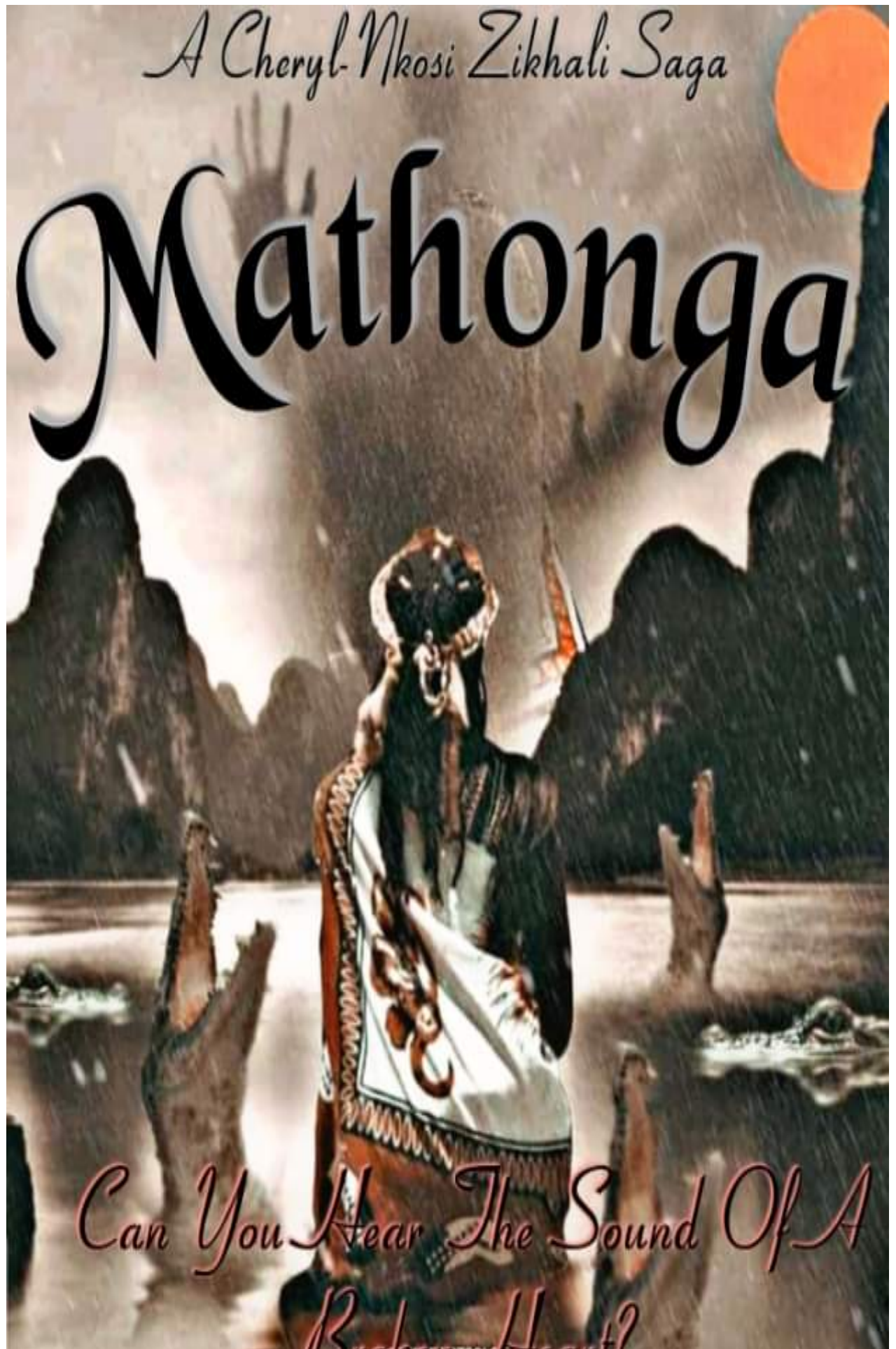


A Cheryl-Nkosi Zikhali Saga

Mathonga

*Can You Hear The Sound Of A
Broken Heart?*



Preface-

This Saturday is a Saturday like no other, one that will go down in history. It all starts with a cloud as small as a man's hand, not only do the village people see it, they see hope. Hope that it will finally rain in Izingolweni.

In less than thirty minutes blue skies are covered by dark clouds, thunder roars, lightning strikes and rain pours down like God himself is singing to a happy song in the shower.

A perfect storm it has become.

After ten years of draught, waiting and praying for rain, the villagers praise God, ancestors or whatever higher power is in charge on the other

side.

Some dance in the rain, some keep their windows tightly shut to keep warm and dry, while majority are gathered at the Khanyile homestead, celebrating the coming birth of Vumile Khanyile's seventh child.

A village chief highly esteemed in Izingolweni and neighbouring townships, mostly because of his wealth that, over the years has spread throughout South Africa.

As 6pm approaches, agonizing screams of a woman are heard in one of the rondavels, the people gathered outside have halted the celebration.

Now they wait with anticipation, hoping that the seventh time around Vumile Khanyile will be blessed with another son for whatever reason.

“It’s a boy.” The midwife cheerfully sings, holding the new born upside down. A few slaps on his butt and the baby cries. “At this rate you’re going Dalisile, you will be left with nothing in your kraal and a house full of daughters-in-law.”

Had it been anyone else, they would’ve been ousted or banished from the village for calling her by name. These old women are an exception, they have known her since she was a child.

Dalisile doesn’t bat an eye, neither does her heart twitch as she lies on the soft mattress drenched with her sweat and blood, the sound of her baby’s cries challenging the thunderous roars of the gods.

“He is a beautiful creature in deed.” Another

midwife sings the baby's praises.

"Here, breastfeed the young one, he's crying for his mother's touch." Sings the woman with the baby in her arms, he's now wrapped in a warm grey blanket, his cries have not come to a stop.

"Get that thing away from me." Dalisile shoves the midwife's hand away, luckily the baby is still secure in her arms.

Confused and astounded, the two ladies exchange glances.

"Dalisile!"

"I'm not touching him," the mother interjects.

Not once did she ever touch her belly while she was with child, even when bathing. Why would she do it now?

"Dalisile, this is not how things are done. Your baby yearns for what your breast holds, feed

him.” An impatient midwife snaps, the baby’s cries elevate as if he could perceive his mother’s negligence. With each passing second, Dalisile's spirit crushes farther. This is not what she wanted, it’s not what she wants.

“Shut it up.” Saying that, tears roll down her cheeks. “Shut it up now, now.” Dalisile grips her hair as screams leave her parched lips, a delusional woman she has become.

The midwives are taken aback by the sudden outburst, it’s not their job to pacify the baby nor the mother.

Dalisile clenches her eyes and covers her ears until the fretting cries come to a halt. A silent night would it have been if it were not for the rain and thunder outside, it’s almost like the gods are angry.

Flicking her tear-filled eyes open she sees her husband cradling the baby in his big arms.

He is so predictable, it's not new that he loves the baby more than she could ever hate it. His love overpowers the hate she has for the life she has brought into this dark world.

"He knows his father at such a tender age," a midwife observes smiling down at the infant who is quiet in his father's arms.

"Leave us." Dalisile commands, a stone cold expression on her face. The midwives depart, they are used to her demeanour.

Despite the cold hearted person she is, Dalisile always celebrated the birth of her children. All six boys, the seventh one must be different for her not to want it.

“Seven is the lucky number.” Her husband says, unable to contain the smile on his face. “Today is the seventh day of the seventh month, it is the 1997th year. He truly is a blessing from amathonga.” (Ancestors.)

“Put that baby down Vumile.” Dalisile’s cold tone pierces her husband’s heart, instead of adhering to his wife’s words, he holds the baby closer to his chest.

“I will do no such thing.” Vumile.

“He is not ours to keep, he was never ours to keep.” Eyes pasted on the wall, with no plans to glance anywhere else, Dalisile argues.

“What are you talking about?” Vumile snaps, frowning down at his wife.

“You know what I’m talking about Vumile,” she hisses. “My sister has been informed about his arrival, she is on her way as we speak. She will

take the child away, he does not belong here.”

Dalisile utters with no remorse found in her voice.

“Over my dead body,” Vumile roars and that alone startles the new born. Loud cries of a baby fill their sacred room, he doesn’t attempt to pacify him. Anger is seated on the throne of his heart now and he needs to get it off.

“I will not give my son away. Do you hear me, Dalisile?”

“It is not your decision to make Vumile, the boy was nurtured by me, in my womb. You did not help me carry this child, I endured labour pains alone. I will do to him as I please.”

Words can make and break a person, Dalisile never cares to bruise her husband’s ego.

“Talk to me in whatever way you see fit, matter

of fact is the baby stays.”

Vumile throws back as he rocks the baby back and forth in his arms. He looks at the infant as if he is the most precious thing in his life, eyes glinting with unshed tears.

“Mathonga Ngwanekangwadi Khanyile.”

He christens the new born. All Dalisile can do is watch in horror.

Who said one only cries tears of joy? She clenches her fists, tears raining down her face, the anger she feels is unexplainable. Suffocating to say the least.

“You’re going to regret this Vumile. The Khanyiles will never accept him. I will... never...”

accept... him.” Dalisile sputters, eyes burning with rage. Vumile scowls at his wife, he clicks his tongue, once... twice.

“Tell your sister to turn back, she is not needed here. This is my house, I will not be controlled by a woman.”

He delivers and walks out of their rondavel, leaving his wife drowning in wrath.

Dalisile has not left her chambers, exactly fourteen hours have gone by not once has she gone out to enquire about her new born baby, nor has her husband brought him to her.

Although still in pain, she cleaned up, put on her best dress and asked for her first born son Vukuzakhe.

Today is his birthday, it was twelve years ago when she pushed him out of her vagina. The happiest day of her life, she remembers.

She and Vumile had been praying for a child, he didn't mind the gender while she pleaded with the gods to give her a son, an heir who will continue his father's legacy.

Her pride and joy who will make her a woman amongst women, the envy of Izingolweni and that, she did become by the time she gave her husband boy number three.

Women sought to be like her, men envied her husband.

"Mama, may I go play with my brothers?" He has a speech impediment.

Not only does her son stutter, his words are

unhurried and his voice can be mistaken of a little girl's. Dalisile hates it. She becomes extremely impatient when he speaks, not to mention annoyed.

"Mama." The child is tired of sitting under his mother's skirt, he was woken up at crack of dawn, bathed and put into his best attire.

He thought the party his mother had promised him was going to start early. But his thoughts have changed, it's almost midday and he's still stuck with a woman who hasn't said much to him but "happy birthday themba la Khanyile."

"You will go later." She says almost snapping at the poor child. She's standing beside him, stroking his head with a gentle touch. He's been asking and she's been giving the same answer.

"But it's my birthday today, I haven't seen some

of my brothers.” He is used to complaining to his mother, she takes it usually because he is the apple of her eye.

“Who is more important to you, me or your brothers?” This is a tough question. The boy has no answer for his mother, he loves his family the same. He’d never choose.

He shifts on the little stool his mother forced him on, it’s a wooden bench made for a little prince. That’s what she told him when she came home years ago from a trip in western Africa with the bench wrapped with a blue ribbon.

Of all his brothers, Vukuzakhe is the only one who gets gifts from her trips. It’s not that the damn woman has favourites, ask and she’ll unashamedly tell you that she loves her children the same, she just enjoys her eldest son’s

presence more.

He's on his feet, looking up at his mother. He's too tall for a twelve year old, maybe two years from now he will be taller than her.

"But why are we in here? I haven't met my little brother." He says, sulking a little.

A frown grows on Dalisile's face, it's ugly and scary.

"You were with Sakhile this morning." Says the woman, as she continues to brush her son's head. Three year-old Sakhile was her last born before the one she birthed last night came along, the unexpected seed that was not planned.

The couple thought they were done and dusted with six boys, that's why they named their last

born Sakhile. The name Vukuzakhe has a deep meaning, it came to Vumile in a dream.

The boy was meant to bring luck into their family, to multiply what they needed the most and it did happen. The Khanyile family became richer, from livestock to sons.

Sakhile's name was them saying they are done, they have built the life they wanted and had everything they had asked for.

“Not him, I'm talking about Mathonga. Baba told me about him last night, I wanted to meet him but he said I'll meet him in the morning. If I knew you were going to call for me, mama, I was going to hide.” Honest is what the boy is, he is an extrovert and tells things like they are.

“Vukuzakhe...”

“Can I sit with you later? I have to go now.” He’s polite as well, Dalisile grips his arms when he shifts his weight from one foot to the other.

“Don’t go.” There’s panic in her voice, her eyes are wild and shifty.

He wants to ask why when they hear screams coming from outside.

“Fire, fire.” It is many voices screaming in horror, Vukuzakhe shifts again as if snapping himself from the tight grab. His mother pulls him back, she refuses to let go.

“Mama?” Now his eyes are wild, he’s not sure what’s going on, but he needs to go out there and see what the commotion is about.

“Don’t go.” That’s all... no explanation whatsoever.

Eyes bulging out of their sockets, his head

whips toward the door, then back to his mother.

There are tears in her eyes, he doesn't understand why she's crying. He doesn't care either, at this point, what matters are the brothers outside this door, and the man who gave him life.

The screams outside skyrocket, his heart sinks at the thought of losing his family. He jolts from his mother's tight grip, one foot behind, the other in front as he plays tug of war with Dalisile.

"Let me go mama." He shouts like a little girl, but she won't let him go.

"Stop fighting me son, I'm trying to protect you. It's not safe out there." She yells back.

Vukuzakhe does not care, he does the unthinkable when he kicks his mother on the knee. Dalisile shrieks as her giant-self tumbles

to the ground. There's no time to check on her, she's alive, that's all that matters.

"Vukuzakhe no."

Her reproach falls on deaf ears, he grabs the key lying recklessly on the table and runs to unlock the door.

"Nooooo."

A horrific cry calls behind him, he'd turn if his mind was not filled with thoughts of his brothers and father.

Ignoring the stabbing pain on her neither regions, Dalisile manages to get back up just as her first born runs out of her bedroom, she's limping and springing her way out of the room not caring about the stitches that might rip.

Face covered in tears and heart drumming hard on her chest.

“My son, my son.”

She yells the second she's outside into the chaos. The sun is out in all its glory, the skies are blue again, no sign that it had rained last night but the damp ground.

Dalisile cringes at how crowded the Khanyile premises are, there's never peace and quiet in this bloody place.

She is sweating and heaving like a wounded animal, she knows she's bleeding down there. The unbearable pain is proof that her stitches have ripped, proof that just last night she had given birth to a child she does not want.

