at him.

I think things would be different if he were an ordinary middle class citizen, perhaps they are after his money. The government paid him a hefty amount of money for the trouble he went through, different companies sponsoring him with whatever they can, money mostly.

His father has not been found. They continue to look for him. Sbahle and Siba his sisters went as far as seeking help from Khumbulekhaya. It's possible he was killed and buried somewhere in the woods, in a shallow grave.

Today is one of those days I doek up, wear a skirt and visit my old lady. Sizakele wanted to come with, she was reluctant in tagging along. She's been quiet since we left, something is amiss but I don't want to

dwell much into it. You never know with her, might be boyfriend problems. She leaves the car as soon as Mandla parks on the side. I doubt she's been to see my mother since she died.

"And then? That one?" I say mostly to myself, gaze on her as she's striding away. "We'll leave her here if she gets lost, I can't be yelling at the grave yard. Imagine all those dead people hearing my voice, that's a nightmare I'm not up for."

A light titter has me turning to my right, Kenneth's empty smile does not match the chuckle. His eyes are filled with concern.

"Come here." He pulls me in for a brief hug as he says this. "Do you want me to come with you?"

"If it was dark, yes." I appreciate his gesture. Why does he look worried though? "Don't worry, if we see anything supernatural, I'll push my cousin toward it

and run for my life.”

I’m trying to lighten up the mood, I think it works because he grants me a ghost of a smile. His hand is like velvet to my skin, his eyes are like a flame to my soul. He tells me he loves me without telling me he loves me.

“I’m not moving in with my mother, Kenny. I’ll be back.”

His stubble is ticklish under my hand. His worry worries me.

“What’s wrong, baby?”

He replies with a headshake, my lips feel his for the umpteenth time today and it’s barely 12pm. It’s best I leave the car, he’s not going to tell me what the problem is.

Strange how my cousin easily found the grave.

“Have you been here before?” I didn’t know she cared enough to visit my mother.

“Yes, with mom.” What? Nokzola hated the woman lain in this grave.

“How did I not know this?” Sizakele has not looked at me one bit, her side-view is not something I’d like to keep for memory. Head bowed, eyes immersed on the grave, she answers my question.

“Because you were sleeping most of the time.” The words emerge in a whisper, I hardly catch some of the syllables.

“I don’t sleep during the day, explain what you mean.” If I’m reading correct, her voice is coated with guilt. I want to turn her around, to see if her face matches her voice.

“The week she died, my mother and I came here almost every night.”

For a reason unknown, chills rush through my body, they have me shivering at her words.

“What?” I nearly choke on the word, the hairs on legs

stand, my knees weaken. Sizakele pays me no mind, tears have come to claim her eyes.

“Aunty, I’m sorry for everything.” That was loud, I turn to see if there’s anyone around who also witnessed her ugly cry.

The car we came with is not far from here, Kenneth is leaning against it, looking like an overpaid undertaker. I need to do something about those black clothes he wears. Dlozi will want to follow in his footsteps since they are so close, can’t have my baby wearing black all the time, people will think we fostered him from a cult.

The ugly cry grips me back, I whip my head to her direction. She’s on her knees, weeping. Palms plastered on the red soil. She didn’t cry the day I buried my mother. Is it not too late in months to be showing compassion?

“I’m sorry aunty, I should’ve stopped her.” Sizakele continues to cry, curiosity nudges me. I’m not fond of suspense.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m sorry Zitha.” People who cry make me uncomfortable, It’s getting awkward and I’m not about to put her head on my chest.

“Sizakele get up and tell me what you’re talking about.” She’s got me shouting at a place I should be showing respect. “What are you sorry for?”

She’s shaking her head, wailing stubbornly. I don’t care. I need to know what she’s apologising for. What did they do to my mother?

The silence scrabbles through my bones, I want to smack her across the face, get her to talk.

In a twinkling, I find myself towering over her and grabbing her shoulders. Her cries rise steeply when I briskly start shaking her. Anger in place of pain, it has me by my tits. Pulling at every nerve in my body, pushing me to cause damage.

“Your mother’s death was not an accident, my mother killed her.” The confession spurts from her

quavering lips.

My heart halts, probably the reason why my head is spinning. This can't be, it can't be real. Releasing her, I wobble back a centimetre. Trembling like Christmas Jelly. Sizakele meets my eyes, her face is drenched with tears and snort. An ugly cry at work.

“Your mother was born with luck, apparently she got it from their maternal grandmother. That’s why things went well for her, you two lived a comfortable life before you moved in with us. Mom did everything in her power to seal that luck, she put ischitho on her. That’s when everything went south for aunty. From the beginning, the plan was to kill her. It became easier when you moved in with us.”

I feel a presence behind me, his scent stops me from startling. Kenneth is always on time, my breath hitches as I wait for his arms to surround me, he disappoints. That’s alright, as long as he’s here, lest I’m too weak to take the news. Sizakele has dropped

her gaze, must be out of shame.

“Every night without fail, at exactly 3am, Mandela would enter her room and wrap himself around aunty. He would suck her blood, that’s how her sickness started. That’s why doctors couldn’t pick it up.”

“Who is that?” Though dazed and immobile, I manage a question.

“My mother’s snake, he lives in her room, in the wardrobe. That’s why I can’t move out of the house. He will kill me if I do, he needs a master to feed him and order him around.”

I must be stuck in a horrendous Nigerian movie where there are cults and shit. Or this is a terrible dream and my mother will wake me up and tell me everything was nothing but a bad dream.

“He was like slow poison to her body. The first night Mandela visited your mother, I heard her tell mom

in the morning that she had sleep paralysis. It happened again and again until her limbs gave up on her. There was no way she was going to guess what it was because she couldn't see him."

This is the purest form of evil. How did I not see them for who they are? There were signs, and I ignored them. How could I have been so blind?

Arms girdle my waist in time for me to release a gasp, he's still behind me, locking me in his embrace. After the Tshilidzi incident, I had promised myself never to cry again. But I have suddenly forgotten everything as I struggle to grasp Sizakele's confession. There's more, she tells me more unspeakable things they did to the woman who gave me life.

My thoughts shift. They tilt and fall into bottomless depths.

Why my mother? I want to ask, but I don't want her to keep talking. With everything in me, I want her to

shut up. To never utter a word in her life again, I want to do to her what they did to my mother.

“Shut up!” I scream, staggering deeper into Kenneth. He steadies me, with no word from him.

“I’m sorry Zitha, I should’ve stopped her.”

She’s still talking, “After aunty died, mom wanted to use her, turn her into a zombie because she couldn’t get to you. You were protected by her, and our grandmother. They were able to keep you safe from the grave and mom hated you even more for that. She hated that she couldn’t touch you.”

I gasp at the revelation, the first breath so painful that tears pool in my eyes. I don’t want to cry, I thought heartbreak was a thing of the past. Why does it always find me?

My hands rush to cloak my ears, “No more, I don’t want to hear anymore.” I cry out in pain as she continues to sing like a bird, her speech destroying

me from within.

“Zithobile,” He turns me in his arms, a finger on my chin, he tilts my head up so I’m looking into his eyes. Soft. Homey. Worry. “It ends here... today. You’ll never feel pain again. I swear on your mother’s grave.”

“Get her out of here, Kenneth.” I don’t ever want to see her face.

“No.” A scream erupts from behind me, I’m too hurt to turn and face her. “Please help me, I’m not a witch Zitha. I’ve always been against my mother’s evil doings, she’d force me to do things I didn’t want. Help me kill that snake, please. It’s troubling me, I want to live a normal life. I’m tired of being surrounded by evil.”

Earnest eyes are looking into mine, I think he wants me to forgive Sizakele. It would be a cold day in hell before that happens. I remember her words. How she told me how much she hated me, I remember

every insult.

“That day at the hospital, you showed no compassion after my mother died. You can’t possibly tell me you had nothing to do with it.”

“Please forgive me, don’t let me go back to that house. He’s going to kill me one day, I’m too young to die Zitha. Please.”

“Living with that snake will be your punishment, Sizakele. If you want help, get it from someone else.”

I’m done with family, toxic is toxic. I’m not going to associate myself with any of them.

“Get me out of here.” I plead with Kenneth, my hand in his, he starts to lead the way.

“I knew you were never going to help me.” A strained voice clogs me from moving further. “A least fix auntie’s grave, she’s not resting in peace. My mother had told me that only a prophet can reverse the curse.”

This time, shock forces me to turn, in time for her to plunge a knife through her stomach. Bloody hell. I don't feel anything, I'm too numb to move. Maybe I'm heartless, it's their fault. They ripped my heart out, made me their dream zombie.

"MaMthombeni." The smooth intonation says he expects me to cry for her, I'm dry as a desert. A corpse cannot feel anything, my aunt and her child killed me the day they killed my mother.

"Take me home." I sound cold, and probably look it as I impassively watch my cousin bleed to death. Why did she choose to die in front of my mother's grave when hers is buried not far from here? Nonsense.

His arms have not left my body, he leads me towards the car and snuggles me the minute we settle down. Mandla doesn't have to be told to drive.

"They are all gone now," He's whispering in my ear, planting faint kisses while at it. "Everyone who's ever hurt you, will never hurt you again. I'll always protect you and Dlozi with my life. I promise."

Strangely, my mind serves me with thoughts of Nokzola, Ulwazi and her family. Did he get them killed?

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Seven

ZITHA-

The knock at the door reveals the pantsula wearing-new celebrity. I think he'll smile like the Siphos I know, but he gives me a forbearing look. His father's disappearance has taken a toll on him and his family, Kenneth has looked high and low, it's as if the man has disappeared from the face of the earth.

"If you have no use for the money in your account, give it to me." I tease and get a simper from him, he slides in the house and stands in the corridor. "Is this the part where I call the fashion police on you? AmaTrompies wore it better, you know?"

Clap hands for me, I've made Siphos Mndeni laugh. Okay, it wasn't a laugh. A chortle is something, give me a break.

“There’s nothing wrong with my outfit, muntu ka bafo.”

Yhii! We are still there? I’m not complaining, I love being umuntu ka bafo. He loves me just right, it’s almost refreshing.

“Find a woman first, then come and tell me how she feels about you dressing like you’re going to a dance competition.” The Pantsula wearing freak grins, he’s still a beautiful black man. He cocks his head as he folds his arms across his chest.

“I have women, and they don’t seem to mind what I wear.” Listen to this one. He reminds me of Liyana’s fiancé. He thinks every day is heritage day, that one needs a wakeup call.

“Women?” I snort, shook to the core. He’s becoming Mr. Casanova. “You mean STD and HIV and unplanned pregnancies and...”

Where is he going? I’m still talking. I saunter after him, he knows his way around my house. Imagine that.

“Where is bafo?”

I’m being ignored? Fine. I will let his mother deal with him.

“Shower.”

It’s right after 1pm, that’s why there’s an uncomfortable look on Siphos face. I should’ve said toilet. Now he knows what went down in this house before Kenneth jumped in that shower.

I don’t have to tell him to sit, he does it out of his free will. Not before he rushes to the kitchen and grabs a bottle of Black Label. How he stomachs that? I’ll never know.

“How is our baby?” He means Dlozi. “I miss him.”

I join him on the sofa, “You wouldn’t miss him if you hadn’t been busy entertaining the whole country,

Sipho Mndeni.”

This name has gone far.

“Uthwele Sipho?” I’m curious, it’s a relief he’s not offended by my random question. He laughs till tears prickle his eyes, it’s good to see him laugh after everything that has happened.

“Yindaba?” (Why)

Right... we’re back to being serious.

“Fame follow you, money follow you, women follow you.” I sing to Davido’s follow you song, he’s laughing again. I like, I like. Marketing for what? Speed dial Trevor Noah for me.