A little more hatred grows for Mathonga. This wouldn't have happened if he wasn't born. She thinks to herself.

Her line of thoughts are wiped out by someone bumping into her, a village teenage boy carrying a bucket of water on his head, too focused on the burning rondavel to stop and apologise.

She thinks of dealing with him later. Right now she needs to find her son.

People are scattered like ants, women have yielded to wailing, while men are working tirelessly to put out the fire.

All of these people don't matter to her, neither does the burning rondavel. Her concern is Vukuzakhe, she can't spot him anywhere no matter how much she scans her eyes.

"Ndlunkulu," shouts one of the crying women. Dalisile spares a glance, disgust written on her face. The woman points at the burning house. "Vukuzakhe ran inside that house, he wanted to save his brothers. They are going to die, they

are all going to die.”

The woman’s words evoke anger in her, Dalisile clenches her teeth and runs to attack the female with a vicious slap, it gets the attention of a few.

“How dare you?” Dalisile yells, a dam pouring down her face. “Do you know who you’re talking about? My son will not die, do you hear me?”

The poor woman is served with another slap, no one dares to interfere.

They are aware of Dalisile Khanyile and the heart she inherited from the devil.

Dalisile turns back to the burning rondavel, horror evident in her eyes. She’s hyperventilating, locked in fear.

“Vukuzakhe, Vukuzakhe my son!” At this, she falls down on her knees weeping like a woman

who has lost it all.

The womenfolk next to her are dazed, this woman is a mother of seven. She was told all her children are inside the burning hut, how is she grieving for just one?

Mathonga-

One-

THE KHANYILES

“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

No parent ever wants to hear these words, this is not how things are supposed to go. Parents should not bury their children.

It's a tough time at the Khanyile household, never in his wildest dreams did Vumile think he would have to bury his fourth and last born.

Vimbela and Sakhile suffocated to death while the other children were being rescued.

Fortunately, Mathonga and Vumile were not in that rondavel much to Dalisile's annoyance.

She threw a tantrum when her husband came running from god knows where, asking her to hold the baby as he wanted to help put the fire out. Of course she declined and one of the women took the task.

Not everyone is invited to the funeral, just family members, they would have invited a few friends but the family is big enough as it is.

When it's time to throw soil into the graves, Vumile turns to his first born son and extends his hand.

The boy takes a step, his mother pulls him back. She hasn't left his side since they were rescued by the villagers five days ago. But all Vukuzakhe

wants are his brothers, the ones who have left him and the ones he's left with.

"Ndodana." Vumile calls again, Vukuzakhe rips himself from his mother's tight grip.

"My son." It's a whisper, Vumile hears it though and scowls at the woman. She's unbothered, look at her rushing behind her son. As she gets to them, Vumile circles his hand on her bicep and squeezes a little.

"You're too obvious Dalisile, stop suffocating the boy." He whispers into her ear, making sure the warning only catches her.

"What did I do?" She asks.

Her face is hidden behind a hideous hat that has a veil, it's too dramatic for a funeral, maybe it would've worked for church... you know something to avoid the pastor when he starts asking for tithes.

“Sakhile and Vimbela are gone, your sons died but you don’t seem to care. You’re hovering around Vukuzakhe as if he’s your only child.” Vumile is fuming.

“Of course I care,” Dalisile growls, she’d yank her hand back but her husband's family is always looking for something to talk about. “They were my kids too, I loved them.”

Her voice says otherwise.

“Pull yourself together, I will not repeat myself.” His word always stands, and she knows it.

The burial goes smooth thereafter, Dalisile keeps a safe distance from Vukuzakhe, her eyes though are stuck on him. Vukuzakhe and Hlabela their ten year old second born are the

only kids allowed to attend the funeral. The young ones were appointed a babysitter.

When the extended family members are long gone the family is left to grieve on their own, it's a cold silent night. Feels like no other, something is missing, they all can feel it including the kids. The youngest are oblivious to what is happening, Ntabezikude, the one who took over from Vimbela on their mother's breasts keeps shooting the elders with questions. `

"Where is Vimbela? Can I sleep on his bed tonight?" No one has given him a solid answer yet, Vumile cannot bring himself to utter a single word.

The family is gathered in the dining area, his brothers are here to support him. He's

embarrassed that his wife has locked herself in the bedroom, she hasn't shown her face since the visitors departed.

"Vukuzakhe, take your brothers to bed and check on Mathonga. The babysitter might need something." Vumile excuses his sons, the room is free of children in seconds.

"Sangweni is going to pay for this." One of his brothers says, there's anger in his voice. Vumile frowns at the declaration.

"Do you think it's them? Would Ongezwa Sangweni have the audacity to enter my premises and challenge me?" It sounds too unbelievable, considering that Vumile is feared in this place.

The Khanyiles and the Sangwenis once had a good relation, that was before Vumile's grandfather met his demise. He was a man of

good character, loved and respected by the community.

His heart had grown fond of an orphan, Thuthuka Sangweni who had no place to call his own. Vumile's grandfather was generous enough to give him a piece from his land. The deal was that once Thuthuka takes a wife and bears children, he was to move from the land of the Khanyiles and build his family somewhere else.

The deal was not kept by Thuthuka, he built houses for his sons who grew up thinking they have every right to the land. That's how the enmity between the Khanyiles and Sangwenis began.

"I have no doubt it's them, since we gave them a portion of land, they have been trying to wipe

out this family. I say we attack, come at them when they are sleeping. Burn their houses down with their wives and children sleeping inside. We can't let them get away with this." That's Dumile, his younger brother, the middle child. He's a chubby fellow, too violent and always looking for the next person to sink his fist into.

"No, we will do no such thing."

Vumile is the peacemaker in this family, his brothers hate it sometimes.

"Don't you get it bhuti? Those people are jealous of the legacy you have built, they live on borrowed land, our forefathers' land. You live in a big estate with more rooms and rondavels to accommodate his useless sons." Dumile stands, spreads his arms with pride dancing on his face. "Look at this place, it screams 'I am rich.' Show me a person in Izingolweni who lives

such a lavish life.”

Vumile does not know pride, or else he'd agree with his brother.

“We need to take them down before they finish all of us.” Dumile again, he'd be dressed for war if it were up to him.

“Would you stop? Violence does not solve anything.” Vumile chides, banging a fist on the table.

“Then what do you suggest we do bhuti? They killed our sons, we can't sit and hang our heads like losers” Bopha's words state that he's ready for war as well, he's younger than both Vumile and Dumile. They have a brother no one ever

wants to talk about, and two sisters who live in Joburg, pushing life the best they could.

“Taking the law into our hands is wrong, what if Ongezwa has nothing to do with this?” Vumile says, wishing life upon his words.

“Ongezwa has a big head, it grew the day he was given a portion of our land. He thinks he’s better than us now. I say oust them out of the premises, take your land back bhuti.” Dumile barks, his anger has brought him to his feet. Vumile raises a dismissive hand, he’s used to Dumile’s tantrums, his son Ntabezikude is exactly like him.

“That Sangweni died.” Vumile argues.

“And that was a mistake too many, he should’ve taken his hooligans with him. Let’s finish them bhuti and fill that space with crops.” Dumile. He’s making Vumile angry.

“No such thing will happen, the land was given to the Sangwenis by our grandfather. Taking it back would be the same as spitting on his grave.” He’s right, their grandfather was a very generous man who never went back on his word. “Besides, it’s only a small portion. Only a few rondavels stand in that land.”

Dumile and Bopha heave, clearly they do not agree with their brother.

“I don’t know what you mean by a few, he’s almost taking over the whole place. Don’t you think Ongezwa Sangweni is plotting our deaths while we sleep at night? Surely he’d want his sons living comfortably, his other wife is pregnant. God knows how many children the man is planning on having. It’s distasteful how he’s littering our father’s land with useless seeds.”

Dumile would spit if he could.

“Baba, baba.” Vumile knows that voice, it belongs to his second born Hlabela. The boy runs into the rondavel, he’s bathing in sweat and his heart hammering with fear. He throws himself on his father’s lap, Vumile places him back down. He doesn’t do hugs.

“What happened?” Vumile asks.

“It’s Vukuzakhe, he has a knife baba and he’s crying.”

Hlabela doesn’t complete his explanation, the brothers run outside. They don’t know where they are headed to because Hlabela was not given a chance to explain anything.

Just outside the ranch, they spot Vukuzakhe in front of the burnt rondavel. He’s on the floor weeping like the child he is.

Dumile and Bopha don't go any further, his father though takes more safe steps toward his son. He scans the area for his other sons, they are nowhere in sight. Hlabela must've taken them away, he's a protector like his big brother.

"Ngwane?" Vumile usually addresses him with his clan names, it makes the little boy happy. Vukuzakhe is too focused on his tears to pay attention to his father's voice.

"Ngwane." Vumile repeats, louder this time. He'd take a step closer, but Vukuzakhe would freak out. Ever since he was a child, he's never been able to control his anger, rather it controls him.

"It's all my fault." A shuddering whisper emits, "It's all my fault."

Vukuzakhe yells the second time around. Vumile looks at the burnt shed then back at his

son, he knows what he's talking about but still asks.

"What are you talking about?"

"I suggested we all sleep in the same room, we wanted to wake up together so we meet Mathonga in the morning. I called my brothers to my rondavel baba. Sakhile usually slept with his nanny but I took him from her. I didn't know mama was going to ask for me early in the morning before they woke up. He'd still be alive, Vimbela would still be alive too."

His tears are undisciplined, same is the hand that holds the knife close to his stomach. Vumile had tried to raise his sons the right way, he's shocked as to how this one knows about suicide at such a young age.

“It’s not your fault Zukuzakhe.” He’d say more if he were not in panic mode and if he wasn’t desperate to get the knife from his son. How does this situation work? The boy is holding himself hostage, and any wrong move he’ll kill himself.

Vukuzakhe looks up at his father, his face covered in snort and tears.

“I can still hear his desperate cries baba, Vimbela called for me. His screams tore through my ears, I told him I’ll come back for him and Sakhile.” He drops his head again. “I told them to hide under the bed, that I won’t be long. There was so much smoke, I didn’t know they were going to suffocate. They are gone baba, my brothers are gone and I couldn’t do anything to save them.”

“Give me the knife Ndwandwe.” The clan names

keep coming, it should work in calming him down. There's no time to nurse his feelings, Vumile would not want to lose his other son.

After a stretch of silence, Vukuzakhe meets his father's gaze once more. He extends the hand that holds the weapon as Vumile kneels beside him. A scream pierces through their ears, they turn to find Dalisile ogling at Vukuzakhe in horror. It doesn't take a second before she collides on the floor, she's fainted.

"Great, we're having another funeral." Dumile yells, obviously teasing.

"Where is my son?"

Dalisile has been brought to her chambers, the

first person to cross her mind when she regains consciousness is Vukuzakhe. Vumile snorts at the sudden tears rolling down her face.

“You’re impossible, you know that?” He never thought he’d be disgusted by his own wife.

“What did I do?” She asks, Vumile moves from the edge of the bed to stand over her.

“What’s happening Dalisile? Why are you so dramatic? Your children need you, but you don’t care. You’re so obsessed with Vukuzakhe that you’ve forgotten you have other children.”

“How is Vukuzakhe?” She asks, Vumile frowns. He can’t grasp how his wife can be so cold hearted. “How is my son?”

“I have had it with you Dalisile, continue with this behaviour and I will throw you out of these premises.” The threat alone brings her to her feet, she’s frowning at her husband.

“What did I do?” Feeling defensive, she yells.

“You continue to embarrass me in front of my brothers. You think I don’t know what you did Dalisile?”

“What are you talking about? I didn’t do anything, there is nothing wrong with me worrying about my son?”

“You started the fire.” The accusation comes out firm and certain. Wild eyes stare back at Vumile, his wife blinks and starts biting her cuticles, an annoying trait her husband is not fond of.

“What?” She stammers, flapping her lashes to kingdom come. Vumile snatches her arm pulling her closer to him, Dalisile winces at the pain.

“You’re hurting me Vumile.” It sounds more like a plea. “I didn’t do anything, I swear on our children’s lives. I was with Vukuzakhe when the

fire started, you can ask him.”

Dalisile can see her husband is hurting, it's been there from the day their two sons were declared dead. It's as clear as day.

“I'm your wife, those kids are mine. I would never hurt them.” Dalisile defends herself. No way would she ever take the blame for any wrong doing.

Grimacing with anger, Vumile pushes his wife, she tumbles down with a loud thump.

“What are you doing?” She'd yell louder than this but they have visitors, ones she hates with a passion. They think her life is perfect as far as she knows because that's the image she has drawn for her husband's family, her own included.

“You’re evil. How am I associated with you?”

“I didn’t do anything, I swear I didn’t do anything.” Dalisile cries. She crawls to her husband and wraps her arms on his legs.

“Please don’t throw me out, I’m innocent.”

“I know you Dalisile, I know how manipulative you can be.” He snarls, his furious gaze never leaving hers, irritation grows on her face.

“Are you insane? Why would you think of me like that? Have I ever given you a reason to suspect me of such atrocity?” Dalisile answers all the way from the floor.

“You made it clear that you don’t like Mathonga.” Vumile says, pointing down at her. The anger is pulsating out of him, hitting Dalisile with its vile touch.

“Yes but not enough to kill him. I’m not a murderer.” It takes a second, Dalisile is on her feet, hands all over her husband, trying to pacify him, to make him see reason.

“Ndwandwe, Ngwane. Please don’t do this to me, please.” Trembling lips plead. “I’ll die without you, without Vuku... without my sons.”

This is her life, it’s all she knows. She married this man at a young age, she’s built with him. If she leaves this family, she knows she’s not taking anyone with her, Vumile would never let her take his sons. Divorce is not an option, she’d be the laughing stock of Izingolweni. A failed marriage is something she will not accept.

“I will find out the truth, I don’t care how long it takes me, mark my words, if you had anything to do with that fire, I will kill you myself.” Vumile

narrows his eyes, turns and walks away.

That was a close call, Dalisile thinks to herself.
Playing your cards right can't be that hard.

Mathonga-

Two-

MATHONGA-

It's been four hours since the clock struck 12am.
I'm officially a twenty four year old man with
nothing much to show but my father's hard
earned money.

I watch my brothers drink like there's no
tomorrow, I should be joining in on the fun. It is
my birthday after all. But I'm that idiot who can't

even have a good time, my mind is entertaining thoughts of my mother. I tried to wipe her out of my head, it shouldn't be so hard. Right?