“Favour is not fair, but somebody’s got to have it.”

Anyone would say this with pride, but this man is as humble as pie. That’s what white people say, right? Argh, idioms will crack your head.

“Yeah, some people make us believe they are

favoured while they know they don't sleep at night, busy chanting other people's names, or entertaining snakes."

"I'm not some people." Siphho.

"If you say so, Mndeni." I stand, ready to head out. "I was on my way out."

He doesn't know what to say to this. He's drinking the Black Label, as if it was brewed from the Coca-cola company.

I would say goodbye to Kenneth, but he hates where I'm going. Bulelwa is not his favourite person, the bastard does not understand that Bulelwa is gay and has a husband. When I told him I was offered a job by the man in question, somewhere in the marketing department. Kenneth transparently told me that I don't need to work for another man when mine has all the money I'll ever need.

He thinks I will stay home, have sex with him and birth him a nation of babies. I see he wants to continue from where Abraham left off. I'm not cut

out to be a house wife, boredom and I don't gel.

“Uyaphi MaMthombeni?” (Where are you going?)

Sheesh. I should've used the window, it would've been faster. Releasing the door handle, I spin to find the man in my space. So close I can smell how fresh he is, the scent travels south, making sacred places twitch at the wrong time. He's got to be kidding me.

“Don't tell me, you've adopted my style of showering for two minutes.” I'm stalling.

“You're leaving without saying goodbye?” Big baby queries.

That's all he's going to say to me? What, am I talking to myself here?

“I'm running late, Kenny. Bulelwa is waiting for me.” I say, dropping my phone in my handbag. Does he

have the right to look disappointed?

“You’re taking the job?”

This question should not be making me feel guilty. I didn’t tell him, I’m taking the job, just that I was offered employment. Luck does not come every day and I need this. For me, for the dreams my mother had for me and for Dlozi.

“Yes, baby. I’m taking the job.” My hands roam his body till they land on the small of his back, he doesn’t hold me but keeps his hands in the pockets of his pants. Oh well!

“You know you’ll be doing a nine to five, right?”
Raised eyebrow and all.

“Yes baby, I know.” Must be fun. Staying home is not fun, I’ll pass.

“And you’ll be surrounded by other people, right?”
Ehh!

“Yes baby, I know.”

Would this be an appropriate time to roll my eyes?
I’m five-to doing so.

“Most of them will be men, you know that right?”

Ooohhh! This is what it’s about. Argh shame, my old man, Jehovah. Bless his virgin heart.

“I only have eyes for you Kenny.” I might look when I see eye candy but it doesn’t mean I’ll touch, and Kenneth’s got me hooked.

“I know,” He mumbles, confidently so.

Why the questions though? At long last, his hands find me, they grip my hips, pulling me closer so there’s no space between us. The kiss takes me by surprise.

“Come home soon.”

As if I will find him here, he’s forever at work. I make the empty promise, kiss him and skid out. Don’t get me wrong, I love him like a fat kid loves chocolate cake, but I need to eat my youth... I mean enjoy my youth.

Mandla must be tired of driving me around, I can’t stay in one place for too long. Maybe it’s time I put

my vagina to use and ask the eater of the cake to get me a car. I know he'll dismiss the fact of me driving myself around, he needs to relax.

"How was the ritual yesterday?" Mandla asks, he's all for small talk. I like him. It can't be strange that I see a father in this man.

"It went well, actually."

About yesterday, we found a prophet who helped clean my mother's grave. Turns out Sizakele was right, she wasn't resting in peace. Maybe that's why she never looked happy in my dreams. I had to go for cleansing at a river. Cold water and I will never be friends again. An uncle surfaced from somewhere in this country. He's my mother's elder brother, one of my grandfather's many children that are scattered all over South Africa.

Kenneth didn't say anything, but I know he's got everything to do with it. He's nice, the uncle. I haven't met his family yet. I'm hoping soon, it will be good for me to keep a slice of my mother. Her brother is

the closest I can get so far.

Kenneth took care of Sizakele's burial, I had a change of heart when we got home that night. Luckily, he had sent people to fetch Sizakele's body.

Nokzola is to be blamed for my cousin unravelling, she was young. I should've listened to her and helped her, her death gives me sleepless nights sometimes. Nothing spiritual, just a guilty conscious. Damn you anger, look what you made me do.

The snake was dealt with, don't ask me how. I was not allowed to go, Kenneth went with the prophet to the house. It still stands, with poise. I don't care. I will never enter those premises again.

Johannesburg CBD welcomes us in less than 45 minutes, I thank Mandla and stride down Main Street. The place is not far from Ghandi Square. The building is very posh, if I stepped in here months before I met Kenneth, I would have felt out of place.

The reception area shows a skimpy woman in a dress too tight to be worn to work. The weave on her

head must have cost her an arm and a leg.

“Hi, is Bulelwa in.”

Dislike at first sight? Okay, I see.

“Who are you? Do you have an appointment?” She looks disgusted by my presence.

“Zitha, he asked me to come.” I don’t want to bring Zitha from Orange Farm into this, but if she continues with this attitude...

“Chomie.” An acquainted friendly voice turns me around. Thank God he’s here... with his husband. The men look and smell expensive, definitely blending in with the interior of the garish place.

“I thought grandpa bae would keep you from coming.” Kenneth is who Bulelwa is talking about. My laugh bone shakes and releases a cheerful sound through my mouth.

“He doesn’t have a choice, I am my own woman.” That is a fact.

“Yes queen.” His sassy response comes with a brief

hug, Zizwe nods as a salutation. He's getting used to me, but he won't admit it.

"And then, what's with your secretary looking like she's going to Konka?" It's his turn to laugh, it's loud and has Zizwe shaking his head with a ghost of a smile.

"She's been around for too long that she's grown too comfortable." Bulelwa entertains, hooking his arm around mine.

Oh! She's those ones.

"Buttercup, I'll call you when I get there." Buttercup is given a quick kiss, it's how he's looking into Bulelwa's eyes that has me worshipping their kind of love. He looks at him like he's the only thing that exists, the only thing that should exist.

"I love you." Zizwe tells him and ambles off before Bulelwa can return the fondness.

"Your man walks like he rubs shoulders with Bill Gates." Bulelwa laughs at my observation, my gaze

shifts to him and finds him literally lusting over his husband, as he watches him stroll until he's out of the building.

"He loves me as if he's cousins with Azwindini, in this sad case, I'm who-Susan." A bubbly reply from him as he drags me away, I can't stop myself from laughing. "Let's get you to that interview room."

BAMBINDLOVU-

"I will make a plan sir."

This is what he told the father of the woman he loves when he asked where he'll house his daughter and grandbaby.

The money he makes as a truck driver is not much to get him a house, Capitec disappointed when he went to seek for a loan. The three months bank statement was not much help, it's the salary that's

not enough. The bond application was not approved. He could get them an affordable house in the South, start small. He's been looking at houses in Glenvista. So far, he's found nothing affordable. Time is working against him, the wedding is approaching like a hurricane.

The one bedroom apartment in Jabulani is what he can afford at the moment, but he wants the best for his family.

Lobola negotiations went as planned, thanks to his father, he was able to pay the asked amount. Now he's allowed to have his woman over whenever he visits. His father in-law was gracious enough to give him a week off. It gives them time to plan the wedding.

Three months ago, the day he proposed to Liyana was the happiest day of his life. Sadly he had to go back to work the very next day. They could've gotten married earlier, before she gained the baby weight that's got her high on hormones but fate has a way

of detecting people's lives.

"Bam-Bam!" The scream forces him to his feet, twists his heart and has his head spinning. He throws his phone on the couch and runs to the bedroom, following the direction the sound came.

"Lili, Lili, hold on I'm coming." He's shouting, running as if the house is on fire. He almost slips and falls when he pushes the bedroom door open.

Panting and holding the door for anchor, he asks.
"What is it? Is the baby coming?"

The last question leaves his mouth without his permission, Liyana glares up at him from the double bed. The room looks a mess, clothes scattered everywhere. She looks a mess herself, hair unkempt and half naked. Men's trunks is the only thing that fits her, plus a sports bra, that fits her full breasts.

"What?" She's confused by his last question. "I'm seven months pregnant, Bam-Bam."

Now he's confused. "You screamed."

"Yes, because I can't find my dildo." His mouth hangs open as shock prods him. Not sure he heard right, Bambindlovu takes slow steps toward Liyana. He'd get close but she looks scary right now. She stands from the bed, hands glued to her hips. A bull ready to fight is what she looks like.

"I'm not sure I follow, Lili. Uthi kwenzenjani?" I mean he has to be sure. A frown crosses Liyana's face, maybe he shouldn't have asked.

"I can't find my dildo, it's green, the size of..."
Confidently she repeats, glowering at the man who's responsible for her looking like Barney the friendly dinosaur.

"A dildo?" He interrupts.

"Yes, it's a..."

"I know what a didlo is. Why would you have a dildo?" This is something he needs to hear.

"Why would you ask me a stupid question? What are

dildos for?” Liyana snaps.

“Mfethu, you don’t own a dildo.” He snaps back, maybe they share pregnancy hormones. Liyana looks ready to attack, her brows crinkle in annoyance, and like the three little pigs, she huffs and puffs an exasperated breath.

“I do too, Zitha bought it for me for my 18th birthday. Do you want me to call her and ask?”

“No, no. That’s insane.” He’s not the type to share his bedroom matters with friends, not even his closest friends.

“Why would Zitha buy you a dildo?” His query paints a deeper frown on Liyana’s forehead.

“Because unlike someone I know, she loves me.” Okay, this is getting befuddling, Bambindlovu scowls in confusion. He knows what she’s talking about.

“Is this because we haven’t been having sex?” It’s a wild guess from him. “Is that why you’re in search of an imaginary dildo?”

If she had one, he would've known by now of course. They've been together since van toeka af. Jesus came, died and rose again and they are still pushing their thing; that's how long it feels to him.

"Liyana throws her hands up, showing how unfulfilled she's becoming.

"Would you stop saying dildo? The word is starting not to make sense, and it's not imaginary." A shout from the baby carrier, Bambindlovu gulps.

"You said it first, Mfethu." Men are like kids, they panic when you confuse them.

"Fine, I won't say the word anymore." She's still snippy, Liyana lets her feet lead her to the wardrobe. A long mustard maternity dress is picked out. "Why are you not changing?"

The question is for the umblaselo wearing freak.

"Where are we going?"

"To an adult shop." Her answer has Bambindlovu choking in his saliva. "You're buying me a dildo, Bam-Bam."

This must be a bad joke.

“Mfethu, you can’t be serious. We are not going there, you’re not getting a dildo Lili.”

“You can’t do this to me, Bam-Bam.” Emotions have their way with her. “Look at me, I’m fat, unattractive and horny. I can’t stop eating, I walk like a Japanese sumo wrestler and I haven’t had sex in months. What do you want me to do with myself?”

Wide eyed and mouth ajar, he gasps before covering his open mouth in shock.

“Umdavazo? Mfethu, you’re crying because of umdavazo?” (Sex)

His words seem to prick her where it hurts, angry eyes narrow at him. In her head, she’s probably slit his useless throat, cut him to pieces and stored his remains in a freezer.

“Yes.” Liyana can’t seem to keep her voice down.

“Yes, I’m crying because of sex. Do I not have a right to sleep with my fiancé?”

“But we’ll hurt the babies, there are two of them in there in case you forgot. There is barely space to accommodate me.” Bambindlovu.

“The doctor said it’s okay.” Desperation has a voice, it sounds like Liyana’s.

“No.” He shakes his stubborn head, crossing his arms across his chest. “I don’t trust people with a bad hand writing.”