Argh! What's the point of trying to convince myself? I'm hurting like I've always been for years.

It's not a surprise that she's not in the country, I don't remember a year my mother was present on my birthday.

Without fail, my father would throw the mother of all parties, I guess that was never enough to get her to attend. Neither has she ever wished me a happy one.

This year I don't want a party, so they have brought me here, my brothers. They brought me to a club in Durban, far away from Vumile's eye.

"Why aren't you drinking?" Vukuzakhe asks.

He's always the first to fall away, you'd think he'd be the responsible one but my brother drinks like he's the guy who helped Jesus carry the cross.

"Do you think she will come home?"

He frowns at my question before gulping down a bottle of beer.

"We brought you here to get your mind off of her. Come on Thonga." Dark weary eyes under drooping eyelids are staring back at me. Even in his drunk state, he gets me to drop my gaze first.

I'd describe Vukuzakhe as an alpha male like my father. He is rough around the edges. Fairly charismatic and reasonably good looking and that's a given, he is Vumile's son.

My brother was once an unfaithful asshole, he left that part of him in his younger days. He's

too old now and too taken to be chasing skirts.

“I know bhuti, but you know I can’t help it?”

“Can’t help what?” That’s Hlabela, standing close enough for me to hear him regardless of the loud music. This one is a church boy. Who drinks orange juice at a club? It’s embarrassing.

“Baby wants his mommy.” Ndleleni teases, he’s the insensitive one. He gets a glare from Vukuzakhe.

“Not today Ndlela, fill that big mouth with beer not nonsense.”

“Hey, it’s the truth.” Ndleleni argues, his stubbornness reminds me of Dalisile.

That’s what she ordered me to call her. My brothers have the privilege to address her as mama while I was never given a choice, it was either I address her by name or not talk to her at all. At first it bothered me, but eventually grew on me like a plant on concrete.

“I don’t know why you waste your time with that woman, it’s clear she doesn’t care about any of us but her golden boy.”

His unbothered eyes point at Vukuzakhe, he has no care in the world that Zakhe is nine years his senior.

“What the hell is your problem? What did I say to you just now?” Trembling hands bang against the table, fiery eyes bulge out of their sockets and slurred words erupt from my big brother’s mouth, yet they hold the authority that brings Ndleleni to submission.

“Guys calm down,” trust Hlabela to be the peacemaker, he’s standing beside Vukuzakhe with a tight grip on his shoulder. “Can we just celebrate Thonga’s birthday?”

“I agree, you don’t have to be a jerk all the damn time Ndlela.” I’m angry, he has no right to speak to Vukuzakhe like that.

“Whatever.” Ndleleni grunts, grabs a bottle of castle light and finds his way to the bar. I guess in a way, we’re kind of like the same. Lack the love of a mother. Being the second last born, he too grew up craving for our mother’s attention and when he didn’t get it, he made way for hate instead.

“I’m going out for a smoke.” His speech loses itself, you know Vukuzakhe is fuming when his stuttering gets out of control. I want to follow him but Hlabela holds me back.

“He needs time alone.”

He’s right, my gaze finds the cause of all this, Ndleleni. He holds his beer in the air, and

flashes me a wide smile. Okay. I guess all is forgotten.

“I need to use the bathroom.” I excuse myself, from the table.

Weaving through the crowded room, I scan through the sea of bodies moving rhythmically to the music. Funny how life gets you to a position where you forget all your problems and all that matters is this very moment. At the end of the day everybody here has to go back home, back to their demons.

My eyes catch a glimpse of deliciousness across the floor. I'm not into tall women, but this one can be an exception. She has a sandy complexion, smooth and yellowish-brown, the dress of fine red silk pops against her skin, swallowing her skin tone but not hiding it entirely. She's beautiful to look at.

A rush of eagerness scratches through my bones as her evaluating stare sweeps across the room, as if searching for something or someone rather. I have time to school my eyes, but I don't.

There's a pull, it's stronger than me. It must be her beauty. Men can be idiots in the presence of a beautiful woman.

I'm on the verge of finding my self-control when she turns, gazing straight at me. Everything else ceases to exist, all I see is her and that ghost of a smile on her face. Everything that is her is drawing me in, but also holding me in place.

For a while as we hold each other's stares, I can almost taste the connection. I can't shake the feeling of having met her before.

"Ndoda." And that's it. Just one lousy shout

from Hlabela, I blink and she's gone.

Disappeared into the bodies swaying crazily on the dance floor.

"Dammit." I curse, reacting to the pat on my shoulder. Hlabela is confused, he always looks confused.

"People will start thinking you're a serial killer plotting to slaughter everyone here. What are you staring at?"

I can't tell him, he won't believe me, or he'll say it's one of the many visions I normally get. Am I allowed to hate my life? I think I hate my life.

"We should get going, we have church in a few."

Hlabela knows we're not going to make it to church, not after a long night of drinking.

"No we don't." I dispute, trying to get away from his grip. "You have church tomorrow."

“Tell that to your father.”

“Then we’ll have to go home after church.”

That’s an idea, honestly I don’t see myself sitting through a 6-hour church service.

Whoever gave them the idea that church goes on the whole day... Hlabela is laughing, I hate this guy.

“It’s late, let’s find the others and get out of here.” He says, showing all his adult teeth.

“We don’t even know where Ntaba is.” I remind him. There were five of us when we got here, now there’s four. As old as we are, baba will want all his children present on a Saturday.

He’s oblivious to what we are up to, the old man thinks we’re attending a meeting. He’s not stupid though, it’s the early hours of the morning, sure he’s figured it out.

We have barely moved when we hear the sound

of beer bottles smashing against something solid. Angry loud voices merge with the music.

Turning to our left, there stands Ndleleni head to head with Mfundo Sangweni. Both pointing broken beer bottles at each other.

“I swear you can never take Ndleleni anywhere.”

Hlabela growls, before rushing to intervene. I think of going out to call Vukuzakhe, he’s the only one who can control Ndleleni. But it’s too late, one of the men is on the floor, bleeding.

Ndleleni has stabbed Mfundo. Vukuzakhe and Hlabela are holding him back, I don’t know when the big brother got there. He’s whispering something to Ndleleni, arms tight under the angry man’s armpits, probably trying to get him to calm down.

No one has tried to help Mfundo, people are watching in horror.

“Let’s go.” Hlabela shouts as he whiffs past me, he’s following Vukuzakhe and Ndleleni. I want to run after my brothers, but my feet are frozen in place, refusing to listen to me.

A cold, soft touch... my body shivers, my heart leaps. I’m pulled towards the exit by a figure, it’s a female. I should be protesting given that I don’t know who this is, but this feels right.

When we step into the cold night, it takes me a second to recognise the person pulling me. I want to ask what her name is, but once again, I’m pulled away. Away from her.

“You’re such a damn child Mathonga.” My brother, Hlabela’s voice booms, chiding like a harsh parent. “When I say let’s go, I mean let’s go.”

Turning back to see if the lady is still there, a wave of disappointment washes over me when

I find no one. Who is that girl? I have to find her.

Ndleleni is driving, faster than the speed limit. Vukuzakhe is on the passenger seat, serving him nothing but insults.

“Would you slow down?” Hlabela barks as he fastens his seatbelt, it takes a lot to upset him. “We’re in Durban, this is not Izingolweni where you do whatever you want. I don’t want to spend the rest of the night in jail ndoda, we have church in a few hours.” It’s official, Hlabela is obsessed with church.

“You can’t be thinking about church at a time like this,” is he crazy? “Ndlela just killed a man.”

“He’s not dead.” Ndleleni mumbles, the nerve he has.

“He killed a Sangweni.” Vukuzakhe points, I can’t see his face from back here but anger is present in his voice.

“I said he’s not dead.” Ndleleni repeats, shouting. A string of silence takes over a second later.

“What happened back there?” Hlabela.

Good question, my brother does not go around stabbing people.

“Ntaba?” I start. “Where is Ntabezikude?”

“He said he’ll meet us at home.” Vukuzakhe.

I’m not surprised, he’s prone to doing his own things.

“We’re waiting Ndlela, what the hell happened back there?” Vukuzakhe is growing impatient, never mind that his voice borders on femininity,

it's authoritative and firm. He knows how to get people to respect him.

“That fool said I was making fleshly remarks towards his brother.” Ndleleni speaks through closed teeth. “Imagine ndoda, I’m a man. Why would I even look at his brother like I would a woman? You know me, all of you. You know how I love women.”

The defensive tone is thick, he’s extremely offended.

“I don’t understand.” I say. What is he talking about? He’s rambling and no one seems to follow. “Why would Mfundo say that?”

“Mfundo has a brother who sees men in a different way, he’s... he’s gay.” Ndleleni finishes.

Hlabela frowns, "Gay?" You’d think he’s never

heard the word gay in his life.

“Yes, our herdsboy.” Answers Ndleleni, not letting go of his anger.

“We have a herdsboy?” A confused Vukuzakhe asks.

“Baba hired one two weeks back. How do you not know this?” I ask and get no reply from him. Vukuzakhe should know these things, it is his responsibility as heir apparent. He will take over the Chief’s position when baba decides to step down.

“Let me get this straight. You stabbed a man because he questioned your sexuality?” Hlabela.

“I should’ve killed him.” Ndleleni is impossible.

“What if you did, Ndlela?” I don’t mean to yell. He gets on my damn nerves sometimes.

“There’s no use in arguing about this, Mfundo’s

brothers will not take this lying down. Forget them, baba is going to kill us. I won't be shocked if he disowns us." Hlabela.

This is my biggest fear, I already don't have a mother. I don't need to lose another parent.

"It would've been best if there were no witnesses, the old man has probably worn himself out from pacing around in anger." Vukuzakhe.

"He'll die before his time if he lets anger get the best of him." Ndleleni quips. I can't find the joke in this.

"That's our father you're talking about, the least you can do is respect him even in his absence." I rebuke Ndleleni, respectfully so, the car goes silent. A hand grips my shoulder, I embrace the squeeze from Hlabela and acknowledge him with a faint head nod.

We've all fallen victims to our thoughts, staring at the nightlights. It's almost crack of dawn, we should be home by sunrise. Being a Seventh Day Adventist can be a struggle sometimes. We live according to the bible.

The Sabbath begins Friday evening at 6pm, and ends Saturday at 6pm. We are to do no work until it ends. Our father takes these laws seriously.

It wasn't like this when I was born, no one knows when Vumile Khanyile decided to be an Adventist. He woke up one Saturday, packed up his sons and took them to church.

Dalisile has never graced the church walls, she's not even bothered about it.

We make it home around 5am, and almost trip on each other trying to get away from the heavy rain. Our wet feet don't move further from the

kitchen threshold, it's the foreign presence that has us glued on one spot. Eyes bulging and mouths ajar.

As far as we know, Dalisile is away on business. But there's a woman in our mother's kitchen, cooking on a damn Sabbath. Mind you, it is not allowed in this house.

"Who is she?" Ndleleni is the first to pose a question.

The woman loses focus of whatever she's doing on the stove and turns to us. This one is too flashy to be a house maid. Expensive church outfit. Yep, he definitely got this one from church.

"Great! You're home." The lady sings, cheerfully. Too cheerful for my liking if I may add. Her approach is that of a person who has met us before. "Breakfast is almost ready, you boys

must be hungry.”

“Who are you?” It’s Hlabela’s turn to question her.

“This...” says baba, stepping into the kitchen. We missed the sound of his footsteps. He stands next to the woman, his suit weirdly matches hers and he holds a smile of a teenage boy. It’s a cringing sight.

“This is Mashamase... my friend.” He says.

His friend? What are we? Five?

MATHONGA-

Three-

VUMILE-

Roommates is what they have become, it doesn't feel like marriage anymore, it's been like that since Mathonga was born. He thought they'd get over it, whatever they are fighting about, mend their differences for the sake of the children.

But she's hardly around and that frustrates him to infinity.

Sometimes he forgets how she looks, her scent that once felt like home, the smile that once brightened his life even on rainy days. He's half past to forgetting her name, as crazy as it sounds.

Every year on the 7th of July they are blessed with heavy rain, today is no different, it's pouring as if to wash away something that should not be revealed or rather conceal a

hidden secret.

Mathonga has turned twenty four years old, he's a grown man. They all are... his children. He couldn't be more proud, pride knocks on his chest whenever he sees his sons. They are beautiful, healthy and sometimes happy.

Vumile's sons are as tall as him and by the grace of God have completed their schooling.

It's not like they had a choice, Khanyile Holdings demands an education. He singlehandedly built the company, all done for the future generation. Now they are here, wealthier than before. He's built more rondavels around his estate.

There are undertones of mockery and jealousy roaming around Izingolweni, that Vumile Khanyile copied the Nkandla homestead.

No matter how big their mouths stretch, they can't deny the fact that it's a dream every

person wants to see themselves in.

“Aunty,” Ndleleni offers the bewildered woman a handshake, and she... reluctantly, perhaps unsure about being called aunty, accepts.

“She’s not your aunty,” corrects Vumile with his deep Zulu accent.

Ndleleni tilts his head to the side, a spitting image of his mother, he is. Sometimes it freaks Vumile out just how much he looks like Dalisile and seems to have inherited her bad attitude. His other son Ntabezikude is not far from her as well.

“Then what do we call this one baba? There’s so many of them, it’s hard to keep up.” Ndleleni.

Ah! You spare a rod, you spoil a child. This one must have been asleep while the others were taught manners. Vumile cuts his eyes at him, it does nothing to the boy.

“Ndleleni? Ndleleni?” A reproaching tone from Vumile, brows arched in censure. It has Ndleleni rolling his eyes.

“Awuswabi, umdala and you’re married.” His teeth are clamped and eyes narrowed as he shakes his head in disapproval.

Where is that rod we spoke about?

Vukuzakhe’s hand lands on Ndleleni’s shoulder, he squeezes tightly as if to chide him. Ndleleni side eyes him.

“Whatever baba does with his personal life is none of our business.”

God bless first born children.

Ndleleni would turn his glare towards his big brother if he were not afraid of him. Perhaps their father is too old for him to tremble at his word or he's just too tired of the family drama to hear Vumile's side of the story.

“Are you kidding me bhuti? He's married to our mother, but uses every opportunity of her absence to bring a prostitute into my mother's house.”

Ndleleni and creating silent moments. Vumile is about ready to clap back, tell his unruly son where to get off when they hear dogs barking outside.

“What are they doing here?”

He seems to know what's happening outside, the boys too judging by the way they exchange nervous looks. Mathonga looks more terrified than the rest, Ndleleni's face is as still as the

night.