Liyana’s eyes do a flip, “You don’t have to go deep.” Okay, parental guidance is advised.

“It’s still risky, Lili. Can’t we wait till the babies are born?”

The tears refuse to depart from her, snivelling, she drapes her body with the dress she picked.

“Fine, we’re going to buy the stupid dildo.”

There’s a pair of white snickers at the foot of the bed, putting them on is harder than algebra. At this point, she’s basically trying to solving for X and maths has

never been her favourite subject.

With great difficulty, she settles on the edge of the bed. "Come help me with my shoes." Liyana.

It's not like he has a choice, plus, he doesn't mind even though he thinks pregnant women are a lot of work. Their eyes lock as he kneels before her, a look of affection that; at an ordinary day like when she's not pregnant and high on hormones, would stretch a smile on her face.

"Mashenge, my beautiful bride. My boneless Chicken Licken wings, my skopo delux sakwa Mai-Mai."

That's a good way to start, soften the Godzilla up.

"I'm not your wife yet, Mashenge for what?"

The pout makes his heart pliable, "You're half-past to being Mashenge." He's right. "Very soon you'll be wearing isicwaya ne sidwaba (leather skirt), dancing for me in front of our friends and family. By the end of that day you will no longer belong to the Okolies, you'll be my Mashenge and I will never let you go."

Ah! There goes her heart dancing like it's New year's eve.

“Say, do you think dildos come in 1 centimetre? You know, something that won’t...”

“Don’t patronise me, Bam-Bam.”

He heaves a sigh, as he ties the last shoe lace. His heart is sitting on his throat, thumping firmly, and it’s getting hard to breathe. There’s something he needs to say, it’s bothering him and will eat him up if he doesn’t vent. The first step he takes is backwards, just in case his woman decides to attack. He rubs his forehead, a habit of his whenever he’s nervous. He focuses on her innocent eyes, rather than the grimace on her face.

“You’re not cheating on me, Liyana, I will not allow it.”

“What are you talking about? I’d never cheat on you.” She says, without a flake of hesitation. A grin and pride kiss his lips, his breathing steadies and eyes gleam with adoration. Liyana simpers when he places a hand on his chest, chasing a breath that never left him.

Dramatic!

“Phew! Thank God, I couldn’t breathe for a second there, I almost got goose bumps.” Happiness looks good on him.

“Get ready then, I need my toy ASAP.” She tells him, struggling to get back up. Bambindlovu’s world collides with his pride, he thought they had settled this.

“Really, mfethu?” He’s beyond shocked. “You might as well take me to the Gautrain station, call that guy from Squid Game and let me die like a loser because you are killing me.”

Her eyes would compete at a high jump competition and take the trophy home.

“Oh, don’t be melodramatic and get your stuff. You’re paying.” Liyana.

She manoeuvres past him as she says this, it’s his turn to huff and puff and blow off like a chimney.

“Fine,” he concedes. “I’ll have sex with you.”

From the back, he can tell that Liyana is swimming in glee. The smile on her face remains until she's facing him.

"The world is ending," Don't be stunned, men whine as well. The first thing to go is the waistcoat, followed by the leopard print- ingwe vest but the frown on his face is not going anywhere anytime soon. "Men are dying because of umdavasos."

He hardly ever complains, and it's coming from a good place.

"There you have it," he continues.

His precious pants are folded and placed on a dressing table along with the rest of his clothes, his face softens as he chairs his hands on his hips, naked as the day he came into the world.

"I'm naked now, come mfethu. Dildo my foot, what the hell is that anyway? Nithand' izinto Liyana." (You

like things.)

A happy wife, a happy life. Or is it a happy wife, a spared life? Look at him, he's still alive and kicking.

"I love you too Bam-Bam." She chirps, throwing her arms around his neck. A whimper takes over her when steady hands squeeze her plump ass, it's been long since she's felt this sensation.

"Yeah, yeah. Kodwa ngizoyifaka kancane, you have one minute to cum, 60 seconds ndoda. I don't want to hear stories." (I won't go deep.)

Another objection from him, mingled with humour and love. Liyana shuffles back, to get a look at his stupid face.

"Really, Bam-Bam?" She wants to laugh at his stern facial expression.

"Yes, really hau." Yep, he's serious. "I don't want my babies giving me funny looks when they get here.

Nawe don't move, just lie there like a grilled full chicken. It's going to be touch and go mfethu, touch... and... go. No funny business."

Her clitoris is too happy to care.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Eight

AMARA-

With everything that happened, our lives had to be put on hold. Work and school. Not that I need the money I made as a TV anchor, we have enough to buy the station anyway. I just loved the feeling of independence. It's been too long since I've stood in front of a camera and did what I love. Maybe I'll miss it, nonetheless, I'm not too worried about it. My destiny is in Ghana with my husband and children.

We are taking it one step at a time, every day is a dread, but bearable. I no longer force myself to smile, it comes freely, welcomed. Love has forced me to wave goodbye to the twofaced agony I was forced into by fate.

My mourning period has passed, the black clothes

were not burnt but left at a river. Nana's instructions. We were told to leave them there, and walk without looking back.

"Mrs. Okolie." A warm afternoon breeze touches my face and leaves me swaying when a garish voice brings me to life, I gaze across the road where Zitha is waving at me, a wide smile alive in her youthfulness. Alive as I am.

"Hurry, it's getting late." She gestures towards the black G Wagon. Liyana told me, Kenneth got it for her, I was a bit taken aback when I heard they are a couple. It didn't affect me, it's the fact that the world is so small, we meet people we never thought we'd ever see again. Kenneth was there, then he wasn't.

I don't know what happened to him. There once was potential of us becoming friends, he was quiet, laidback. I still have the book he got me. The only gift I ever got from him.

The friendship was never going to work, Randall was not a fan of the man. I'm happy for Kenneth, that he

has Zitha now. Love has no age. I was nineteen when I met Randall and he was well in his thirties.

“Amara, we’re running late.”

The second time, Ayize shouts for me to hurry. I don’t know how they left me behind. Oh yes, I had to validate our parking ticket while they pushed the trolley

Today I was given freedom to leave the house without any guards, thanks to Ayize and her stubbornness. How Randall gives in to her, beats me. I think he secretly has a soft spot for her, something he’ll never admit. We had to pop out of the house to get a few things for the party and Zitha offered to drive us. I think she wanted to escape the pots.

“The queen can’t be this slow.” Ayize criticises.

“Liyana walks faster than you, Amara.”

Liyana would not take this well, at seven months pregnant- nearing eight, she has gained so much weight. It’s the twins. I always tell her when I find her crying because nothing that used to fit fits anymore.

Lobola went as planned, Bambindlovu came through and paid the asked amount. I had to put my husband on a leash, he was planning on leaving the poor guy with holes in his pockets.

I was shocked to learn that he's Mhambi's son.

Aunt Petunia did not take it well, I feel sorry for her. She looks like a lost sheep, part of it has to do with Nelisiwe's disappearance. She'll remember home one day and my aunt will go back to the person she was. Uncle Mhambi looks content, Jonas too, believe it or not. Bambindlovu has brought so much peace into their lives.

They want him home all the time, he's still travelling. Overworking himself to exhaustion, unnecessary if you ask me. Randall and I are paying for the wedding.

"Don't let Liyana hear you say that." Ayize rebuffs my warning with a loud guffaw, she's still as garish as ever.

“Speaking of mommy-to-be, she called. We’re late.”
Zitha’s interjection is almost instant.

Baby Asanda; named after Styles' late sister, turns three months today, we’re all gathered at the Sishis to celebrate their new bundle of joy. The couple is learning to heal, there are days when they stumble and fall. However, we’re always there to pick each other up.

We’re packing the groceries into the car when a random guy offers to help us pack. He’s wearing a neon vest written security.

“Let me help you with those.” His Venda is deep.

It’s normal around here for these guys to help load groceries, I don’t understand why Zitha looks petrified.

“What happened?” I ask her.

“Tshilidzi?” It’s as if the name tastes sour in her mouth. The man stops, glaring hard. I don’t know

how they know each other, but I want him away from us.

“Zithobile, my child. Is this you? You look different, grown and affluent.”

What? Ayize and I exchange glances. This man is her father?

“I am not your child.” Zitha hisses, voice catching on a sharp inhale. The Tshilidzi guy drops his head, shame leaning in on him. “What happened to you?” Zitha, with no care found in the tone of her voice.

“I lost everything, my businesses... my house. I was bankrupt and...”

A raised hand stops his elucidation. “Forget I asked, I’m not interested.”

I don’t know this side to her. Fierce... audacious.

“I was sabotaged Zithobile, I have nothing left now. You have to help me, please. At least give me 10K, I’ll invest it and make...” He holds out his hand to touch her, Ayize has caught on because she pulls Zitha back.

“Don’t touch her.” She catcalls, voice palpably flat. The man draws back, obviously drowning in shame.

“I’m sorry, I want to apologise for everything I ever did to you. You were an innocent girl, I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you.”

Oh God no... not her too.

“Let’s go.” Zitha orders, pivots on her heel, headed to the driver’s side. We pursuit. Ayize jumps in the front, I find a seat in the back. We wait as Zitha sends a text, it’s a relief she’s not too worked up, speed kills.

The sound of Naija music fills the silence between

us, minutes tick by, but no one speaks. It hurts to know that Zitha went through what Ayize and I went through. We were abused by the people who were meant to love and protect us.

Kenneth is waiting in the driveway when we arrive at the Sishis, Neo invited him because Styles wants him here. He rushes to get her door and helps her out of the car. The two are lost in each other's arms, him asking if she's okay. Her soft replies are welcomed by kisses on the curve of her neck.

I get a look from him, but don't stay to find out what it's about. Ayize and I silently follow each other into the house, someone will have to bring the groceries in.

Eyes shift to us when we enter the kitchen, it must be the gloomy expression on our faces that has everyone gawking.

“Are you okay?” That’s Liyana, she’s perched on a chair, there’s a dish of ice cream on the table before her. Bulelwa is whipping something in a bowl, he knows his way around the kitchen. Thandiwe says she taught him what he knows, it’s funny when she tells his ‘rich boy’ story.

“Yeah.” I lie not wanting to spoil anyone’s mood.

Sethu is said to have left with Styles, they are somewhere in the house.

“You guys are late, the men have been served. They didn’t want to wait for salads.” Annoyance is heard in Bulelwa’s voice, you’d never see him associated with the ‘men’ as he puts it. Unless he’s clung on to Zizwe, the clingiest man I’ve ever met. “Where is Zitha?”

The sour tone transitions into a bubbly one in a second. He’s moving his hips to the sound emanating from the mixture and the bowl.

“Outside with her Mkhulu bae.” Ayize would say that of course, to think she was never a fan of Kenneth. I think she tolerates him, like Randall does because well, Styles wants him here. “I’m going to find Neo, someone drained my spirit.”

She means Tshilidzi, I feel the same. He took me back to the past for a while there, reminding me that there will always be men like my uncle Moses... men like Ayize’s father... men like Sethu’s ex.

“What’s that about?” Bulelwa is a curious human being.

“Don’t be so nosy Bubu, mind your own business.” Thandiwe reproaches.

“Impossible, if people want us to stay out of their business then they shouldn’t give anything off. It’s like those couples who post everything on social media, from first date to the day the guy proposes. Come wedding day, no pictures. Just hints that they are getting married, we are left with just

imagination. That's too much work, no thanks, my mind doesn't do overtime."

That was a lot said.

"I agree with Bubu, I also want to know what happened." Liyana steps in, leaving Thandiwe outvoted.