“Baba?” Her voice is tinted with worry. There’s a way Vumile looks at her, Vukuzakhe can familiarise with it, he’d seen it quite a number of times before Mathonga was born.

The boys forget about the dogs viciously barking outside, their focus falls on the stranger and their father who is looking into her eyes with adoration.

“Go to the room, and stay there.” Vumile instructs, bad move because Ndleleni clicks his tongue, it’s loud and disrespectful.

“He’s a married man, you know that?” Ndleleni fails to keep his mouth shut. Mashamase has not been able to look up since this boy fired her with a question.

“I’m so...”

“No!” Vumile interrupts, getting into his son’s space. He is not a man to be disrespected not by anyone, especially his children. “You will not apologise for being an adult, Mashamase. You’re my guest and this is my house. These boys know I’m in charge around here.”

It’s the values he taught them he won’t look past, if he has to beat some sense into Ndleleni then he will. Big head over there knows very well how his father functions, the rules in the Khanyile household.

“Are you serious baba? Look at you, the person you’ve become. This woman is cooking in your house on a bloody Sabbath, Vumile Khanyile would never allow that.”

Vumile looks disgusted and it’s because of the tone of voice Ndleleni is using.

“Ngwane come out now.” Ah yes! They have a visitor.

The sound of a gunshot pierces through the walls of the Khanyile homestead, the dogs continue to bark savagely.

Vumile instructs his lady friend to hurry to the bedroom. It must be the guest bedroom because Dalisile would bring hell to this place. Vukuzakhe is the first to exit, like always, his brothers trail behind him.

AMANDLA-

“Those Khanyile boys are at it again,” it’s the usual sound of gunshots that has my grandmother complaining. “We are led by animals.” She continues, splaying her legs on the reed mat.

I beg to differ.

Okay, maybe they need to tone it down with the

guns. I'll speak for my man, he's not violent like his brothers.

"Gogo you can't say that about the chief's sons, if he finds out you're insulting his sons, he will have your head." I argue, settling down beside her and placing a kiss on her cheek. My affection is not accepted, old people are weird.

"Don't kiss me wena." She complains again, using her old wrinkled hand to wipe away tattoos of love. "You need to get married Amandla, I'm not the one for you."

I mean to laugh, she is a funny woman. I see where my mother gets her sense of humour.

"Why do I need a man when I have you gogo?" My arms surround her fleshy figure and bring her closer into a tight hug.

"I'm serious Amandla, don't be a stranger to love. It will pass you by and by the time you want a man, you will be old like me."

These are the days of my life, they consist of bickering with my grandmother. I don't know which ancestor she had a meeting with and came to a conclusion that I need to get married.

"I don't mind marriage," I stand, in a way I'm trying by all means to avoid her eyes. She is not a fan of the topic I'm about to take. "It's Mathonga's birthday today."

It's the perfect way to get in there, being a multitasker comes in handy. I have my back turned as I package the cake I bought for him. He had asked that I bake one for him, I don't know where he gets the idea that I can bake. He knows I don't have the map to the kitchen.

"So?" I expected this cold answer from her, my mother would have served me with the same. Bracing myself, I turn to find her staring back,

rage in her eyes, ridges in her skin seemingly multiplying.

“Gogo, I don’t understand. Other people’s grannies would tell them to be careful and follow their hearts. I don’t understand that look you’re giving me. You know Mathonga and I have something going on, yet you insist that I need a man.”

She is breaking my heart honestly. My arms protest by crossing over my chest as I lean back against the fridge. That reminds me, I need to buy a fridge month end, this one is broken, we have to store meat next door. Sometimes it comes back with missing pieces. Yes, I count our pieces, especially the braai packs.

“I don’t want you involved with that khanyile boy, he’s not good for you Amandla.” She’s wrong,

he's more than good for me.

"He makes me happy." I gripe, my nostrils blowing air like a Christmas train.

"He will never marry you." Eh! This old woman.

Her words cut deep, piercing through the deepest part of my soul. He hasn't mentioned marriage, I don't know if he is into the idea. Maybe I should bring it up when I see him today. I've given my whole life to Mathonga, loved him like he's the only man in the world. I gave him everything, all of me. No other man in this village will ever want me.

"I have to go." With the cake in hand, my feet purposely amble towards the exit, I'd walk fast but I don't want her thinking I'm running away from her.

A pair of heavy eyes rest on my back, she's glaring and it's a nasty one.

My bottom lip invades the seams of my teeth, in

a desperate attempt to hide because I'm about to tell her that there's no reason for her to hate the Khanyile clan. They are good people. Then again, it will be a waste of breath, knowing how her heart loathes them.

This rain. I have to find shelter under an Umbrella.

MATHONGA-

He's here, the gay boy Ndleleni spoke about, he brought his father. What puzzles me is how timid he looks. He's hiding behind his father and brother, head bowed, body and face hidden under a big hooded sweater.

I've only met him once, back then, I didn't take note of how small his body is. He must get his shortness from his mother, I hear she was a short woman. She died a few days after his

birth.

He's the same age as me, I'm months older.

I feel my heart shatter on his behalf when I think of how he grew up without a mother. He's never seen her face, nor heard her voice. I can't relate to this kind of pain.

It should be raining cats and dogs since Ongezwa Sangweni has dared to step into the Khanyile premises with his dogs, but the rain has stopped. Ongezwa has laid his complaint. Apparently Mfundo is at the hospital in Durban, he's going to be okay. Ndleleni is a lucky bastard.

“As you know Vumile, I'm not a wealthy man like you. I need to pay hospital bills, also for whoever is responsible for this to pay.” Yeah right.

This one does not know Vumile Khanyile well, this man does not lay a hand on his sons.

“I hear you Sangweni.” Baba nods. The look on his face says he’s all for peace. He turns to us, we’re standing like soldiers ready to take orders, from the eldest to the youngest.

“What happened last night?” Baba asks.

Expectant eyes are suddenly on me. What do they want from me? After what we did last night, I doubt baba will trust my words this time. I’ve managed to get us out of strings of problems, I doubt it will be the same this time.

“Vukuzakhe, you’re the eldest.”

Baba points, putting my brother on the spot.

Vukuzakhe shrugs, fiery eyes directed at Ndleleni. The root cause of all this. We don't snitch on each other, that's why he's still standing.

"Hlabela?"

The good boy won't sing, he knows too. I sigh in relief when he shrugs.

"You're all not getting paid this month."

Baba drops the news, grumbles fly around to meet his displeased façade. Why does he have to be so strict?

We direct our anger towards Ndleleni, we'd kick

him around but that would give baba the answer he's been wanting.

Why does it look like Ndleleni doesn't care? Something is wrong with my brother, how can he be so cold and impassive? It's as if nothing matters to him, it scares me sometimes.

"Don't worry Sangweni, I will pay for your boy's hospital bills and I guarantee you that this will not go unpunished."

I don't understand why baba feels a need to pacify this man. He's our enemy, it's no secret.

We watch him and his sons arrogantly saunter away, away to our premises. I might not have a right to complain, but I was born into this war.

My brothers taught me what I know, how the Sangweni clan is on a mission to take us out. Rumours that they are responsible for the death of my brothers, Sakhile and Vimbela.

“You should be proud baba, slaughter a cow, hell even a goat will do. I conquered one of our enemies. It’s bad luck on my side that he didn’t die.” The idiot Ndleleni, gives himself away. He was so close to getting away with it. Bloody fool.

Baba coldly glares at his son, I’d flinch and cower if I were Ndleleni. We don’t see it coming when he slaps him across the face, Ndleleni loses balance but soldiers on. Face hard, and unwavering gaze standing at attention.

“Have you lost your mind Ndleleni?” My father shouts, pointing an accusatory finger at him.

“Kodwa baba he...” Another slap shuts him up.

“I’m still talking dammit, shut your damn

mouth.”

He shouts, grabbing him by his collar. I spoke too soon that Vumile would never lay a hand on his children. I’ve seen many sides of the angry Vumile, but this.

“We are the Khanyile clan, o ngwane ka ngwadi. We don’t act like animals.” Baba continues to shout.

“Yes, we are the Khanyiles, we don’t let people shit on our heads. The Sangwenis have been doing that for way too long, and you’ve let them get away with it. Those fools had the audacity to fire a gun on our premises, there is no other level of disrespect than that.”

Ndleleni growls, his teeth are on a rusty dance, clamped together like a can of beans.

This is the first time that he challenges our father, he gets another slap. Anger is no respecter of persons, Ndlela clenches his jaw, eyes glaring at the man who gave him life. He takes a step toward him, posture predatory. Vukuzakhe sees it because he grabs his shoulder and pushes him back. Ndleleni does not seem to like it.

“Ndlela get out of here.” There is authority in our big brother’s voice. Ntaba refuses to take his blazing eyes off of Vumile. “Yeyi, piss off. I said go get some air.”

Vukuzakhe pushes Ndleleni again and again until he stumbles towards his car. The pompous bastard serves us with arrogant laughter. It’s loud, stretched out on the clouds of disrespect before he jumps into the car and speeds off like a maniac.

“In the house,” Vumile orders, authority has made way in his voice. We don’t move until he shouts after us.

Ndleleni is gone, Ntabezikude is nowhere to be seen. Hlabela is as perfect as a rose, baba has never had a problem with him. Vukuzakhe is treated like a brother than a son and I... well, I’m not blowing my own horn. That man treats me like I’ll crack and become extinct if he dare falters.

Hlabela hurries after baba, Vukuzakhe takes a different route, he’s headed towards his car.

“Where are you going?” I shout after him, he shrugs his broad shoulders.

“Out.” That’s it, he won’t tell me where. Baba will not like this. I decide to be a good kid and follow Hlabela.

This is messed up.

MATHONGA-

Four

MATHONGA-

My feet pause and freeze when my gaze drops on a familiar figure. Full hips swaying side to side, unchained braids messy, must be because of the wind. The white dress loosely hanging on her chubby body, flawlessly following behind her, she flashes a wide smile and waves enthusiastically at the car driving out of the premises.

Usually, Vukuzakhe would wave back, the sad expression on her face tells me he didn't. By the time she nears me, she's pouting, eyes drowning in sadness.

“What’s wrong with your brother?” She asks, as she pulls me into a brief hug. “He’s in one of his grumpy moods.”

“What are you doing here, Amandla?”

I don’t talk about my brothers behind their backs. Something flashes in her eyes, she makes no effort to blink it away.

“It’s your birthday. I made you a cake and thought we’d go to church together?” The smile is back, wide and unsophisticated. “You’re not ready for church?”

It’s barely 6am, there’s still time. But I don’t care because I’m not going, none of us are going except baba and Hlabela. I have a feeling his female friend will be tagging along.

“I’m not going to church.” I tell her, inviting silence in our midst.

She backtracks, and observes me intently, eyes probing with a mission. I don’t recall going

Trevor Noah on her, hence the confusion lurking around me. She's laughing louder than usual, throwing unexpected punches on my bicep. I step back and tell her to alert me when she's done.

"I'm sorry." She breathes, adjusting the plastic bag in her hand. "Your father will never let you miss church Thonga."

"Today he will." I lie. It's not like my father has a choice, he's faulted on his side. There's a woman in his house, a woman he's not married to and she's walking around like she's my father's wife.

She shrugs and holds out the plastic bag, smiling brightly. "I baked your favourite cake."

"Thanks." I guess. I take her hand instead and start leading her towards my rondavel.

“Wait, let me go put this in the kitchen.” She leaves my hand to begin her walk towards the kitchen. Amandla is known around here, we’ve been together since grade twelve. Started off as friends and now we’re here.

“Mathonga watch out.” Amandla screams, I see it coming thanks to her and jump to the side. My body collides with the wall, leaving a painful, throbbing bruise on my elbow.

I don’t want to think that she’s done it on purpose, that my own mother wanted to run me over without compunction. So I brush it off.

“Are you okay?” Amandla is panicking, eyes bare and teary. I hold back her inquisitive hands trailing all over my body.

“I’m fine.” I say, accepting the cuddle of her stubborn warm hands on my cheek. I appreciate her but my eyes won’t leave my

mother. In a fit of rage, she storms out of the car. I want to tell Amandla to leave when Dalisile's angry feet storm toward us.

“My mother is here, you can leave now.”

Her wilfulness has her shaking her head, I can't let her see what it's like to be Mathonga when Dalisile is around.

“Amandla go, I'll come see you later.” I push her, but like moth to a flame, she bounces back pressing her frame against me. Dammit!

“Move.” That's Dalisile shoving Amandla aside, she screams as her back hits the wall. I told her to leave.

“Boy!” She calls me, eyes juggling with anger. My stomach sinks to the soles of my feet. My frightened eyes avoiding her fierce gaze. I will never not be afraid of Dalisile Khanyile, and she's aware of that. She loves it when I recoil at

her presence, she derives power from seeing me shrink to a little boy when she stands before me.

A shattering slap lands on my cheek, my ear rings and my head throbs. I've received a million of these over the years and some I've kept from my father. Still, I will never get used to it.

"Dalisile?" I sound like a kid, shocked and pained. She has me caged on the wall, with no way out.

"Are you trying to get me locked up? This is your plan? That I run you over and your father sends me to jail, right?" She shouts, going for round for two. Her hand does not make it far, someone grabs it from behind. It's my father. He looks as angry as his wife.

"Don't touch me, Vumile." Dalisile dramatically

screams as she fights off my father, he's basically not doing anything.

Baba's eyes are unblinking, empty and intense.

"You haven't been here for a second Dalisile and you're already putting your hands on my son, my son. Who the hell do you think you are?" Vumile's angry voice booms. She's afraid of him, I can tell with the way her body shudders under his hold.

"I am his mother, I can discipline him any way I like."

Really?

"Like hell you are. These kids are mine, mine. You have no right over them."

Laughs of mockery wipe out his complaint, there's no care in the way she laughs at him. I hate it, the insolence directed towards my father. He's a good man, he doesn't deserve this.

“These children are mine too Vumile, come on don’t be delusional. There’s nothing attractive about pride.” With a not so gentle touch, she pats his cheek right after winning her wrist back. “But we can let you think whatever you want, as long as it makes you sleep at night. I mean an old man like you needs his sleep, I wouldn’t want to be the cause of you dying before death calls you.”

God take this woman from us.

I’m embarrassed, Amandla is witnessing my father being humiliated by his wife.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Baba asks.

I hope she’s not planning his death, I don’t trust

her. Dalisile continues with her laughs, manoeuvres past my father and continues to the house. The sound of her heels clicking against the concrete scream haughtiness. Wait till she sees who's in the house.

"Are you okay?" Baba asks, he's caressing my throbbing cheek.

"I'm fine." I lie.

My heart is in so much pain. I only wanted her to wish me a happy birthday, but I got a hot slap instead.

"Dalisile hates me." I mumble, keeping my gaze from him. I hear him breathe once... twice. He's stroking my cheek again, I'm uncomfortable because we don't do this.

"Your mother does not hate you Thonga."

“I’m not a child baba, white lies don’t move me anymore. In all my twenty four years in this world, I have never felt her love. I don’t know what her touch feels like, neither am I familiar with her eyes. She knows I’m here, but her eyes don’t know me. ”

He sighs, it’s what he does when I lay the truth on the table.

“You have me, your brothers and Mashamase.”

What? I don’t even know this Mashamase woman.

“Dalisile will kill her when she finds her in the house.” I remind him, maybe he needs to protect her. His eyes are suddenly bright, it’s childish and something I’d rather not see. This is my father. Eww!

“She’s gone, I sneaked her out using the back gate.”

Ewww! Ewww! Why is he telling me all this?

“Dalisile will never allow this, you’re playing with fire baba.” He laughs, this old man is not serious about life.

“Dalisile will never touch her, I promised to protect her.” Eh!

“So how long are you going to play this game?” He better have a plan, he’s too old to play Tom and Jerry.

He sighs and crosses his arms over his chest.

“It’s not a game Thonga, there are things I need from your mother. Things that will change everything, if I let her go that easily, I’m afraid all my years of hard work will be in vain.” The old man is confusing me now, I’m supposed to be the smart one around here.

“Things like what?” I ask, curiosity cheering me

on.

“Don’t worry, get ready, you’re giving the first word at church today.”

And with that he’s gone.

What the hell? I’m not doing that. My eyes find Amandla, she’s still here. She grins, widely. Baba will have to take her to church instead, since they seem to love it so much.

“You promised to marry me.” Amandla’s statement causes me to frown. I almost choke on my saliva as shock slams against my chest. She’s settled on my bed, comfortably. It’s not the first time that she’s entered my rondavel.

“When- When did I do that?” I stammer, turning from the mirror to face her. Big eyes are staring

back with expectance, she abuses her bottom lip and lets it spring out to freedom all shiny and a bit swollen.

“The day you held my hand, kissed my lips and took my virginity.” Eish!

“I said I’ll marry you?” I swallow shock, I don’t remember promising to marry her. Marriage has never been part of my future plans, it’s a scam, a trap my parents fell for.

“Well.” Scrawny shoulders wiggle idiotically,
“You might not have said it but...”

I almost got goose bumps. Amandla is so cruel to scare me like that.

“Why do you look relieved?” She’s suddenly offended.

“I don’t.” I turn back to fix my tie. She picked out

a suit for me while I took a shower. I'd rather be sleeping to tell the truth. "I thought I had proposed to you when I was drunk or something."

Stupid thing to say.

"You don't drink, Thonga." That's what she thinks. "And why would proposing to me be a bad thing?"

"I didn't say it is." I'll never find my way out of this mess. There's an elephant in the room with no one to address it, I'm not going to start. Avoiding eye contact, I grab a pair of formal shoes and sit on a chair to put them on.

I'm not into suits, this is what I hate about the Sabbath. Wearing suits, you have to be in formal wear whether you look good in it or not.

"My grandmother says you will never marry me." Great! She's discussing marriage with her

grandmother as well. How am I going to get myself out of this mess?

“I’m ready.” I say too quickly to side-step the marriage topic, grab my bible, car keys and wallet. “Let’s go, you know how Ngwane hates it when we’re late for church.”

This is my only escape. It’s not that I don’t love her, I do. But marriage... I hold her hand after locking my rondavel, lest she thinks I’m avoiding her.

FUNOKUHLE-

Coarse hands tighten around my throat, making it extremely hard for me to breathe. It’s until dark shadows start dancing before my eyes

that I put up a fight. But it's in vain, God was not kind enough to bless me with a body fit enough to scare anyone away.

"Bhuti, please." The words tumble against each other as they fight to escape my trembling lips. "I- I can't- breathe."

"You're such a coward, don't spoil my fun." The sick bastard says.

The promise I made to myself a few hours ago when we got home from the Khanyile homestead was that I won't fight back, rather succumb to the hands of death, the peace it comes with. Yet here I am fighting for my right to breathe.

My brother says it's a punishment for not protecting Mfundo, as if I asked that Ndleleni guy to stab him.

His crazed eyes glow with anticipation, he loves

it when I fight him. It makes him feel powerful when I can't override him.

"This is to make you a man, not to kill you."

Nsizwa is starting to sound like a broken record now. He hurts me each time with a promise that he won't kill me. What, is that supposed to make me feel better?

This is it, I will never see twenty four. My brother will make sure of it.

"That's enough." My father's voice sashays into my room, Nsizwa doesn't waste any more time.

His rough hands release me, I shoot up to sit my trembling body, go into reverse until I'm pasted against the wall, trying to gather myself together.

"Ntando," my father calls, and you have to look at him when Ongezwa calls you.

His eyes are not looking back at me, he's never looked at me since I came out. I don't know what I was thinking.

Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut, it didn't register to me that they'd hate me. That life would drastically change for me.

"Get cleaned up and go back to work, Mfaniseni has been looking after the livestock. He needs a break."

There is a look of disgust stuck on his face, I want him to scold Nsizwa. Call him out on his bullying. Dammit! I'm his son too, I deserve his protection. I didn't ask to be born.

"Okay baba." He cringes at the sound of my voice, it's still me, his beloved son. The one he once called Funokuhle, I was his Funo, his last born baby. What has changed? I'm still the

same boy he loved and protected. My mother named me Funokuhle, it's what she used to call me so I hear. It's what everybody in this family used to call until...

My father says Ntando sounds more mannish. He thinks I'm confused because I have no interest in women. To hell with him and my brothers.

"You're useless Ntando, just know it's your fault Mfundo is at the hospital. I don't understand why you're still here, you should've killed yourself already. You are a non-factor, a disgrace to this family, to our father. Uma must be turning in her grave, seeing what has become of her last born son." Nsizwa sputters. I want to hate him, all of them.

Trying not to look terrified, I let my eyes meet my brother's, "I told Mfundo not to bring me there." My voice should not be trembling this way, I'm not as weak as it makes me sound. "He knew I didn't want to go to Durban but he forced me."

Honestly, I didn't think Durban would be as homophobic as this place. I expected them to be open minded, I guess there is always a homophobe somewhere.

Nsizwa shakes his head, "you're pathetic. I don't know why ma died and not you. It should've been you." He shoots, deadpan, sending my heart into a painful trip.

I tense, feeling defence rise around my diverged heart, afraid of being hated by the only family I have. They still love me, they just have a hard

time accepting who I am. Like an idiot, I convince myself and get up from the floor. Nsizwa chortles at the courage I portray, this is something he will never take from me.

Nsizwa clicks his tongue and shuts the door behind him with so much force that I flinch. I don't want to be this timid person, they hate it, I hate it too.

My father says I should act more like a man, take whatever my brothers do to me like a man would.

I try, I swear I do, but they come on too strong that my body loses strength.

It all started on my fifteenth birthday when I came out to my family, I was a spoiled last born. My father and brothers did everything and anything for me, that's how I became too comfortable and thought they'd understand. Little did I know I was being raised by

homophobes.

Dusk is approaching, it doesn't hinder me from heading towards the river. If I'm lucky, I may never see my family again. I want to get away from them, fade into oblivion. They'll be better off without me. No. Scratch that, I'll be better off without them.

A bird caws in the distance as if mocking the haste decision I have taken. Peace. Death. Will it ever set me free? Is it liberating as people say it is?

I've been to this place many a times, contemplating my death. Only today do I have the courage to go through with it.

Standing at the edge of the river, I gaze at the water, terrified to jump in but curious as to how it would feel when my soul leaves my body.

I shiver coldly as the freezing water touches my

feet, there are thoughts to turn back. But if I don't do this, if I don't kill myself today, then my family will. I'd rather die a coward than by the hands of those who claim they are correcting me.

There is no one around, no one to see me leap into the deep water and no one to hear me splashing at the surface, desperate for air. I can't swim to save my life.

Soon I'm under water, gulping water into my lungs. My body grows tired of fighting, I'm sinking, the water embracing me and pulling me deeper to the bottom.

I know I'll be dead soon, but still raise my hands in an attempt to survive. It's instinct for me to do this. This is it, I'm going to die. I'm going to see my mother, I'll finally be with her. Despite my dire situation, a smile crosses my face. The

sky looks beautiful through the glassy surface. I'm not dead yet, but I feel it and the peace I've heard about. I feel it all coming.

I think I've swallowed too much water, my throat hurts and my chest feels like it will burst. Suddenly something grips my arm, I fight and struggle to get out of its grip, but it's stronger than me. Soon both my arms are clutched and I'm being pulled up against my will.

The first thing I see is a huge man, his eyes are void as he lifts me in his arms as if I weigh a servant's wages. I don't fight him, instead cough out the water that had filled my lungs.

"Hey, are you okay?" He asks when he places me down on the sand, the sky is slowly embracing the night but I can see him clearly. He's one of the Khanyile brothers, the eldest if I

remember correctly. I don't care to know what his name is, they are bastards who think the world was created for them.

"Hey, are you okay?" He hits me with the same question, I nod to get him off my back and hope he'll leave. He doesn't, so I force myself up and run for the water again.

Arms lock around my waist from behind.

Dammit. Why is he here?

"Let me go." I kick and scream and fight with the little strength I have. "Don't touch me."

"I'm trying to help you." a stuttering rumble, infuriated and thick with criticism.

"Did I ask for your help?" I scream, he refuses to let go.

"Dude you're trying to kill to yourself." He appears extremely annoyed. This is Vumile's

stuttering son, my father calls him quite often.

“It’s none of your business, let me go.”

“No.” He snaps, dismissively. Who the hell does he think he is? I will not be controlled by a Zulu man, hell no. Especially a Khanyile, so I kick and shout for him to release me.

It’s in vain really.

The man tightens his hold around my waist, my legs and hands flailing in the air, and marches over to the river bank. He pins me down on the ground, his whole body pressing me down. I squirm and struggle against his big built. He’s not budging.

My father would be disappointed in me, I’m such a failure. I can’t even fight off another man.

“Get off me?” I sound calmer, although out of breath. Worried brown eyes are staring back, too intent, too penetrative, too judgemental. They seem to search for my deepest secrets, I

blink to hide everything.

“You don’t want to do this,” comes a gentle answer.

“You don’t know anything, now get off me.” I snap, too confident for someone who is pinned to the ground.

“Why do you want to kill yourself?” He frowns as confusion makes way for curiosity.

“It has nothing to do with you, now get off, or I will scream.”

“You’re a man, men don’t scream.” He says, condescendingly, reminding me of my father’s words. These fools are no different from each other, the next thing he will be telling me I’m not man enough.

To prove him wrong, my mouth releases the

loudest scream. It doesn't go far because he slams a hand on my mouth to shut me up. Now I understand why my father hates the Khanyiles, they think everything and everyone belongs to them.

I'm not going back home alive, this I know for a fact, this I decided before I left my father's premises.

MATHONGA-

Five

VUKUZAKHE-

At thirty five, he's supposed to be somewhere in life. Not on stagnant-station, living off of his father's legacy. He has nothing to show but a wife who complains about everything and anything.

Bongiwe is coming home today from her father's house, she's been gone for three weeks.

He should be happy about it considering they are married. Three years to be exact. But Vukuzakhe gets a headache when he thinks about his wife because that's what she comes with, a darn headache with no aspirins to cure it.

His heart grows heavy when he drives into the Khanyile premises, he has a good mind to go straight to his rondavel, and sleep. However, he has a crazy mother who will fetch him in his room and bombard him with a million questions.

Ndleleni's car is not in the driveway, neither is Ntabezikude's car. He hasn't spoken to Ntaba since last night, he's worried. It's unlike him to disappear without a trace.

As expected, his mother steps out before he

leaves the car. He sighs about how he is not in the mood to talk to anyone, he's not a talker anyway.

He forces a smile when he jumps out of the car, approaching his mother.

Stories about how black don't crack must be true, the woman has not aged a day in her life. Or is it Vumile's money that has made her look so young and beautiful?

"I've been waiting for you." Dalisile greets, throwing her arms around him. Vukuzakhe flinches at the touch, backpedalling a little. Dalisile gives him an odd stare, his heart does a mile. He clears his throat, blinking his shifty eyes.

"You're drunk? And why are your clothes wet?" It's not a question really, although it sounds like one. He's grateful that that's the only scent she

can pick up on him, he'd be embarrassed if her senses were that of a deity.

"I'm 35 mother, I'm ought to drink." Mother? The others went for mama, while he chose to be formal with her. There's nothing wrong with the term mother except that his comes with a cold tone.

"You're my son, the future chief. Alcohol should not..." Vukuzakhe raises a dismissive hand, this is the last thing he wants to talk about with his mother.

"Not now, please." He throws in a whisper.

She sighs, running a manicured hand on her gel-up hairstyle.

"Bongiwe is back,"

His eyes focus in on his mother, his heart does a 360 this time.

"She... she's back?" He stutters, sometimes

Dalisile forgets that her son stumbles on his words. She rolls her eyes, bare and annoyed.

“Yes.”

His eyes move over to the kitchen entrance, he knows that’s where Bongiwe is. She loves spending time in the kitchen.

“I’ll take a shower before greeting her.” He walks away before she can protest.

In the shower, he takes his precious time. Meeting Bongiwe is something he’s not going to rush. She has a tendency of not eating without him, so delaying will not work on his behalf anyway. He will still find her waiting for him.

He’s out just as the hot water starts giving up on him, a pair of long brown pants is what he

chooses to wear. Bongiwe hates these pants, she says they make him look like a typical taxi driver.

Whatever she meant by that.

He compliments the pants with a simple white t-shirt and a pair of black crocs. His dress sense is not something to be envious of.

Laughter greets him the second he enters the main house through the kitchen, he decides to quench a thirst he's been harbouring for hours.

A glass is taken from the cupboard, he has sensitive teeth so he goes for tap water.

"Ma said you're home." Her voice pushes against him, making him jump. It's not out of fright, he just didn't expect her to follow him here.

A muted deep breathe is taken, he turns to face her. She looks no different from when she left three weeks ago. He was headed for work that Friday, leaving his wife in this same hideous dress and head wrap she's draped in. He almost sighs at the sight, but curtails himself.