"I would tell you, but it's not my place to tell." I drop the mic, joining Liyana. Since the men have been taken care of, there's really nothing much to do. The moment is cut short by a terrible voice, singing is not for everyone.

'I like shiny things but I'd marry you with paper rings.'

Only one person can be this loud, no scratch that... three people. The voice belongs to Zitha, my assumptions are confirmed when she pounces into the kitchen, dancing like an energetic school kid. Her moods change like Bulelwa's, I find them weird really.

Bulelwa is pulled into the strange movement, they are dancing like white girls at a night club. It's loud, chaotic and puts a smile on my face.

That's a Taylor Swift song playing loudly on her phone,

"Me hemma."

Silence breaks forth, his presence fills the room... intense and slightly worrying. I'm his wife, but sometimes feel intimidated by this aura he carries. It must be the confidence he wears, he wears it with strength and beauty with condescension.

"Let's go." Must he be so serious? I want so bad to straighten that arched brow. I follow his extended hand, feet practically faltering. The kiss on my cheek would drop me to my knees, thankfully the grip around me is tight enough to help me find my footing.

“I missed you, where have you been?” My skin shivers at the sound of the drawl. His warm hand is light on my back, caressing as we make our way to the lounge.

“I was gone less than an hour.”

“Don’t leave me alone for too long again, I felt lost in this place.” He ignores my answer and decides to say his own things. I love clingy Randall, a part of believes he’s trying to fill up the void our baby left.

“I won’t.” I’m lying, he’s crazy.

“Bulelwa had to serve me food, can you believe he went down on his knees? Everyone was looking at me, it was so uncomfortable.” Says the king of Ashanti kingdom.

“You know once you sit on the throne, many people will kneel before you? Presidents included.” I must remind him who he is, this man tends to forget he’s a king.

“That doesn’t matter, just don’t leave me alone again. I hate glimpses of living without you.” His retort stops my feet from moving, he turns still wearing the

furrowed brow.

"Promise we'll grow old together, Randall." I need his assurance. His hand glides up my cheek, a soft touch. Eyes lovingly gazing into mine.

"We're soul mates me hemma, twin flames. That means we'll never be apart."

I accept the kiss he offers, I love it here.

In a while, everyone is gathered in the living room. My smile finds Sethu and her baby, they are perched beside Styles. She looks different every time I see her.

Everyone is here, Nqaba, Nkomo, Zizwe, Neo and Kenneth. He doesn't appear to truly belong. It's as though he's been parachuted from a different era. Whatever conversation he's in, Neo, Nqaba, Zizwe and Nkomo look enthralled. It's as if he could converse without leaving any verbal fingerprint. His

eyes move and in an instantly are glancing my way.

A tight hand squeezes my side, it's Randall, still holding me like I'd escape him the second he lets go.

Needlessly, he pulls me to sit in his lap. Like I said, he's clingy lately, so much it has Kwame complaining sometimes.

Speaking of... the kids are in the garden with Chioma, Ayize had a jumping castle put up. Zulu hated it at first glance, he's a teenager now, surrounded by kids under the age of fourteen. I'm certain he hates his life.

Bulelwa and Thandiwe share a two seater, Liyana perches herself beside us. Zitha is next to her. There's a meeting, clearly. The atmosphere is heavy with tension.

Turning to Ayize for answers, I see her carrying a big framed picture of Sihle in her school uniform. This is what it's about, I didn't think we'd do a tribute. My body stiffens when Neo reveals a baby ultrasound picture, framed. I remember the day we got that, it

was the last ultra sound Randall and I went to. Beneath it, in gold is the name Adekunle Zulukhaya Okolie.

My heart batters like a drum in my chest, debauched and blistering in expectation of something... anything.

“Seven months ago today, two angels were taken from us, way too soon if you ask me.” Ayize starts, creating a spotlight in the middle of the room. Her husband is right next to her. The portraits of our babies hanging beautifully from their hands. “But God has a way of reminding us that he is God, we can never question him. There is a reason he does what he does, and it’s never to inflict pain. He loves you like you were the only one in the world.”

Her eyes move from me to Sethu, I’m having a hard time fighting tears. Randall cuddles me in the folds of his arms, and kisses the curve of my neck.

“Are you okay?” I nod to reply his question.

“Babe, would you like to say something?” Ayize asks, gaze fixated on me.

“You don’t have to stand.” Randall's arms refuse to unlock around me, he’s right. I’d fall if I were to stand. Eyes are on me, deep and penetrating.

My eyes find the baby ultrasound picture, I feel my throat closing up. Hot tears render my vision out of focus.

“My baby.”

Thoughts tumbling, I speak, haltingly. Feeling as if speaking is a foreign, far away concept rather than something I always and regularly do.

“These past months felt like a dream, a hellish dream, the kind in where no matter how fast you run, you barely move. Your father and I had prepared ourselves for your arrival. Your siblings were excited as well, it was hard for them when they learnt you were never coming home. You came unexpectedly and left the same way. There is a reason you are not with us, I need you to know that we love you. You’ll forever be missed my little angel.”

As soon as the words get out, my thoughts click into

place, finally settling into my brain. I have nothing more to say, I've entertained tears for too long.

"You did good," Randall murmurs in my ear, kissing it as if to ease my pain. I appreciate him.

Sethu hands Asanda over to Ayize, Styles takes Sihle's portrait and places it against the coffee table before snaking an arm around his wife.

"I don't want to say much, I'll end up crying if I do." I know what she means, hence my words were limited. "Agony doesn't drown you. It burns the inner core of who you are, leaving nothing but ashes, not even cracked pieces to help you piece something of yourself together. Nothing can compare to the hole in my chest right now, I miss you so much my baby."

Tears find a way to escape through her eyes, she's struggling to continue. Styles holds her in his arms, leisurely running his hand up and down her spine.

"Losing Sihle has been hell," He takes over from her. "For the first time in my life I truly prayed to whatever higher being there is. I was ready to give up my life

to have her back. I went from begging, to bargaining, to complete threats. I vowed that the day I meet God, I will punch him because of the lie he told us.”

His words break up, he’s fighting the stuttering sounds emanating from his mouth. Tears stream down his face, he swipes one away when Sethu clings on to him with both arms, her wet face hidden in her husband’s chest.

“That he’s all powerful, the fact that he could hear me and chose to do nothing. The silence that welcomed me was worse, the inevitable knowledge that you’ve been separated from someone you love and no amount of praying, begging and bargaining would keep them from leaving you.” Styles finishes.

Sadness has come as a painful wave, it feels like a bullet through my heart. It grazes through me, rather than skating over my skin. It travels through every cell to reach my aching heart. Styles and Sethu have it hard, I wish there was something I could do to rid

them of this burden they are carrying.

“Can we please cut this short?” Neo interrupts the sobs that have filled the spacious living area, his timing is perfect. “We can’t be crying like this when there’s a new baby in the house. We came to celebrate life, not mourn. Sheba, le Kenneth o ntse a Ila. Ke manyalla fella, motho enoa is from a cult.” (Kenneth is also crying.)

Kenneth does not spare Neo a glance, he’s focused on Styles and Sethu.

“Baba you don’t say that about people,” Ayize reproaches the father of her kids. “Must I teach you everything?”

“Mara baba ke Kenny, oa Ila. This is something you don’t see every day.” Neo insists and manages to get a few chuckles in the room. Zitha and Bulelwa are on a roll.

“Neo basop,” Zitha budes, it’s funny how Neo gives her a look he’d give a stranger. I hope he recognises her.

“Ke mang eo?” (Who is that?)

I give up with this guy. He knows Zitha as Liyana's friend. She does not take offence, rather laughs at his response. Kenneth is yet to pay attention to any of them.

"Okay, that's enough." Thank you Ayize. "May we get this over with?"

Neo's attempts to make Styles and Sethu laugh were in vain. Their eyes are glued on Sihle's picture.

"My angel, there will come a time when we realise we're living as if you never existed. That won't mean we've forgotten you, it won't mean we're heartless either." Styles stops to wipe the tears on his face.

"Nature abhors a void and life tends to fill in the gaps that death digs. You will always be in our hearts my sweet Sihle, your aunt Asanda will look after you. Rest in power my baby, smile as much as you did when you were with us."

Out of the blue a song fills the speakers, it takes a minute for me to catch Mariah Carey's voice. Who would play such a sad song? The gloomy atmosphere drains my heart, leaving it empty, yet heavy. I shift in Randall's lap to hide my face on his shoulder when the chorus hits.

And I know you're shining down on me from heaven.***

This is the part that hits the most, when you realise your loved one is gone. They are in heaven like the song says and that's something I will never be able to grasp.

No, I can't do this. I can't listen to this song.

"Please turn it off." I whisper to Randall, the pain I had fought hard to forget is starting to crawl back.

"I'll turn it off." Zitha offers, I don't raise my head to check. The music dies down, it takes a second for a

different song to burst through. I don't know it, it sounds like Blaq Diamond. She keeps the volume down.

"Okay, now that that's over." Neo yells over the smooth sound. "Can we talk about Kenneth crying?"

There are complaints and laughs.

"I say we cast votes, Neo needs to be locked up in an asylum." Nkomo's suggestion is laughed upon, not derisively. Some people here seem to love the idea.

"I say we lock him up, I don't know what to do with him anymore." Neo is shocked by his wife's articulation.

"Why did I get married?" He's dramatic.

"Why did I get married too?" Ayize throws back, they will never stop if we give them the spotlight.

"Can we go to the garden?" The man I'm married to requests, a twinge of need smeared in the tone of his voice. "I need to be alone with you, me hemma."

I don't ask questions, but let him lead me outside.
We leave the Maakes in a debate about why they got
married.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Seventy-Nine

LIYANA-

Never in my wildest dreams did I see this day coming. Getting married while heavily pregnant at nineteen was far from my plans. Fate sure knows how to play a tricky one on you.

However, I'm not entirely complaining because well, I'm marrying my best friend.

To avoid the babies born out of wedlock, we're going to sign at the magistrate, I refuse to walk down the aisle looking like a parachute loaded with pandas.

We'll have a proper wedding when the babies turn four or five months. The man I'm going to marry desperately wants a traditional wedding, which makes perfect sense. Apparently, we'll travel to Pongola for that, that's his home, where he was born. It's where his forefathers are buried. We'll have the

traditional wedding first, maybe the white wedding a month later.

A sigh seeps through the seams of my lips at how this off-white dress fits me. I'm not sure I like the way it looks on me, how it makes the baby bump look like an oversized balloon. I went for a tight knee-length dress. Anything loose would've made me look bigger than I really am. Other than that, everything else is perfect, hair, make-up. I'm content.

Isencane lengane,

Aniboyilekelela. (Uban'obenga shad'emncane kangaka.)

isencane lengane.

Joy fills my heart at the loud singing coming from the corridor, smiling widely I turn to the door just as it reveals my girl best friend and Bulelwa. They slide in dancing and singing to this song I relate to, I am

too young to get married like the song says.

But I'm not peevish, I'm in love. I'm forced into a dance I do not want to engage in because I'm too heavy to move, plus I don't want to sweat. I swear, I can never keep up with the energy of these two, sometimes I wonder how we became acquainted with how crazy they are. Our personalities differ tremendously.

"Today is your wedding day." Oh my God, she's screaming. My head hurts, we had a late night yesterday. Zitha and Bulelwa wouldn't let me sleep, these two combined are a mass destruction. It will be a miracle if I make it through today, it's not even a proper wedding. I can't imagine how they'll be on the day of the actual wedding.

"How are you feeling?" At least Bulelwa does not scream, bless him.

"I'm not sure about this dress, can't I wear something else?" This pregnancy has not been kind to me, I thought you glow when carrying a male child.

These two have decided to make me look like Shrek, and mind you these were Bam-Bam's words. Sigh!

My nose looks twice than it's normal size, my feet are swollen most of the time.

"No!" Like twins, they shout in unison. Lord help me get through this day.

"You look perfect Liya," Bulelwa reassures me. "Bam-Bam will drool when he sees you."

"You're sure I don't look like Shrek?" Yey! Insecurity will kill you.

"Please, Shrek wishes he looked like you." That's Bulelwa again. I'm hauled into a hug by Zitha, she's crying.

"My baby is getting married." She makes me sound like a real baby.

"Your baby is going to be someone's wife, stop calling her a baby."

She laughs at my retort.

“Okay, Fiona, let’s get you to the courthouse.” I’m going to slaughter Zitha and these jokes of hers.

“Fiona’s beautiful, better her than Shrek.” Bulelwa jumps in, I’m not going to entertain them. They can have all the fun they want taunting my weight, my time to clap back will come.

There’s a knock, Amara and papa walk in. They look ready to go, suddenly I’m in tears.

“No crying, you’ll ruin your makeup.” Bulelwa warns. “We don’t want you looking like Cruella now.” Argh! I’m so done with him.

The duo excuse themselves after telling me that I look amazing, I guess I believe them.

My mother is the first to hug me, I expect one from papa but he’s standing in the doorway, hands rammed in his pockets. He looks powerful in that black suit, my protector. I’m taken back to the day he rescued me from Zwelethu and his father. I will forever be grateful to him.

“Papa!” I’ve been warned about crying, yet here I am blubbing. He extends an arm, an invitation to find shelter in his arms.

“You know this is not what I wanted for you, at least not this soon.” He starts, after pulling away from the embrace. “It’s hard for me to see you as a grown woman, a mother and someone’s wife. It will take some time for me to accept this path you’ve taken, bear with me, princess.”

“I will papa, I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you and Amara.”

“We’re not disappointed baby, if anything, were proud of you and how far you’ve come.”

It means a lot hearing these words coming from Amara, she’s been the best mother anyone could ask for.

“Your mother is right, just promise me, you’ll continue with your studies. Set a good example for

your brother and the twins.” Papa says, cradling my cheek in the palm of his hand.

“I promise papa, I’ll make you proud.”

“I’m already proud of you, princess.”

I don’t want to cry.

“Let’s get you married, your husband is waiting.”

At Amara’s proclamation, we plod out. Bambindlovu is waiting at the courthouse with his uncles and aunt Petunia. We only need two witnesses, but everyone wanted to be there so it’s going to be a full house. We’re coming back to the Okolie residence to celebrate, this is where Bambindlovu and I will be raising our family. I honestly didn’t think he’d agree when papa proposed it.

Bulelwa is driving me and Zitha to the venue in Newtown. My heart sinks to my stomach when he takes a turn on Albertina Sisulu Rd. My future husband is in there, waiting for me. At our arrival, we find family and friends waiting outside. As per

normal, my eyes desperately search for Bambindlovu.

“He’s inside.” That’s my mother, a warm smile spread across her face. These nerves will be the death of me, we’re only signing, but I’m nervous as hell.

Claiming my hand, she ushers me inside. Zitha is behind us, singing and ululating. Mind you, this is a courthouse.

My heart dances when I see him, he’s wearing his favourite attire. Umblaselo. It’s an exception today, I don’t want to see it on our wedding day. He will wear a crisp white shirt and a suit like normal people. Warmth streams through me when his eyes meet mine, God I love this man. Mhambi is standing with him, Bam-Bam wanted his father to sign as his witness.

“What took you so long?” He asks when he’s within earshot. “I thought you were not coming, I was ready to move to China and teach English.”

Really? He's stupid.

"Did she come?" I ask. He had said he'll talk to his mother, they are at daggers drawn.

"No." He's tries hard to hide the pain lingering in his heart. "Sindi is here though, and that's more than enough for me."

Yes, I did spot her with aunt Petunia and Kwame outside.

"Don't worry Bam-Bam, she'll come around." I'm hoping she will, he doesn't say anything, but gives me a slight headshake. His face suddenly tightens, he's sweating. My father is here, next to me, glaring at the man I love.

"Remember the talk we had the day you came to ask for my daughter's hand in marriage?"

What talk? No one told me about a talk.

Bambindlovu guzzles, nervously. He's nodding like a maniac, my father is not that scary.

"Good, I know how to use a gun by the way." Oh God

and he's not kidding.

"Papa stop." I wouldn't want Bam-Bam changing his mind.

Papa ignores my reproach and heads back to his wife, a smile springs on Amara's face when he enfolds her in his arms. A few kisses here and there.

"Their love is admirable." I tell the man next to me, he's watching them as well.

"I know, our baby will be in good hands." His declaration is shocking, I thought he didn't want to give the baby away. Seeing my confusion, he readies his mouth for an explanation.

"I don't want to fight the ancestors." That's all he gives me, the magistrate calls us to begin before I can let out my thoughts.

In less than thirty minutes, we're a married couple. Friends and family break into wedding songs as we step out a married couple, the courthouse is filled

with sounds of jubilation. Happiness floods my heart, this is the best day of my life.

“I love you mfethu.” I love him more than life itself and I love how he’s looking into my eyes right now, I love the tears that pool in his eyes whenever I declare my love for him. He kisses my lips, and hugs me.

“Nami ngiyak’thanda Mashenge.” (I love you too.)

BAMBINDLOVU-

It’s 9: 15pm, some of the guests have retired for the night. The remaining people have gathered in the lounge where the groom called an unexpected meeting. Nqaba is here of course, he’s the uncle. Next to him are Randall and Amara. Mhambi has found a comfortable seat at a corner, the newlyweds are restfully perched next to each other on the couch.

“I have come to a decision,” He feels Liyana’s eyes

on him before she gently squeezes his hand. He'd look at her but her eyes render him weak, so he keeps them on the father of his bride. "I will accept the decision made by the ancestors, but I have a request."

There's a huff, it's from the uncle of the bride. "You are in no position to be making any requests, the ancestors have spoken. You will give the child whether you like it or not."

"I understand sir." Argh shame! Poor Sokalisa is trying. "However, that does not change the fact that the baby has my blood running in his veins, he belongs to us." He returns the gently squeeze from his wife. "More than he belongs to the ancestors, they simply cannot have a claim on him when his parents are alive."

That makes sense. The room falls quiet, he's given them something to think about.

"Another thing I wanted to discuss is, how will we know which baby to give away?" He seems to have

thought this through. “We can’t just pick randomly.”

“The one born crying.” An instant answer comes from Liyana, her eyes widen and she immediately turns to Bambindlovu to find him staring back, incredulously.

“Mfethu!” He whispers only for her to hear. “You never told me this.”

“I didn’t know either, I just heard a whisper into the wind.” Liyana clarifies. “He’s here, I can feel his presence.”

“Nana?” The Okolie twins fall to their knees without a thought to it, heads bowed and hands intertwined.

“You don’t have to kneel papa, nana says stand. A king does not kneel before his subject.” At his daughter’s call, Randall slowly comes back to his feet, settling where he was seated. “You too uncle Nqaba.”

Twin number two follows.

“You can go ahead, Bam-Bam. He says it’s okay.”
Liyana.

“He told you what I’m about to say?” Shock plays around him frequently. What he’s about to say is a casual thought that came to mind seconds ago, he can’t let it go just like that. A shadowy nod from Liyana gives him the push.

“Sir.” Bambindlovu’s sincere eyes are scrutinising Randall, trying to read the grim expression on his frontage. “If you would allow us, if it is okay. My wife and I want to move to Ghana with you, I don’t want the twins separated. I know what neglect feels like, I know the agony of living without the most important person in your life.”

His eyes find Mhambi.

“I grew up without a father, I basically spent my entire life yearning for one. The twins don’t deserve to be separated, let them grow up together. It might not be under the same roof...”

“Okay.” An instant answer from Randall, it clearly came as a shocker to everyone in the room. He turns to Amara for assurance, which she gladly gives. “I have no problem with that, you will be given a land where you’ll build a house for your family. Maybe we can look into registering a company for you, you will pay me back when it’s up and running.”

He’s not a charity case and is glad his father-in-law respects him to not treat him like one.

“Thank you, that would mean a lot to us.”

Bambindlovu. “Liyana and I have come to an agreement, the traditional wedding will be held in Pongola as you all know, and the white wedding in Ghana.”

“Sokalisa?” A word from Mhambi, the man appears troubled. “I just found you.”

“I know baba, I won’t be a stranger. I promise. I need

to do this, I would sacrifice my life for my children, please understand.” For the first time in his presence, his father drops his gaze. A frown birthed on his forehead. Nevertheless, it’s not about him today.

“We support your decision, bhuti.” The queen plumps in, she’s been quiet for too long. “Liyana shared the same worries with me. Besides, it will be good for the twins to be together. I’m sure nana won’t mind.”

This is a relief for Bambindlovu, staying away from his country won’t be easy. But he would move mountains for his children.

The meeting is dismissed, he’s able to take his bride aside for a quick chat. They find a way to sneak to the backyard, these clingy hands of his... they are touching Liyana wherever they can. She’d never protest, in fact, pride is shielding her. She taught him this, how to be clingy.

They have come a long way, from a struggling boy from the streets of Hillbrow who speaks like he

pickpockets for a living and is oblivious to the do's and don'ts of romance; to a man who loves like he was made to love.

“What did you do to me, Lili?” A gentle soft voice presses on the crook of her neck. “Why do I miss you so much when I’m away from you?”

“It’s your fault, you decided to love me and look where that has gotten you.” He laughs at the clap back. “And don’t expect me to have mercy on you, I’m having a nice time from where I’m standing.”

This is the woman for him, the one he ordered when he presented a list to his ancestors and the Man upstairs. After a slow quick kiss, he tugs her towards the pool and helps her sit on one of the garden chairs. He settles beside her, arms never leaving her.

“Are you sure about moving to Ghana?” She’s been meaning to ask.

“We’re not living for ourselves anymore Lili, there are

two humans who will depend on us. It's up to us to make sure they are always together."

Anyone ordered a wise man, on the go?

This is the part he's not comfortable with, when she sheds tears. If he knew what to do, then he wouldn't be as nervous as he is right now. His head whips back and forth in search of her father.

"Lalela mfethu." A whisper leaves his mouth, hurried. "I'm trying to make it to the birth of my children, your father will kill me if he finds you swimming in salt water."

Liyana treasures the joke and sticks on it like magnet, she laughs heartily. It's transmittable, that it has him laughing, only because Randall won't find his daughter in tears. Liyana caresses his cheeks, and keeps a locked eye contact.

"It's so hard to believe I'm married to my best friend, it feels like a dream." Liyana.

“Well believe it, I couldn’t be happier. I love this life with you Mashenge.” There is sincerity in the way he says this. The hug they share is brief, lest father-in-law comes running with a shotgun.

LIYANA-

No wonder I overslept, this man is still sleeping. He’s habitually the first one to wake up since the truck driving job, he got used to the early hours. Winter must be approaching, it’s still dark outside. The sun is usually out when I wake up.

Feeling sticky, I decide to hop into the shower. I’ll wake this fool when I’m done, he’ll have to make breakfast like he’s been doing since we got married eight days ago.

“Liyana!” Oh, he’s awake. My body shivers at the cold touching my skin.

“Close the door Bam-Bam, I’ll catch a cold.” I don’t mean to snap. Let me wear a smile before facing

him. Bracing myself, I show all my adult teeth. But... why is he looking at me like I escaped from an asylum?

“What are you doing?” His question baffles me, really. By default, I happened to marry the most talkative man in the world, his vocabulary is fuller than a dictionary.