Her eyes are on him, they sweep up and down his frame with a displeased expression on her features, she's probably mentally complaining.

"Yes." He replies, forcing another smile. It's the second time today. Bongiwe takes steps towards her husband, dubious eyes on him the entire time. He blinks and gulps, he can't be so nervous. So he takes a deep breath this time and wraps his loving arms around his wife. Thank God he smells like his masculine shower gel and not like...

“I missed you.” Bongiwe confesses, disturbing his thoughts. Not that he’s complaining.

“Me too.” We did mention that he’s not a talker. She’s the first to pull out of the hug, narrowed eyes scrutinise him under their gaze.

“You smell nice.” The tone used does not give a complimentary gesture. “You never take a bath before supper.” Her voice is accusatory, Vukuzakhe shrugs. He’s not sure what she means by this, or is he?

“You’ve been gone for three weeks, people change, Bongiwe.” His answer is cold, Bongiwe snorts. Her arms fold across her chest, brows arch on top of curious eyes.

“You haven’t been doings things behind my back, have you?” She observes, looking straight into his eyes.

“What?” He doesn’t stutter this time, in fact he sounds offended.

“You were once a player, I’m not confident about your sudden change, Ngwane.”

Sudden change?

“Whose fault is that Mabuza? Don’t drag me into your insecurities.” This is one of the things he hates about coming to this woman he calls a wife, she’s a complainer and an insinuator.

Vukuzakhe pours himself another glass of water, does not spare his wife a second look as he takes a turn to the dining room. Dinner has started, no one bothered to call him.

“San’bona ekhaya.” His greeting is acknowledged by his parents, Mathonga is too busy on his phone to have heard. That must be one heck of a conversation he’s having there, the smile on his face is unmissable.

“And then, wena?” Vukuzakhe grabs his phone, locks it and places it on the table, much to

Mathonga's annoyance. His mouth opens, but words fail him. This is his big brother, he can't argue with him.

"No phones at the table." Vukuzakhe reminds him, positioning himself on a chair next to his mother. His wife walks back in with a jug of diluted orange juice, she finds her place next to her husband. They don't bother looking at each other.

"Where is everyone?" Vukuzakhe asks, as he waits for Bongive to finish dishing up for him from the variety of foods laid on the table.

"Ndlela is sleeping in his rondavel, he was drunk when he got home." Mathonga answers, preying his phone on the table next to his big brother. "Hlabela is at a church thingy."

There's a veiled yawn accompanying the last answer, he gets a reproaching glare from Vumile topped with a headshake.

"Church meeting." Vumile corrects his last born who nods his head in response.

"Yes that and Ntaba is not home yet. I tried to call him but his phone rings unanswered."
Mathonga.

"Something must be wrong, he's been gone since yesterday."

Vukuzakhe discerns, frowning at the possibility that something might have happened to his brother.

"He's a grown man, he will find his way home."
That's Dalisile, sipping on a glass of wine. She doesn't care that this is a Christian home.

Oros for what?

"I think that's unfair ma," Bongwiwe interrupts.

“Had it been Zakhe missing for a mere hour, you would be pulling Bheki Cele by his ears, demanding he finds your son.”

She’s not lying, however, Dalisile is glaring at her as if she has told a forbidden tale from the devil himself. Vukuzakhe heaves a sigh, he’s not in the mood to correct a grown woman.

“Watch your mouth little girl, I will crush you like the annoying cockroach you are.” The secret is out, Dalisile is not a fan of her son’s wife. A slow smile spreads across Bongiwé’s face, she’s not intimidated by her mother in-law. She pushes her chair back and slowly stands with her plate in hand.

“I’m going to start with the dishes.” She leaves with Mathonga’s plate, Vumile is almost done, Dalisile too and Vukuzakhe has just started.

“Find out where Ntabezikude is, I’m going to

turn in for the night.” Vumile is gone before he accepts farewells from his sons. Dalisile stands, strokes Vukuzakhe’s head. It must be a plan to make Mathonga squirm with jealousy because he does.

“Use an extra blanket, it’s cold tonight.” And with that, she’s gone.

Vukuzakhe’s focus is on his phone, checking if Ntabezikude has sent any messages. He hardly heard a word his mother said.

“I’m going out.” Mathonga is next to stand, he doesn’t look like the happy chap he was when Vukuzakhe walked in.

“I’m coming with you.” He says this because he doesn’t think Mathonga should be alone or he just needs a breather or distraction, his mind is not with him today.

“I’m going with Amandla, we’re getting ice cream.” Mathonga says, tugging his phone into

the pocket of his jeans.

“Even better reason for me to tag along, I love ice cream.” He lies. He doesn’t understand why people eat the damn thing, it tastes like flu and smells like death.

“What about sis Bonggi?” Mathonga makes a confused face, he knows how Bonggiwe can be. She won’t want her husband out of the house at this time of the night.

It’s past 8pm, they should be in their rondavel, cuddled up and talking about life and everything nice. Then again, Vukuzakhe is not about that life, he rushes out of the door using a different entrance.

MATHONGA-

My brother wanting to tag along makes things uncomfortable for me, the initial plan was to pacify Amandla. She's been grumpy since we left for church this morning. Honestly, I'd rather be doing something different like lying in bed.

I know I said I wanted my birthday to be different this year, I should've been specific, it was terrible. Except the club scene.

My father was more focused on his new fling, Ndlela's hot head pulled him away from home, from me. Vukuzakhe was gone the entire day, just like Ntabezikude. I won't stress on pastor Hlabela, you'd think Jesus is camping at church with how he's so obsessed with it.

Amandla is a blessing, she got me a cake, sang for me and spent her time with me. These are the things I appreciate about her, her selflessness.

I swear to God, I wish I can give her, her heart's desire—marriage. She deserves that at least. Maybe I should let her go, so she finds a man who will make an honest woman out of her.

“I’m going to get something to drink, do you want anything?” Vukuzakhe introduces and offers as he parks his car at a petrol station. I don’t get why we’re here. We’re supposed to drive to the nearest eatery for some ice cream, I promised Amandla I’ll bring some for her. Unfortunately, her grandmother wouldn’t let her go.

“I’m coming with.”

His phone rings as he locks the car, puckered brows are drawn in muddle. Something has happened.

“It’s Ntabezikude, he’s at the police station.” He delivers before rushing back into the car, of course I follow pursuit. Vukuzakhe is speeding like I’ve never seen before, no one says a word. Worry and anxiety is keeping us company.

It doesn’t take us long to get to the police station.

The hairs on my body stand as we walk in, my heart jumps to my throat making my vision indistinct. Time seems to slow down.

My eyes search for my brother, he’s seated on one of the benches, head dropped with a crown of shame on it.

I’m a bit taken aback when Vukuzakhe hugs him, we don’t do hugs. Ntabezikude respectfully pushes him back.

“Usuyistabane manje bhuti?” (Are you gay now?)

Ntabezikude's stupidity is not far from Ndleleni's. In fact, their stupidity should come together, make stupid babies and become a stupid family. How can he say that to our big brother?

"You've grown balls after seeing your big brother." Vukuzakhe painfully nudges his shoulder that he winces in pain. "Were you not the one crying over the phone?"

I want to laugh at Vukuzakhe's return. Ntaba is a smart mouth, serves him right.

"Take me home, I need my bed." That's Ntabezikude, and mind you, he's not asking.

Vukuzakhe doesn't ask any more questions, he respects our privacy. That's the best part about

him. This trouble maker will tell us what he did when he's ready, he knows where to find us.

"My car is outside." Ntabezikude says, I offer to drive it and grab the keys from him. My phone beeps with a text from Amandla as we start to head towards the exit.

Gogo is sleeping now, you can stay the night and leave before she wakes up in the morning

The message reads, tempting, but my brothers need me. We have a situation. I don't think we'll be buying that ice cream anymore.

Something came up, I'll see you tomorrow.

I turn my data off after two ticks, knowing she doesn't have airtime to send an SMS. My

brothers are gone by the time I raise my head, I have to hurry after them or I will never hear the end of it.

“Baby,” startling arms loop around my neck, touching me without permission. They are too scrawny they feel like a kid’s arms. “Play along.” A female voice whispers in my ear, I might get myself in trouble if I follow whoever this is.

“You’re so slow.” She whispers again when I refuse to embrace her. As she lets go, my eyes scream with shock. It’s her, it’s the girl from the club. She looks beautiful under normal lighting.

“Are you going to help me or not?” She looks at me with displeased eyes.

“What’s going on?” I’ve only seen this girl once and she’s asking me to play along to whatever game she’s playing. A wink is sent my way,

coated with a mischievous smirk.

“Bab’ phoyisa, my husband is here now. I told you he’s a respected citizen in Izingolweni. You can let me go now.” The girl begs, sounding different from the person who was whispering in my ear.

In front of me stands a chubby elderly man, probably in his late 40’s. He smiles, too friendly.

“Sir, your wife was caught stealing muffins at a local bakery store.” He says.

I make sure to give her a judgemental look when our eyes meet, she drops her gaze then frowns up at the policeman.

“I was stealing? I’m a Khanyile wife and you have the liver to call me a thief, bab’ phoyisa?” The girl spits, putting on a sham of shock. I know because she mentioned that this is a game.

“I... I didn’t mean it like that.” The police officer appears nervous. So this is what people do, they use the Khanyile surname to get themselves out of trouble?

The lady comes closer, rests her head on my arm.

“Hlabela baby, tell the...” Who?

“It’s Mathonga.” I correct her, hush enough for her ears alone.

“What?” She looks like she’s been struck by lightning. “You’re not Hlabela?”

“Don’t offend me please, I’m more handsome than pastor Hlabela.” I tell her, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“I thought you were Hlabela Khanyile, he’s the much respected brother around here.” Is she kidding me? Does she want my help or not?

“And I thought you were taller, clearly we were both deceived.” My come back has her lips parting, she wants to say something but swallows her words.

“I’m a woman, heels are allowed to embrace my feet.” Sure they are.

“But if they make us think people are tall when we are surrounded by a group of SpongeBobs, then they should be burned.” She gasps at my response.

A chuckle takes us out of the world we’ve locked ourselves in, it’s the policeman.

“Lover’s quarrel.” He sings. The smile on his face should be trialled and locked up for life. I can fake a smile, and this one on my face is the fakest I’ve ever presented.

My arm curls around her waist to bring her closer, her body feels warm and soft. For a second I want the moment to last.

“Shorty!” I call, glancing down at her. She returns a fake smile, eyes threatening to skin me alive. “Where are the seven twins?” Confusion kisses her face. I thought she wanted me to play along.

“Twi-twins?” She stutters, idiot will give herself away.

“Yes, our babies. I told you not to go out, you just gave birth to seven twins and you’re here playing cops and robbers with Nyawo.”

Something seems to click in her head. Can’t believe she has forgotten her own game.

“Yes, our seven sphongos who have their father’s head.” Sphongo? I don’t have a big forehead. “Bab’ phoyisa, I’m a mother of seven new born babies. My husband and I are barely coping. No one wants to look after them because there is so many of them. My breasts

will start leaking soon, I need to get home to them. Right baby?”

All innocent eyes are looking up at me, I nod as if I don't have any other choice. This one should be crowned queen of lies, she tells them like it's her second language.

The police man grins at me and extends a hand, “Congratulations Mr. Khanyile. Yeyi, you know how to keep secrets in that family.”

I shake the bloody hand and brush off his declaration. I hope he's not one of those men who can't keep their mouths shut or the entire village will know I have septuplets by sunset.

“Can we go now?” I ask, my brothers are

probably worried.

“Sure, sure sir.” He’s beaming. “Take your wife home and don’t worry about the muffins, we’ll take them back to the bakery store.”

“What? Those are mine, I stole...” She stops when she meets the frown on my face. “I mean, you’re a good officer. You should be awarded for your hard work.”

The policeman’s day has been made.

“Tell your father my name is Tobias and I bank with Capitec.” He says, refusing to wipe the grin off his face. I don’t know who mentioned money but...

For his trouble, I hand him a R200 note. It’s not much but it’s something, he’s grateful and cheerful and still asks me to tell my father he

banks with Capitec.

My hand is still on the small of her back when we exit the police station, she wriggles herself from me as soon as it's safe to. Her eyes are everywhere, probably searching for an escape. She's still as beautiful as the day I saw her, even without the heavy makeup. She looks peaceful when quiet, like a breath of fresh air. Someone I'd want to come home to after a long day at work.

"What's your name?" I've been meaning to ask, she scowls as if unsure whether to tell me.

"Felicia." That came too quick.

"You don't look like a Felicia." I don't know what

I'm saying, however, I don't believe her. Missy shakes her head, indifferently. Her voice and character is way different from the girl she was in there.

"Take it or leave it, ndoda." Ndoda?

This can't be the girl I met at the club. She must be her twin.

"Where do you stay? Do you need a ride home?" It's getting late and there are no taxis at this time.

"I thought you'd never ask, I don't live too far from Nkandla." She says as if it's not a big deal.

"Wait, I'm not headed there, maybe I should call get you an Uber." I can't drive to Nkandla, I have a father who wants me home before Jesus comes.

"Don't you live there?" She queries, I thought she knew who I am.

“What makes you think I live there?” We’re in Izingolweni, what on earth would I be doing here if I lived in Nkandla?

Immature giggles sway from her mouth. “Sorry, that’s what everyone around here calls the Khanyile homestead.”

Oh!

“Can I drop you off?” Last offer, if she delays I will have to leave her here.

“Let’s go Dlozi.” The name calling is unexpected.

“What did you call me?” I ask, unsure I heard right. Curious brows shoot up, innocently.

“Dlozi, isn’t that your name?”

“No, my name is Mathonga.” Same thing but...

“Same thing.” She steals my thoughts, fidgets her undernourished shoulders and tells me to lead the way. Is she getting enough food at home? I doubt it.

In the car I receive a call from Vukuzakhe asking where I am. He's not happy about me dropping some strange girl home and tells me to be careful.

The ride would be silent if she was not singing along to Mariah Carey, word for word. I want to turn the radio off and shoot her with questions that have me restless.

Mustering up the courage to do that takes me forever, it becomes harder by the second. My eyes keep running to her exposed thighs, it's hard to keep them to myself with the way she's working tirelessly to pull her short dress down.

"Why did you steal the muffins?" It's not the question I had in mind, but it will do.

"I was hungry." Comes a quick answer, carefree and unbothered.

"You could've bought one."

“I don’t have the money, so I stole them.” Okay!

“It’s just muffins, they will bake more.”

“Yeah but...”