“Taking a shower, of course.”

My eyes are itchy, there's a deep urge to roll them. Instead I opt to face the wall. This is what people do in the morning. Has he forgotten? I don't blame him, driving long hours can actually mess with your brain. I completely made this up.

I can still feel him behind me, staring and I am dead sure he hasn't moved an inch.

“Are you going to stand there and watch, or join me?” Men are weird.

“I don't do witchcraft, mfethu.” He pronounces, with a tinge of humour in his voice. The statement has

me turning to face him, he's still wearing the dazed expression.

"Excuse me?"

"It's 2am, Liyana." No it isn't. "Why are you showering at this time? Uyaphi?"

He can tell I don't believe him, I won't fall for his tricks. He rushes out of the bathroom, and is back before I can bat an eyelash. Embarrassment slaps me across the face when Bambindlovu shows me the time on his phone. That's insane. How did I make such a mistake? I honestly thought it was morning. He takes a bath robe and wraps it around me.

"Let me take you back to bed, NomaRussia."

I have no words, just lost in worry. I barely make it to the bed when a sudden pain takes over the entirety of my being, it's more intense than anything I've ever imagined. A scream shoots out of my mouth, he's holding me, stopping me from falling to my knees.

"Lili?" His eyes are wide with fear and panic. Water

splashes from my nether regions, my water just broke. I have never seen anyone jump so fast.

“What the hell is that?” He’s asking me a stupid question, shockingly ogling at the water on the floor. Can his eyes go any wider? I want to slap that annoying look on his face.

“Call my parents, the babies are coming.” I shout at him. His mouth drops open, eyes are impossible wide right now. Is he swea... Oh my God, he’s sweating and heaving like a bruised donkey.

Pain comes doubled, locking me in as effectively as a prisoner.

“The babies are coming, Bam-Bam.”

Another scream erupts from my mouth, I want to grab his shirt, needing something to grip on but the man takes off running, right out of the bedroom.

Where the hell is he going?

“Bam-Bam, come back here.” I know he heard me.

Who on earth did I marry?

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Eighty-One

BAMBINDLOVU-

His hands are trembling, it must be crazy that she's got him sweating and feeling anxious. This is something he has to do though, it's excusable that she didn't make it to his wedding, but things are different now. He's a father, she can't miss this as well. The least she can do is show her face, she doesn't have to embrace them.

"Why don't you call her and get it over with?" His wife is beside him, cheering him on. Liyana was discharged two weeks ago, they are at the Okolie residence where she'll be staying until the twins are three months old. He looks at her, longer than comfortable. Liyana returns a frown from the bed she's laying on.

"Come on, call her again." She pushes, he listens.

The phone rings unanswered, breaking his heart in the process.

“Dammit.” He grunts. “MaOlady can’t do this to me.”

Liyana shifts on the bed, seeing how troubled her husband has become.

“Try again Bam-Bam, she’s bound to answer.” She sounds more desperate than him. Bambindlovu settles on the edge of the bed, worry written all over his face.

“She won’t answer mfethu, I’m wasting my time here.” Sadness is evident in his voice.

“You can’t give up now... try her again.” It’s not like her to be so persistent.

“I would if she wanted to speak to me, I’m not going to force myself on someone who doesn’t want to be in my life.” He’s frustrated, hence the yelling.

“You don’t mean that Bam-Bam, she’s your mother.”
Liyana.

Did I say he’s frustrated? Scratch that, he’s hurt to

the core and has no idea how to act upon this. Tossing the phone on the bed, he stands, rubbing his face in frustration.

“Don’t you think I know that, mfethu?” He snaps, unintentionally. “The woman refuses to take my calls, it’s fine if she doesn’t want to be part of my life. Stop grilling me, uyang’ deep fryer ndoda, I can’t stand the heat.” He’s not lying, talking about his mother has got to be the most draining thing ever.

New-born cries fill the room, Bambindlovu hurries to the baby cribs. It’s his fault anyway, shouting like he’s forgotten how to speak like a normal person.

It’s Dumolwakhe, meaning God’s praise. He knows this because of the blue hat on his head. The name was chosen by his grandmother, Amara. Her way of giving thanks or praise to the ancestors for granting her request. Kwenzokuhle who is peacefully sleeping is wearing a grey one instead. His name was given by Bambindlovu, he feels it’s because of him that

they get to keep Dumo.

“You woke the baby up.” Liyana points at the obvious, not happy about the yelling.

With the baby in his arms, Bambindlovu slides his pinky finger into Dumo’s hand and watches as he quiets down. He holds him close, hand over the baby’s back to give him some warmth.

He turns his glossy eyes to his wife and in a voice that’s almost broke opens his mouth to speak.

“I’m sorry mfethu.” He is, Bambindlovu is a peaceful person. The spirit that lives in him is a quiet one, unless provoked.

Through her exhaustion, Liyana smiles and lets her eyes leave his face to take in the baby in her husband’s arms.

“You have a spiritual gift as well, haven’t they showed you anything regarding this?” They must’ve come forth, told him how to deal with his stubborn mother.

“The gift is there, but it’s not for me.” His ancestors

never told him he needs to go to an initiation school and become a traditionalist. “I haven’t been shown anything since I found my father, maybe they are at ease now.”

Dumolwakhe’s soft cries interrupts them, their attention solely falls on him as his father cradles him in his arms.

“They grow up so fast, you know that?” Liyana.

“I know.” He voices, thoughtfully, walking briskly towards the bed. “This is why I want them to know their grandmother, she means the world to me, Lili. I don’t care what she did anymore, I want her present in our lives. She’s my queen.” A nightmare to many, and a queen in his eyes, it’s a must that she’s a part of his life.

“She will accept us one day, nothing lasts forever.” Her smile is weak, almost as if she’s not sure if Thandikela will have a change of heart.

“I know,” he replies, handing Dumo over to her so she can breastfeed him. “Right now, I want to drink

this moment in mfethu, this moment with you and our babies. I will forever be grateful to your mother for what she's done for us.”

He's been saying this for almost weeks now. That day, when Amara came to the hospital and told them what had happened. What she had done, no one questioned her. Joy had taken over the moment, only one person was not happy about her escapades. Randall... he wanted to know why she left without telling him anything.

“Now that we're keeping Dumo, are we still moving to Ghana?” She's asking because she knows how much family means to him. He'd want to stay and fix things with his mother and build his relationship with his father and teach his children about their culture and tradition.

“We're not moving.” He says, running a hand on her thigh, eyes locked with hers. “If that's okay with you.”

Liyana shakes her head. “You're my husband Bam-

Bam, I go where you go.”

“Ngiyabonga mfethu, thank you for giving me a family.” He sends his gratitude looking her squarely in the eyes. Come to think of it, a family is what he’s always wanted. “Forever with you is going to be fun, I can’t wait.”

Her lips twitch into a smile, “Me too Bam-Bam.”

This love is real, he feels it in every fibre of his being.

KENNETH-

MNDENI’S ALLEGED SHOOTER DIES IN HIS SLEEP!

The news buzzed for a day and died down before the clock struck 12am. Siphos did it, there is no doubt in his mind. As to how he got to the man’s house and did whatever he had to do, he’ll never know. Siphos skills shock him sometimes. This is what they do. Kill without mercy. Kill as if people are cockroaches.

Once upon a time before Zitha and her problems flooded his life, Kenneth's hands were free of blood. Well... the only blood in his hands was that of his father. Now... now he can place his ten fingers on the table and count the number of people he's killed.

He is free from guilt though, the man sleeps peacefully at night.

He's standing in front of the wall mirror when a delicious scent takes over the air, covering all of him. In a jiffy, her face appears on the mirror. Her arms enwrap around him from behind. He's too tall that her head rests on his back.

"Look at you, pink looks good on you." Did she say pink? Of course she said pink. Kenneth rolls his eyes without actually rolling his eyes. This woman he loves has him wearing a different colour t-shirt today. His wardrobe has been rearranged, she left a few shades of black.

"I look like a marshmallow." He fires back and adds a sigh of displeasure.

Her hands roam around his chest and lower torso, he almost shivers at the touch.

“Don’t be ridiculous, you look amazing.” She means it, he knows because of the genuine look on her face. “Thank you Kenny.”

“For what?”

“You don’t have to change your habits for me, but the mere fact that you try means the world to me. Through this, the little things you do for me, I’m reminded how much you love me.”

Pride knocks on his chest, he lets it in. He would let the smile in too, but he has his days.

“I’d jump off a bridge if you asked me to.”

That’s his answer, Zithobile digs through it and finds a joke. She’s laughing heartily, while he spins her in his arms so she’s facing him.

“Can I ask you for a favour?” This is a first, he’s not a requester of things, he makes things happen rather than ask from people. Zitha nods, certain she’d give

him anything he asks of her. "Can I name our baby and give him my surname?"

She locks her lips between her teeth, eyes bulging and teary.

"Kenneth?"

"It's not a marriage proposal, not yet. I will marry you one day when you're ready. I want us to focus on ourselves and the baby. I want you to stand on your own, be the woman you've always wanted to be."

"Says the man who didn't want me to take a job." He still doesn't want her working, he can take care of her and Dlozi with no problem at all. But he's reminded that his Zithobile is not a kept woman, she wants to be out there, living life to its fullest.

"I can't stop you from going for your dreams. I want you to have everything you want. You and Buhle."

There it is, the name he's been wanting to give baby Dlozi.

"Buhle?" A soft undertone as she leans more into Kenneth's body.

“Yebo ndlovukazi yam. He’s our beautiful baby boy, he’ll bring beauty into our lives.”

“I love it Kenny? Buhle Dlozi Mkhize.”

A chuckle rumbles up his chest, “You’re sticking with Dlozi?”

“Sipho named him Dlozi, I wouldn’t want to break his heart.” Zitha.

Sipho won’t mind. Kenneth shakes his head, holding her closer to his body. Their chests collide, nose touch, lips brush. She’s standing on her toes, trying her best to maintain the height.

“I love you, Kenny.”

He would say it back but he wants to devour her. He kisses her soft lips, almost desperate, sweeping his tongue against hers. The passion between them is always in full force.

“Bhuti.”

His little sister’s voice forces them apart. Someone forgot to close the bedroom door.

“You’re back?” Kenneth asks his gloomy looking sister, her eyes are red and puffy, it is clear she has been crying.

“Can we please talk?” Isisa’s eyes sweep through Zitha and her brother. “I’ll be in the lounge.”

“What’s wrong with her?” Zitha asks the second she’s out of sight. Her relationship with Isisa at the moment is null and void. She liked her during the days Kenneth was following her around. Isisa didn’t stay long enough to build a relationship with her brother’s now girlfriend.

Kenneth shrugs, takes Zitha’s hand and ushers her out.

Of course Isisa was going to be the one to bring this woman back into his house. The last time he saw

her, he threw her out of the old house they lived in and told her never to show her face.

Boldness has no shame, could be that she's using his naïve little sister to worm her way back into the house. He doesn't want that woman anywhere near them. He wants to tell her to leave. He would if Isisa was not holding her hand like that.

For a second he thinks Zitha will say something as they settle down. Relief embraces him when she sits quietly floating beside him.

"What is the meaning of this Isisa?" He asks.

"First day you're back and you bring this woman into my house?" To say he's irked and disappointed in her is an understatement.

"I'm moving out." She says. Kenneth frowns, glances at Zitha next to him then back at his sister.

"What did you say?" Oh he heard her alright. He

wants to know if she has the audacity to repeat herself.

“I’m moving out bhuti, I’m going to live with aunt in our old house.”

The scariest people are usually the calmest ones in the room, that’s what makes them interesting. Kenneth glares at his sister, long and hard until she’s unable to stand the stare down.