“Don’t judge me, you don’t know me.” She sputters, looking out the window. That’s not what I was doing, I’d never... Argh!

“You can drop me there.” It’s a little over ten minutes when she points at a vacant bus stop. There is no one in sight, I doubt it’s safe for her. Plus, I’m not ready for her to go yet.

“I have cake.” I haven’t touched the cake Amandla brought, I’m not a cake person anyway and my brothers don’t care for it as well.

“So?” Arrogant I see. I don’t answer but continue driving, this might get me into trouble, but nothing I can’t handle.

It’s time for her to play along.

“What are you doing? I said drop me off at the bus stop.”

“I’m taking you home, to meet my father.” I’m lying.

I just want to feed her pretzel body. My focus remains on the dark road ahead, there’s a temptation to steal a fleeting look.

“I’m serious ndoda, stop the car.”

“No, we’re married right?” This is going to be fun.

Finally giving in to the urge, I turn to find her mouth ajar and eyes in wonder. “Don’t worry... baby. My parents will love you.” I tease. She frowns, crosses her arms and sits back like a good wifey.

MATHONGA

Six-

FUNOKUHLE

My birthday is next week, exactly eight days from today. A day that should be spiked with anticipation and joy. There's no one I want to spend it with, than him, he's special to me.

The task of asking him to sacrifice a day just to be with me lies heavy on my chest, he loves me, I know he does and you sacrifice for the ones you love.

I breathe, trying to brush away the knot inside my stomach that keeps twisting and turning as I stroll down the empty street. Thoughts of earlier hovering in my head, I need to stop thinking about what happened. I wasn't in my right mind. Yes, it was a weak moment and I gave in.

His house stands alone, at the far end, away from prying neighbours. He prefers it like that. Privacy means a lot to him.

My pulsating heart leaps with bliss as I think about the intimate times we've had in this house, the memories bring about rays of joy that allow peace to battle with my nervous tension.

My body is trembling as I open the small gate and walk down the pavement. Stopping behind the pine-wood door, I say a little prayer. The man behind this door is unpredictable, hopefully today he's in a good mood.

The door clicks open, despite the frown on his face, I place a smile on mine. He used to love my smile, said it reminded him of summer.

"Hi." I greet, I don't have an endearment for him.

He hates them.

“What are you doing here?” His gaze moves from me to the streets, scanning and panicky.

“No one saw me, I made sure.” I keep the smile.
“Won’t you let me in? I came to see you.”

I don’t expect him to clench his jaw, it wasn’t my intention to upset him. He hates it when I say sorry, so I keep the apology.

I shriek when he grabs my wrist and pulls me inside, he bangs the door closed. The loud sound matches the beat of my heart.

I’m pressed against the door, he’s towering over me.

Pule is a hand’s length taller than me, he was once a handsome fella.

Now he’s at an age where he’d probably be

mistaken for my father, that's one of the reasons we don't go out together. Well, that's what he told me, he says people will judge him.

I wish I looked my age at least, I'm approaching twenty four but have features of a high schooler. Pule distastes that I'm portable, he always forces me to eat. Apparently, I'm too lean for a man, and should have a little meat.

No matter how much I stuff my face with food, my body refuses to gain weight.

"You're so careless Ntando." His hand tightens on my wrist. "What if someone saw you?"

"I'm..." I bite my tongue, the word will get me into trouble.

Our relationship is a secret, it's been for ten years. He was my history teacher, the new flame at school, straight from Johannesburg.

Every girl had their thirsty eyes on him, but he saw me. It made me feel special, and wanted.

He came at a time when my family had just turned their backs on me. If it were not for him, I probably would've died long ago.

He was thirty four when we started sleeping together, and I was fifteen. He was my first, it was uncomfortable really. And the other times after that, but I got used to it. He's not the most romantic man in the world, not everyone is a Romeo.

"How was Durban?" He asks, forgetting his anger a minute.

He was against me going to Durban, we fought about it. It almost got physical.

My brother... Mfundo, he's as hot-headed as Pule. I couldn't say no to him.

"Mfundo got into a fight and was stabbed." I tell him, his brows pucker with questions. I narrate the whole story until the part where I almost drowned myself to death and was saved by a stranger. I leave the details of who the stranger is and what happened between us.

Pule is a jealous lover, he'd kill me and bury me somewhere in this house.

"That's the problem with you Ntando, you're so damn stubborn. Awulaleli." He growls, getting into my space. His anger is never too far.

"What? Pule, I almost took my own life. Doesn't that affect you?"

“Should it affect me?” I wish he would tread carefully where I’m concerned, his words cut deep. I clamp my jaw, regarding him with a glare that will most probably get me into shit.

“None of this would’ve happened if you listened to me and forgot about Durban.” Basically, he’s blaming me for everything.

“I’m going home.” I sputter, he grips my wrist. This will leave a mark. My eyes rush up to meet his empty stare and hard face. “Ouch!”

I try to stand tall, show him I’m a grown man now and not the boy he always calls me. His eyes close only to open seconds later, they are glinting with warmth. I did say he’s

unpredictable.

“Stay.” He pronounces, the grip on my wrist does not loosen. “Stay.”

We’ve been together for so long I can’t recall him ever saying sorry.

Pin drop silence passes between us, drawn out and delicate. Pule steps closer, pressing himself against my body. The palm of his hand touches my cheek, caressing it a second. I gasp as he sadistically smashes his lips against mine, there’s nothing gentle about his kisses.

I wish he’d take note of my presence, remember that I bruise easily. Attempting to breathe, I receive the vicious kiss, trying to meet his demanding assault. Teeth clash, tongues meet

in a greedy dance.

“You taste different.”

A soft voice belonging to another whispers in my ears. I open my eyes, heart racing with an intention to send me into an early grave. Pule is still here, abusing my lips that they start to burn.

I shouldn't be thinking about someone else, when I'm with Pule. I've betrayed him enough. What I did today, at the river. God should punish me for it.

MATHONGA-

What is this I'm doing you ask? I too have no idea, all I know is that I found a girl I think is fascinating. Nothing is planned as of yet.

I wasn't really taking her to my house, inside my father's house, not without her permission nor his. My father is not one to be disrespected, he knows about Amandla, that's why she's allowed to enter his premises.

The lights in the main house are on, Vukuzakhe's rondavel as well. It's my other brothers who seem to have gone to bed.

After grabbing the cake from the kitchen, I make my way to Vukuzakhe's room.

Hushed voices pull me closer to the rondavel... quarrelling, that's what it sounds like. That doesn't stop me from knocking. A second and the door cracks open.

My eyes have a life of its own, they manoeuvre past my brother's tall body right into the room. Bongiwé is standing near the bed, face coated in anger and arms folded. My intruding is

interrupted by my brother blocking my path.

“Do you need anything?” His eyes are on the cake in my hand.

“I’m dropping someone home, I won’t be long.”

“Amandla is not the daughter in-law of this family, when are you going to take responsibility and stop sneaking around?”

He thinks I’m with Amandla. I think to tell him what’s really going on, but he seems to be in the middle of something with his wife.

“I won’t be long.”

“Ngwane!” Bongiwe calls, impatiently.

“Are you okay, bhuti?” I question the drained expression on his face. He nods, it’s dismissive.

“Okay, goodnight.” Again, he nods and shuts the door after telling me to be careful.

I’m barely five feet away when I hear a womanly shout coming from Vukuzakhe’s rondavel.

It belongs to him, his voice becomes high pitched when he’s angry. It used to be worse actually. As a kid, I couldn’t understand why my brother sounded the way he did and had a hard time putting words together.

It has become better with age, sure he’s not blessed with a deep voice but when he speaks, we all tremble.

I think of going back to check on him, but he won’t like it.

The walk to the gate where my car is parked is longer than I'd like, I hope that girl is still there. She appears too smart, like a kitchen mouse.

I'm regarded with an eye roll when I enter the car, she accepts the plastic bag with a scowl on her face.

"What's this?"

"I told you, I have cake," is that a smile I see? It's there but distantly.

"Take me home." Her request is heard.

In less than ten minutes she instructs me to drop her off.

The houses here are government built, there are informal settlements here and there. Some residents have extended.

"Nala Shange." She starts. "That's my name, Felicia is my second name, but I never use it.

Only when I want to scare off men who prey on me.”

Confident, are we?

“Nice to meet you, Nala.”

“Thanks for saving my life back at the station.”
She says, eyes glued to the smallest house across the street.

“When can I see you again?” I want to see her again.

The look she gives me tells me I’ve asked a stupid question. She opens the door to leave, my hand flies to grab her arm.

I gasp as a jolt of something familiar tears through my veins, it claws and locks—PAIN!
Unfathomable pain. It’s the kind that burns, as if an undetectable flame were held against my

skin.

It takes over a portion of my brain, steals the part of me I most want to share with the ones I love—my light, laughter and the little love I hold in my heart.

Betrayal, death and abandonment, they all lead here... to this unspeakable pain.

Confusion claims a place in me, I've never felt people's agony. Yes I get dreams, dreams I can't predict. Usually there are many voices in my dreams, sometimes in my head, talking at the same time, each wanting to be heard. Has it come to this?

"Na... Nala?" I have so many questions to ask her. Why am I feeling this hurt, emanating from her?

I'm probably scaring her with this dazed look on my face. I've been called weird before, it won't be anything new.

"I have to go." And with that, she flies out of the car with my answer and cake.

Something tells me to run after her but, the thought is washed off by a man in a police uniform stepping out of the house.

I can't make out his face from here, however, the anger coated on it is visible. It must be the way he's standing with hands in his pockets that screams at me. Nala stops in front of him, no words are shared between them, just glares before she dashes into the house.

The man is left glaring my way, inquisitively, there is no reason for me to stay here. He must be her lover.

VUKUZAKHE-

He's sleeping on the far end of the bed, there's hardly space for him to stretch an arm. The fight they had was unexpected, he came home happy he had found his brother not knowing what awaited him at home. It's been hours since they went to bed, Bongiwe is fast asleep, at least that's what he hopes when he slides out of bed.

Funny how a bed only makes a creaking sound when you're sneaking out, he stops, holding his breath. His gaze shifts to Bongiwe, she shuffles a smidgeon but that's all.

The sigh he produces is hush, his feet slip into a pair of sleepers but he doesn't get to use them when a snooping voice terminates his movement.

“Where are you going?” A hoarse sluggish voice invades his ears, he closes his eyes, mostly because she’s annoying. He who finds a wife finds a good thing.

Was God serious when He said that, or was it out of excitement for creating heaven and earth?

Vukuzakhe wants to rush out, pretend he didn’t hear a word she said and that he does.

That does not rid Bongiwe’s curiosity, she yells after him as he shuts the door closed. He can hear her from outside, that’s how thin their walls are.

Profanities follow him a few centimetres away. Hopefully his brothers heard none of that.

It’s so damn quiet out here, only crickets are witnesses to the impudence he’s been

subjected to.

He gets into his SUV, he's more comfortable in here. Maybe he's a lover of big things because growing up, he's only ever felt so small. It's the feminine voice God saw fit to give him.

Forgetting your phone is the same as forgetting your wallet when going to the market, he digs into his pyjama pants and pulls it out. There's a number there, saved under the name Minion.

He remembers how he got it. A standard amount of alcohol was involved, a conversation he didn't want to end because for the first time in a long time he was listened to. He can't recall exactly how he got this number, but he did.

Sealing business deals is easier than what he's about to do. It's almost the middle of the night, normal people are sleeping at this time.

“Can you talk?”

“Who’s this?” The person asks, he knows he can tell. His voice is unique, no man in this village talks like him.

“Can we meet?” Vukuzakhe does not answer the question, instead heads north.

“Do you know what time it is?” An irked voice is what follows. “I’m busy.” is what trails next when Vukuzakhe goes silent.

He exudes a heavy sigh, something is sitting on his chest. He just needs a listening ear, is that too much to ask?

“Can we talk about what happened?”

“No.” The reply is firm, Vukuzakhe is not intimidated.

“Are we going to pretend nothing happened?”
Vukuzakhe smacks himself on the head for sounding a little desperate.

“Yes.”

No. No. This is all wrong. He’s the one with a short vocabulary, he should be the one dishing out short answers. Vukuzakhe takes a deep breath, abusing his lungs.

“Please, we need to talk.” Vukuzakhe states. Grovelling is not one of his strongest points, however, he feels he has no choice but to.

He hears the person breathe, it’s heavy, it’s lengthy and borders on exhaustion.

“Who’s that?” A different voices forces its way through the cellphone, this one is deeper, a bit

hostile.

“No one.” Says the person he’s been talking to. The response should not sting like this, he doesn’t know this person for Pete’s sake. Of course he's no one.

“Who is that?” It’s Vukuzakhe’s turn to ask, not that it’s any of his business.

“I have to go.” The receiver’s voice is shaky through the phone. It’s ridiculous that Vukuzakhe thinks he’s noted fear in it.

The driver’s door is forced open, startling the man. He quickly removes the gadget from his ear at the sight of his fuming wife, standing before him.

“Who are you talking to?” Bongiwe asks, grabbing the phone from her husband’s hand.

“Hello, hello.” She’s whisper yelling, anger etched on her facial features. Vukuzakhe does

not seem worried that his wife is acting a fool on a call that was not intended for her.

Curved brows and irate eyes viciously regard him.

“They hung up.” The tone of her voice is accusing. “Are you cheating on me, Ngwane? Is that why you came to make a call in here?”

She grabs his arm and pulls him out of the car, he lets her and stands against it. Gently he retrieves his phone back, and starts his journey back to the rondavel.

“Vukuzakhe!” She’s after him, short legs trying to keep up with his long legs.

“Ngwane come back here.”

She’s short-tempered, frustrated and on a mission for answers.

Walking into the lion’s den is probably a bad idea, Bongiwe will want a bite of him all night long. He stops and meets the same angry eyes when he faces her.

He’s looking down at her, she’s not short-short, just the average height. These Khanyile brothers are too tall, walking around towering over everyone as if they walked the Garden of Eden with Adam.

“I’m going to sleep in Ngwane’s room.” He’s talking about Mathonga, that’s what they call him sometimes. Vukuzakhe walks away, hoping she won’t run after him.

Bongiwe is left shocked, she can't find her clap back. The anger on her face transitions to pain as she watches her husband leave her behind.

MATHONGA-

Seven

VUKUZAKHE

He wakes up covered in thick sweat, he thought the bad dreams were a thing of the past. Every year on their death anniversary, he's haunted by a burning rondavel, heart wrenching screams and two tiny coffins.