“May I know why?” Now, this is the thing with Kenneth, he lets you have your moment but the final say belongs to him.

Isisa’s eyes move from her brother to the woman he’s chosen for himself and lastly to MaMkhize beside her.

“She’s the mother I never had, I told you this last time.” Funny her eyes are not able to look at her brother. “I need her with me.”

“Did I not tell you, you will move in that house when you’re done with school, working and able to pay

bills?" Kenneth.

It means nothing that he gave her the house, she's not mature enough to live alone.

"Aunt will be with me, nothing bad will happen." The girl has made up her mind.

"I don't want her anywhere near you Isisa." Kenneth.

"But she's..."

"I'm not going to argue with you about this." He stands, again takes Zitha's hand. "Your presence is not needed here MaMkhize, please leave my house."

He's not kidding, Isisa looks like she wants to protest. It's the frown on his face that's stopping her from voicing out. If MaMkhize was not the person he knows her to be, he would treat her like the mother his sister sees.

MaMkhize stands, she's too quiet and humble for someone who used to fly without wings.

"I hope one day, you'll forgive me Kenneth. I really want a chance with you and Isisa. You're my

brother's children, I will never turn my back on you."

"Okay, leave." Kenneth orders.

Isisa is not okay, tears have made her a victim.

"This is not fair, I hate my life." She takes off running to god-knows where. He feels Zitha's hand slipping from his and grabs on tight.

"Let her be, she'll be fine." This he knows. Isisa is a child, she might be in Zitha's age group but people mature differently. MaMkhize is denied a chance to explain herself further, and is escorted outside the house.

This sigh that derives from him, depicts exhaustion. A burden is lifted when Zitha enfolds her arms around his stiff body.

"You're good at this parenting thing Khabazela, I'm proud of you." Zitha comforts. "Isisa will thank you one day."

For the first time in forever his body and mind relax. Kenneth loosens his figure, and lets happiness soak

right into his bones. He wants the feeling to still be here when he's old and grey.

“Ngiyabonga MaMthombeni. Ngibong' uthando lwakho.” (Thank you for loving me.)

He closes his eyes and savours the moment, arms clasped around Zitha's waist. In this second, there are no expectations upon him, at least that's how Zitha makes him feel. She's here to carry whatever burden weighing him down.

RANDALL-

He'd rather be home cuddling his wife, but he's here, waiting for a woman he's only met once. The fact that she's made him wait irritates him, sure she doesn't know about the visit, but he doesn't care. It's 5:56pm, she should be home like her daughter had said.

“Uncle, can I come with you when you leave? I want to see my brother.” She calls him uncle, he told her

to call him that. He's met her once, months ago at his daughter's wedding.

"Sure." His response is quick, he'd entertain the little girl but time is being wasted here. The child smiles, goes back to eating the ice cream he bought her and telling him stories about school and the friends she's made over the years. In the past hour, he's found himself smiling while listening to her babbles, she reminds him of his son.

Upon hearing the sound of the door clicking, he stands from the white plastic chair. The child must have heard it, or she's familiar with her mother's footsteps.

"She's here." She shrieks, running out of the room.

"Mama, uncle is here to see you." He can hear the excitement in the little's girl's voice. "He bought me ice cream and he said he'll take me to see Mr. Elephant and the twins?"

"What uncle?" The woman's voice is panicky.

A norm of his is ramming his hands in the pockets of his pants. “Did you let people in my house Sindisiwe?”

“Don’t be silly mama,” The little girl giggles. “He’s not people, he’s your son’s father-in-law.”

As she says this, mother and daughter appear through the open door. Her eyes spread wide like margarine on steamed bread.

“What are you doing here?” Words and syllables struggle out of her mouth.

“A word?” He asks, eyes cast on Sindi. Thandikela could say no and send him away, but for an important man like him to grace her with his presence must mean something.

“Sindi, make our guest some tea.” The child nods, scurries to get the tub of ice cream from the bed and pounces out like life is the best thing ever to happen to mankind.

“I don’t appreciate you being alone with my daughter,

Mr. Okolie.” Thandikela starts, finding her place on the bed. “Anyone wouldn’t read this the right way.”

If it were anyone, they would’ve taken offense, but not Randall Okolie. He raises his eye brow, poker-faced.

“I didn’t come here for you to insult me, Thandikela.”

She tries to make out how her words have affected him through the sound of his voice and gets nothing. He’s staring, deeply. She feels exposed, every dirty laundry of hers out in the open. Unable to keep the staring contest, her eyes fall to her feet.

“Your grandsons are two weeks old.” He tells her, flatly.

“I don’t have grandsons.” That was quick and snippy.

“Cut the crap Thandikela, I don’t have time for your childishness.”

“He sent you here, didn’t he? My son has become a coward, he can’t fight his own battles so he sends his father-in-law.” Thandikela.

Randall frowns, it’s out his character to pop his

knuckles. Maybe it's because she's getting on his nerves. For an old woman, she sure is foolish.

"I don't take orders from anybody, no one tells me to do anything. You know that, given the research you did on me and my family."

Well it wasn't much research, with no money to pay a private investigator, Thandikela could only turn to Google.

"Get out of my house, Mr. Okolie before I call the police."

Do people laugh so dryly? She wonders, trying to decipher that one second chuckle Randall emanated.

"Enough talking." Randall articulates. He hasn't moved an inch from where she found him standing.

He's kept his voice soft and gentle since the beginning of the conversation, but she's shaking under her skin.

"This is what you're going to do. Tomorrow morning, you'll get ready and come to my house. Your son is

waiting for you, he's stressed and that prevents him from giving his children his full attention. When your son stresses, my daughter stresses and I don't like it when my baby is stressed. It makes me a very bad man and I'm trying to be good, for her and my grandchildren. And perhaps maybe, get myself a sit in heaven." The last statement is a joke, but Randall's mouth knows no smile.

"Now you're going to call your son, tell him you'll visit him tomorrow. 10am Thandikela, I want you at my house. Bring your daughter, she misses her brother."

With that he turns and leaves.

*

*

*

ROAD TO ROYALTY

Season Finale-

The reception is a garden party held upon a day of blue skies and sweetly rising heat. Love is in the air as if it were a new kind of electricity, so profound and tangible. Amid the flowers, amid the petals in a romantic shade, today, they are all transformed.

There she is, in her best dress, eyes moist with affection at the thought of marrying her husband again, the thought of finding everlasting love in the arms of the man who has her whole world in the palm of his hand.

Three years later they are here where his ancestors want him to be, his homeland Accra Ghana. Ashanti Kingdom. Three years later, she gets to walk down the aisle for the second time.

It's a day like no other, a day of celebration. Amara's

elegant white lace gown, his Cheshire-cat smile. Her bridesmaids Ayize, Sethu and Thandiwe in white, dressed like mini brides, carrying jam jars filled with wild flowers. Champagne on the table, the royal garden beautifully ornamented.

They could've gone for an anniversary party. But renewing their wedding vows seemed like the perfect way to go, the people of Ashanti kingdom wanted to witness their king marry his queen. So the Okolies indulged them and have thrown this huge wedding, inviting everyone who is anyone.

At four in the afternoon, the guests are led to the reception, a huge hall in the palace. A live band playing has people enthralled... on the dance floor, relatives, friends and associates are holding each other around the waists and shoulders.

Children run in and out of the crowd, screaming and giggling at the games they are playing. Tables are tangled in squashed everything, napkins, flowers. Dirty plates and empty bottles of whiskey and beer

have been collected by the servants assigned to keep the reception clean.

“Dumo, don’t eat that.” Liyana yells through the sound of the music, her baby is at it again. Eating whatever he finds edible. With a gentle touch, she slaps the flower from the 3-year-old’s hand, it tumbles to the table. Big eyes stare innocently at her, he’s confused a bit before his lower lip starts to quaver.

Dumo cries like his body is rebelling against his existence, as if he’s stuck in a world that makes no sense at all. His skin longs for cuddles, his mind craves the rocking sensation of being carried by his mother.

His twin is frowning from right next to him, he hates it when Dumo cries. Liyana and Bambindlovu noticed when the twins were in their first year. Kwenzokuhle would place a hand on Dumolwakhe’s mouth so he won’t have to hear him crying; while patting his back.

The twins are growing up in a comfortable home, their father has partnered with Styles in the logistics company. Their mother continues with her studies, she's still not sure what she really wants to be. Maybe being a princess is her life goal.

“Look at your son,” The umblaselo wearing father points at Kwenzo with his head as he scoops Dumo from the chair. “He’s ready to slaughter you.”

Liyana shakes her head in defeat. “I’m sorry baby, I didn’t mean to make your brother cry.”

Kwenzo doesn’t seem to care about the apology, now that Dumo is no longer crying, his focus falls on Asanda’s plate. He looks at her long and hard and without asking grabs the largest piece of meat. Asanda returns a frown, retrieves her meat back but Kwenzo won’t have it. He grabs it back, and hides it in his fist.

“Mine.” The toddler points. The little girl screams and like a cat scratches Kwenzo. Just as he’s about

to return the brutality, his mother whisks him up.

“We don’t hit girls, Kwenzo.” She chides him.

This child is not like his brother. He's not a cry baby. He rests his head on his mother's shoulder after watching Asanda crying for her piece of meat. The meat he just threw in his mouth, and is chewing like a goat.

“I’m so close to hitting your son, Bam-Bam.” Liyana proclaims, placing the boy on a different chair, away from Asanda. She’s in her father’s arms, who came out of nowhere; whimpering like her patience was not tested by the little demon... Pardon my speech... Little Kwenzo.

“I’m sorry uncle Styles, you know how Kwenzo can be.” Styles smiles upon Liyana’s apology.

“It’s okay, I’ll get her another plate.” He delivers, and walks away with his baby.

“Kwenzo.” Bambindlovu is amused. “Nithi

niyakthand' ukudla, imagine stealing someone's meat as if your father has no cows in his kraal."

The toddler probably doesn't understand what his father is saying to him. He is laughing though... it's loud and cute and Liyana can't help but smile back.

"Where is MaMsonto and Chioma? I thought they were watching the babies." Liyana queries, eyes scanning the crowded room. She spots MamSonto, trying to up her pace with 4-year-old Dlozi in her arms.

"Where did Asanda go?" That's the first thing she asks as she puts Dlozi down in a chair. These kids are in the same age group, maybe that's why they challenge each other, innocently.

"Her father took her, someone decided to be a ninja and steal people's food." Bambindlovu answers. Dumo has fallen asleep in his arms amid the music.

"Shu! Minus one problem." The declaration runs from MamSonto's mouth without permission, it finds Bambindlovu's sense of humour and Liyana's smile.

“Don’t mind me, kids are a lot of work.”

“At least you live in the palace, you have only Kwame to deal with. There’s an army of workers at your beck and call. While we have to deal with two little devils, one is a cry baby who wants to be carried most of the time. He sleeps on either my or Lili’s chest, the second you put him down he jumps like the world is ending and starts screaming. The other one looks at us like he hates us, that frown on his face worries me.”

Bambindlovu points at Kwenzokuhle on the table, he’s troubling Dlozi now, but Dlozi is just as sly.

“Kwenzo is like his grandfather, serious as a heart attack. He’ll make a great leader one day.”

MamSonto.

“Leader of what? Grab and eat association?”

Bambindlovu snorts. “He’s a bully, one day I’ll let his

mother hit him.”

“Why me?” Liyana argues.

“Was it not you who said you want to beat my son?” Basically, he’s pointing an accusatory finger. Liyana throws her head back and laughs.

“I didn’t mean it, I’ll let Chioma do the beating. But they listen to her, she’ll never lay a finger on them.”

Like she raised Kwame and Liyana, Chioma opted to stay in South Africa with the Buthelezis. The boys love her, more than they love gog’ MaMbele because she’s hardly ever around.

She tries to show up, like she did the day Randall ordered her to. She tries to be part of the kids’ lives. It’s the thought that counts, right?

Damn! Thandikela is still fighting her demons, unable to bloody move on. The woman needs to heal and let go. Over the years, Sindisiwe and Kwame became close friends.

Thanks to his persistence, her mother had no choice but to get her an affidavit so she flies to Ghana. Mhambi and Petunia couldn't make it, her heart is weak, something about stress and loss and 'yawn.'

Maphikelela is here though representing the Buthelezi family. That's what he told Amara while convincing her to buy him a first class ticket to Accra, he dragged poor Jonas along.

Bulelwa and Zizwe have a life.

MamSonto moved to Ghana with the king and queen, there was nothing for her in South Africa. Life is better when you're surrounded by people.

"I'm going to put Dumo to sleep," Bambindlovu excuses himself, he meets Chioma on the way. She offers to watch over the toddler while he sleeps. From his vantage point, he sees Styles with his family.

Asanda has been pacified with a chicken drumstick, not that she'll eat all of it.

"The day this child grew a set of teeth should be declared a public holiday." The couple looks up to meet Ayize standing before them.

"It's not her fault, Kwenzo is the culprit." Styles and defending his daughter... same WhatsApp group.

"Yeah right, just admit it Styles, Asanda likes things." Ayize retorts. Asanda would like things because sixty percent of the time she's with the unmanageable twins.

"I agree with Ayize." That's Nkomo appearing from nowhere, Neo is trailing behind him. His arms invade Ayize's space, and his lips touch the crook of her neck.

"What an uncle you are, stabbing your niece in the

back.” Mr. Sishi is defensive. “Leave my baby alone.” There’s laughter because he’s smitten, a possessive father who watches his daughter’s every move. It’s the fear of loss, losing Sihle left a great scar in his heart.

“Can you believe Uze is an old man now, married twice?” Neo never misses a chance to be stupid. Everyone turns to the Okolies across the room, seated at their own table—looking like royalty. They are engrossed on each other, not minding the guests.

“Yet he doesn’t look a day old.” Trust Ayize to stand up for Randall.

“Amara is glowing, I hope she’s not pregnant.” Neo again.

“What do you know about pregnancy and glowing?” Ayize.

“I see things okay?” He fires back. “I’m a child of God, I have a gift of seeing things people can’t see.”

Derisive coughs are heard, it’s Styles and Nkomo

being dramatic.

“Yep, pastor Neo the sniper.” Laughter surges from Styles, Nkomo joins in.

“Hey that was once, I asked for forgiveness. I’m cleansed, washed in the blood of the Lamb, baptised with the Holy Ghost, I speak in tongues ntwana. Cava that.”

He tries to be serious but his friends are not having it, they can’t stop laughing. Ayize and Sethu are oblivious as to what the conversation is about.

As the night continues, the guests eat, drink and dance. Hours later, men are dancing without their blazers, shoeless women dancing with their phones on live stream. More than one drunken uncle who forgot to lock the soles of his shoes falling over the dance floor.

“Malume!” Zitha shouts from across the dance floor, embarrassed is not the word to describe how she feels. Bringing her uncle to Ghana was a bad idea, she’s sure of it. He’s the youngest of the siblings, she’s met a lot of them over the years.

“You’re embarrassing me, malume.” They trip together as she tries to help the fat man up, laughter booms around. Some royal guests look with condemnation while some find their sense of humour.

“I don’t care a damn no matter what.” The uncle’s words are slurred, he gasps in shock when his niece falls and hurries to help her up.

“Mshana, uncle is sorry. Indaba uyatazela nawe, mshana man.” (I’m sorry, you’re too forward.)

“Don’t touch me.” Zitha snaps, annoyed as usual by this man she’s grown to love like a father. Hands clutch her underarms, they bring her up. She loves how Kenneth is always there to help her up whenever she falls, literally.

“Why did I agree to him tagging along? I’m going to be the laughing stock of Accra, pictures of me with this owl will be splashed all over Ghana by tomorrow morning. My crush will die after seeing me in such an embarrassing situation.” Zitha.

Yep, this is what Kenneth had to face for the past three years. No matter, he takes them and bears them all because women complain and he has no choice but to love her.

“Crush?” Brows raise with this question. Her lashes bat, eyes turn innocent.

“Yes, Genevieve Nnaji.” She replies, adoration laced in her voice.

“You have a crush on a woman?” Kenneth.

“Clearly you’ve never met Genevieve, you’d crush on her too if you had.” A need to roll her eyes overtakes her when her uncle yells to a song that booms through the speakers.

“That’s my jam,” he sing-songs, breaking into a vosho and miraculously masters it with his wobbly drunk legs. “U no le kae, waar was jy.” (Where were

you?)

“Oh gosh,” Zitha’s slaps herself on the forehead.

“Get me out of here, please.”

A ghost of a smile marks Kenneth’s face, he crosses his arms across his chest.

“What about him?” Kenneth asks, inquisitive eyes point at the man dancing to an old school song.

“He’ll see himself, his brother is here anyway. I’m too embarrassed to care.” She doesn’t want to care.

A hand slides to the small of her back, Kenneth is swaying to the music, bringing her to a dance. Who said black people don’t blush? Her cheeks flush red, eyelashes flap. Seeing her melt in his arms, Kenneth smirks taking in the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

“What?” She wants to know the reason behind that crooked smile of his.

“You’re blushing.”

“No I’m not.” She argues, hiding her head on his

chest. He kisses the top of her head, his hands leisurely caressing her back.

“Jobe, Jobe, udlala kamnandi.” It’s the uncle.

“Oh my God!” Zitha expresses in irritation, banging her forehead on Kenneth’s chest. Her uncle is singing out loud, sweating and heaving on the dance floor, the other dancers have stopped to watch him.

“Uya jiava uJobe, isdakw’ uJobe... unemali uJobe, impintshi yam’ uJobe.” The man makes up his own lyrics, he’s having a blast... alone and drunk silly.

“That is not the song playing.” She complains, to receive a chortle from Kenneth. “I hate my life.”

Escaping his arms, she takes a step to the direction of the drunk uncle. Kenneth pulls her back into his arms.

“Let’s go, he’ll be fine.”

“But baby...” He swallows the rest of her words as his lips cage hers, the kiss is deep yet brief.

“I need to bury deep myself inside you, now, or I will die.” He whispers against her lips, before kissing her one last time. Hypnotised by his announcement, she follows him to wherever he’s taking her.

It must be a custom for Kenneth to glance over at Amara whenever he’s facing her direction, or perhaps his eyes are untrained and it happens that they find her. He blinks once, schooling the damn eyes. There’s nothing there for him, there was never anything there for him. Now he lives for this woman in his arms, the mother of his child, the owner of his heart.

“Did we really have to invite Mkhize?” A prideful king will never admit to jealousy, and this one is as

prideful as they come. Amara smiles his way, she shifts her chair closer wanting to be next to him... forever.

“I thought you two have become friends over the years.”

Randall snorts, “Don’t push it me hemma, friends is too personal. We’re just acquaintances, I tolerate him.”

No lies are told here, nevertheless, he’s grown to know that Kenneth is not such a pest. The friendship he has with Styles is something to be admired. Kenneth has made sacrifices for Styles.

While Randall was on the throne, leading the Ashanti Kingdom, Kenneth was back in South Africa watching over Styles.

The Sishis had dark days, days when they’d crumble and fall. Days when living without Sihle felt impossible... Days when they felt the only way out was death... Days when Asanda’s presence could not knit their cracked hearts but they were forced to soldier on for the little girl. Days when Styles would

find comfort in a bottle. Kenneth was there, every day, helping where he could. Helping when Randall could not be relieved from his duties.

“At this point, my king, I’m convinced you tolerate everyone but me.” She’s smiling up at him, leaning in to steal a kiss.

“That’s because they are not you, if it were up to me, you’d be the only person in a world where I exist.” Her bottom lip is caught between his teeth, smiles flash and giggles erupt from the queen.

“Eww, get a room dad.”

It’s not new that they’d forget they are surrounded by people, Amara smiles at her son standing in front of them, a sour face at play, he’s disgusted to say the least. Nqaba must’ve brought him here, look at him smirking at the love birds as if they were sinning in public.

“Kwame?” Randall calls, glaring at his twin brother. There’s no hiding from this one.

“That’s it, I’m resigning.” The now twelve-year-old grumbles.

“From what?” Amara.

“Being your son,” His reply is quick, well thought of. “Seriously, I can’t live like this. I feel like air, that’s basically what I become when you two are together. Everyone becomes air, invisible. These are not the parents I ordered.”

“And what exactly are the parents you ordered?” Randall is amused, it shows on his face.

“Normal parents that know nothing about PDA, you’re killing me guys. I’m done, literally.” Kwame.

Randall stands, “My friend get out of here before I send you back to your mother’s womb.”

The child laughs, raising his hands in surrender. It’s the Ghanaian accent that’s sent him to euphoria.

“Relax old man, I’m just a kid trying to survive in a

world where Randall and Amara exist.”

His mother is laughing like there’s no tomorrow.

“See what I did there, dad? A world where just the two of you exist, I’m trapped. Lord give me strength, I’m too young to die.”

He finishes, sauntering away from the table to join his cousins and friends on the kid’s table.

Nqaba is still here, a shake of the head from him has Amara feeling bashful.

“You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves.” He judges them, and leaves a happy man.

Randall’s eyes follow him, “That idiot.” He grunts, and releases a cackle.

Amara stands to meet her husband’s height, an impossible task.

“Your son is something else.” His hands are all over her again.

“He’s my son when he’s trouble?” Her query is

answered with a kiss. “He’s happy, I love to see him like this.” Amara finishes.

Randall nods, pecking the lips he loves to taste.

“I love to see all our children happy.” Randall says.

At this point, his arms are tight around her, they are flush together, as if they’d lose their breaths if they were to break apart. Glancing into his eyes, she bites her bottom lip before preparing her mouth to speak.

“I know you’ll want the same for the one I’m carrying.”

Heat seeps through his body, it reaches his ears. His heart races beyond the speed limit, tears well up in his eyes.

“You’re pregnant?” He’s asking to confirm if he heard right.

“Yes,” her tears are quick to fall. “We’re having another baby.”

His tears follow, he doesn’t bother wiping them. This has got to be the happiest day of his life, the hug they share catches everyone’s attention. It’s too intimate... it’s too tight... it’s too much. Pictures are taken as it was done since the wedding began. The guests stare with adoration, the king and his queen are unashamedly in love.

“Me do wo, me hemma.” (I love you, my queen.)

The whisper has her trembling in his arms, it fuels the tears coursing down her face. He’s said these words before, but each time feels like the first time. The endearment chases her heart, and has it running faster than its normal rate. It births goose bumps on her skin and has her feeling like the luckiest woman in the world.

“Me do wo, me hene.” (I love you, my king.)

Of course she loves him, he could well be the only thing she loves in this world. But hey, she’s a mother and a queen. Her heart is big.

Two lenient, scented, distinctly feminine arms clasp around his neck. Their nose touch and simultaneously there’s a sound of a kiss. Randall’s hands move up and down the length of her back, the need to touch every part of her is all consuming.

As their lips meet again, Amara loses herself in the passion of the kiss, her body seems to mould against his as if she is liquid.

She can feel herself through him. Every part of her skin. The way her body exists only where he touches her, the rest of her is mist. If love were part of the solar system, theirs would be a universe of stars.

The End...