He's reclined on the king-sized bed, feeling like a crumbled up piece of paper, it's not an unfamiliar feeling not strange either. Twenty four years later, and he still can't shake the guilt of failing his brothers.

A strong breeze catches his attention as it lifts the curtains, the windows have been left open.

Red rimmed eyes scan the airy bedroom, he's alone, it's a relief in a way.

He doesn't have to face an angry wife so early in the morning.

The digital clock on the wall says it's 07:07am, it's a Sunday today. He made sure to set meetings for the whole day, just to avoid a certain somebody. Had they been on good speaking terms, he wouldn't have had to force his behind to work on a Sunday.

The first thing he does before he gets out of bed is send his greetings to the family group chat. Ntabezikude is the first to reply with a kissing emoji.

Hlabela forwards a long bible verse from the book of Psalms and says it's about time they add uncle Dumile's wife in the group because she blesses them with a scripture every morning.

Coarse language is what follows his message, not caring that he just invited the Most High into the group.

Where's Mathonga?

He's the one Vukuzakhe is mostly worried about, last night he found Mathonga's room locked. He had no choice but to go back to the rondavel he shares with his wife.

I'm here bhuti, having a hard time choosing an outfit for today. Shorts or jeans?

A picture of the two is sent, they all tell him to wear whatever makes him comfortable.

*Where were you last night, wena?"

Vukuzakhe is not okay with his little brother travelling alone at night.

I have a life, bhuti.

The little brat throws back. Vukuzakhe doesn't reply but goes in search for someone else on his contact list. The person has WhatsApp, but there's no profile picture.

He can't say he's not disappointed, he was looking forward to seeing a profile picture. The face he hasn't been able to forget.

With his wife around, his waking moments consist of an already made bath, masculine bath soap, towel and the day's outfit picked out for him.

Today is different, it's as if she never came back from her vacation. He has to do everything from scratch, Bongiwe is somewhere around, putting her wife tender to use.

The long mirror in front of him reflects his outfit for the day. Not bad. If anything, he's never gone wrong as far as formal clothing is concerned. Maybe he should stick to it since his dress sense leaves a bitter taste in his wife's mouth.

"I think this will do." He's talking about the black pair of chinos, the crispy blue shirt hugging his

bulging biceps, now he needs help with this goddam tie. Had it been up to him, he'd ban ties from the company.

It's a new week, and of course life continues. A little distraction will do him good, he's been too focused on things that will get him into trouble, things he should not be thinking about.

He wanders out of the room with the tie around his neck, and smiles at the sight of the one who makes his heart dance, his little brother—Mathonga.

“Ngwane.” He's still smiling as he curls an arm around Mathonga's shoulders. The younger welcomes a frown as he's taken aback by the sudden affection.

“What's happened to you?” Of course he'd ask. His brother does not salute with hugs. However,

can't his brother be happy to see him alive?
He's grateful for life and family.

Vukuzakhe snubs the question and leads the way to the main house, Mathonga is not far behind. There's silence between them, the young man knows when not to push.

Entering the kitchen, they are greeted by the smell of food. There his wife is busy behind the stove, beside her is a young lady they are familiar with. She's one of the Khanyile servants, her duties are in the kitchen and some parts of the house.

Servants are given Saturdays off, and work the rest of the week.

"Khethiwe." Hugs are for free, and Mathonga is not stingy with his. The young woman titters bashfully, hiding her face just below his chest.

"Thank you for coming back, we missed your cooking."

"I've only been gone a day, bhuti." She replies.

"A day too long if you ask me."

The two converse, oblivious of what's happening between the couple. Bongiwe has not said a word to her husband, neither is he willing to go first.

It's raining hail storms in this marriage, Vukuzakhe feels tired physically and mentally. He's standing in the kitchen, hands in his pockets and a lenient frown on his chiselled face. His five O'clock stubble making him appear strikingly handsome.

Only now Bongiwe spots the tie hanging loosely around his shirt. She takes careful steps

towards him and helps him with it like she always does.

“What would you be without me?” A man at peace.

Her hands are on his chest, brushing seductively, eyes locked on his.

“You know I’m nothing without you.” His quip is said sarcastically, no humour found in his voice.

The wisecrack is snorted upon. “You better not forget that.” She tells him, placing a wet kiss on his cheek and uses her thumb to wipe off the lip-gloss tattooed by her lips. “You look handsome, like a respectable man. A future chief... a husband and a father.”

His eyes dart to the house maid bustling around the stove, Mathonga has left the kitchen.

“Kids?”

“Yes, you’re the first born son. You have to give your parents a grandchild.” He doesn’t seem to think so.

“We’re not having children, Bongiwé. You agreed to it before we got married.” He says coldly, sending his irritable gaze to Khethiwé again. This is a secret between them, and he’d like to keep it that way. Bongiwé’s arms slither around his torso, they land on the small of his back, eliminating any space between them.

“Well, that was out of excitement and ignorance.” A fake smile stretches her glossy lips. “Ngwane, you need an heir that will continue the Khanyile legacy, your mother would tell you the same thing.”

“I have four brothers after me, they will fulfill

those duties.” He hasn’t tried to move away from her, with Khethiwe shyly stealing looks, he can’t really do anything because really, the girl can be a walking radio.

“It’s not theirs to fulfill.” Quietly, she snaps. Raised brows cheekily consider him as they curve shrewdly. “Maybe it’s time your parents found out about this absurd notion of yours.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” He grits his teeth, grabbing her side. Bongwiwe flinches at the sudden pain, her elbow harshly slams against his chest. The big man staggers a step back. She’s pointing a finger at him, a glare from hell scrutinising him.

“Don’t ever touch me like that again.” It’s an unseen threat, she turns her back, heading back to her wifely duties. Vukuzakhe is thankful Khethiwe did not witness any of that, he’d be

embarrassed.

Dalisile is not at the breakfast table, not because she's travelling, she's around alright. There are days when she can't stand being in the same room as Mathonga.

For now it's just the three of them, Vukuzakhe, Hlabela and Mathonga. Vukuzakhe thinks of mentioning their brothers' death anniversary, then again, it will ruin everyone's mood.

The wound is still fresh, Hlabela was old enough to feel the pain of loss. They've never spoken about it... the fire... the death of Sakhile and Vimbela and Vukuzakhe wanting to kill himself. Everyone moved on assuming they each had healed from the traumatic experience. Memory lane is not always sweet, sometimes it's filled with thorns.

Vukuzakhe opts to keep it to himself.

Two seconds haven't passed when Vumile struts in, a young man with a ridiculously small frame, dressed in a loose blue work suit tailing him.

That night, Vukuzakhe didn't quite get a good look at him. His big hazel eyes, succulent thick lips.

Wide-eyed gaze connects with his, in a second, the younger man drops his gaze while Vukuzakhe keeps the stare until a nudge on his arm pulls him out of the daze he's locked himself in.

Who else other than his forward brother Mathonga, he fights the urge to roll his precious eyes when he meets the grin on his little brother's face.

“Like what you see?” It’s a good thing Thonga whispers this. Something flashes in big brother’s eyes, it’s gone a second later.

“Hamba uyofa.” (Go die.)

Vukuzakhe returns, fighting back the shock that just hit him. Does Mathonga see through him? He’s always been a nifty one, innocent but nifty. Smarty pants who sees through people. More like invade people’s privacy by observing more than he should.

“Ngiyadlala hau.” (I’m kidding.)

Comes a light chuckle, it’s accepted by a tongue click.

“Ngwane KaNgwadi,” is said with pride. “Drive Ntando to the warehouse, he needs to get a few

things for the livestock.”

At his father’s order, Mathonga lifts his wide gaze. He swallows a big lump, thinking of an excuse. This morning, he’s got things to do, important things he can’t cancel.

“Why me, baba?” He asks, swallowing another lump. However, unable to look into the eyes of the man he just questioned. You don’t question this big bull.

“Because I said so.” Yep. It’s a ‘I say jump you ask how high’ type of relationship.

Mathonga looks at his brothers for help, Hlabela’s engrossed on today’s daily paper. Vukuzakhe... well he’s trying hard not to stare at the gorgeous young man timidly standing beside his father.

“I’ll take him.” Ooops! That came too quick. Mathonga nods, happy Vukuzakhe has come to

his rescue. "I was on my way out anyway."

"Yes, bhut' Zakhe will drive him to the warehouse." Mathonga chirps, chuckling to his own words.

Vukuzakhe does not wait for any disputes, he grabs his car keys and walks out of the house. In this family he's almost equal to Vumile. His word is regarded just as important.

"Go ahead son," Vumile tells Ntando. The young man reticently follows Vukuzakhe out.

Bongiwe walks in with breakfast just as Vumile settles down at the head of the table, she joins them after making sure everything has been set.

MATHONGA-

Breakfast is almost over when loud singing occupies the space, and pulls a frown to my father's face, there's only one person responsible for him cringing in frustration.

"NTABEZIKUDE!" Baba yells, voice chiding like a dictatorial parent. Ntabezikude is not bothered, it is his nature. He couldn't care less what people think about him. He stands in the middle of the dining room, dancing to the song of struggle that's agonisingly parading from his mouth.

"What is wrong with you Ntaba? You can't even sing for crying out loud." Baba reproaches his third born son, rubbing his temple as if to rid the headache he's being given.

Unbothered, Ntaba continues before breaking into isicathamiya dance, my gaze finds baba.

He looks defeated but there's a faint smile twitching on his lips.

"Ntaba, won't you do it at least for me?" I cajole, showcasing a playful grin. He poses, his eyes turn to me, soft and warm.

"Awu birthday boy." As if he didn't see me last night at the police station. I'm regarded with a soft kiss on my cheek. Shocking really. The rents are the only ones subjected to these kisses of his. What is he happy about?

"Happy birthday Thonga lam'." He sits down on the empty sit next to baba who is also greeted with a kiss.

"My birthday was yesterday bhuti."

"Yeah, yeah. It's still your birthday month." He's right. The announcement brings a smile to my face. "I didn't get you anything by the way, I used to change your diapers and feed you. That

should count for something."

Why am I not surprised, really?

"A man is greeted with a handshake Ntaba, you know how I feel about this crazy habit of yours." Baba complains, pointing a butter knife at him. I've almost forgotten about that. "I hope you don't go around kissing men, I don't want people spreading rumours about my sons."

"My old man," A humourless chuckle is what we're graced with. "There's a saying. Never let your enemies look into your eyes, it is where they will find your weakness and attack when you least expect it."

"Yeah right! Who said that?" Hlabela is amused by Ntaba's proverb.

“Me of course, you can thank me later.” Ntaba articulates, grabbing a plate and filling it with scrambled eggs, baked beans and five slices of bread.

“Excuse me.” That’s baba, leaving the table without any explanation as to where he’s going. I need everyone out of the house at least for an hour or so.

Khethiwe is here, pouring tea for Ntabezikude. Something he can easily do by himself, I want to complain about how I had to pour my own juice.

“Ngiyabonga ntokazi.” (Thank you, lady.)

A quiet giggle, the shy girl blushes, it’s kind of funny to see her recoil whenever Ntaba addresses her. Sadly my brother has never bat an eye towards her, even if he did, he’d drag the poor girl down to the ground. He’s too

destructive for an innocent girl like Khethiwe, she should set her eyes on Hlabela instead, the holy one.

“I’ll be in the kitchen if you need anything else.” Khethiwe mumbles. Ntaba is not there anymore, he’s stuffing his face like a pig. Disappointment cradles her, she drops her head and lets her size three feet drag her out of the dining room.

“You’re an idiot Ntaba.” He chokes on his food as my hand finds the back of his head with a bang, I’m given a black look that should have killed me.

“What’s wrong with you?” He keeps his voice neutral, soft and deadly calm.

“Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed the way she looks at you.” I’m tempted to smack his big head again. He’s back to stuffing his mouth, face resembling a monkey.

“I know, poor thing can only dream of me.”

“Dream?” Hlabela questions, giving all his attention to Ntaba.

A confident nod is the first answer that comes, “Her dreams consist of a sweaty me, buried deep inside her, pleasuring her until she’s undone.” The arrogant bastard returns.

“And she told you this, when?” Hlabela queries.

“She didn’t have to tell me, I see it in her eyes.” Oh wow! “Where is everyone?” He’s done with that conversation.

His head whips around, searching. By everyone, he means Dalisile and Ndleleni. Ndlela won’t show face today, he’s not on speaking terms with baba. I know not where Dalisile is.

Everyone having plans today works in my favour.

I've never done anything like this before, that's why my heart is violently thudding against my ribcage. The vivid dream I had last night has brought me here, in this rondavel where baba used to talk to the Khanyile ancestors before he decided being an Adventist was the way to go.

He probably won't be happy to hear I went and called upon the great ones, I have no other choice. I have to do this lest I perish. There's an undeniable pull, along with the many voices I heard in my dream last night.

Something is coming, something that is greater than all of us, something set to destroy this family.

I light a candle, place it next to the glass of water and burn incense. This is when I notice the tremble on my hands, it's bad that I have to

intertwine my fingers to stop it.

It takes about a few seconds before I'm myself again.

“Nina bo gogo nabomkhulu, bantu abadala bakulelikhaya. My great ancestors, boKhanyile. Ntunjwa kaLanga. Mthiyane. Ndwandwe. Ngwane. Mathonga amahle. It is I your son Mathonga Ngwane KaNgwadi. I greet you with the highest respect. For many years I have not acknowledged your presence in my life, yet you stayed with me. Thank you for not forsaking me. My heart is heavy, I'm engulfed with grief and great confusion.”

Unexpectedly, the door flings open, it reveals an angry Dalisile. She looks ready to kill, her eyes rush to the items in front of me then back to me.

Nose flaring, she marches in, grabs the glass of

water and empties it on the burning incense. Her actions take me off guard and bring me to my feet.

“What did you do that for?” I want to yell at her, but the courage to do that is nowhere to be found.

“Are you practising witchcraft in my house, boy?” I have no idea what she’s on about. This is not witchcraft, it’s far from it.

“I was talking to my ancestors, I wanted to...” Disdainful laughter roars in my ears, absent of emotion. She’s a cold woman.

“Your ancestors?” It feels like a slap on my face. “What ancestors? Who taught you this nonsense? Does your father know about this shit you’re doing here?”

She's yelling at the top of the roof. I don't want baba to find out. He might not approve.

"I'm not doing anything wrong, Dalisile, I told you..."

"Shut up." I wish she would stop yelling. I'm not fast enough to dodge the white saucer coming at me. It hits my shoulder, causing an unbearable pain, before crashing on the floor. Astounded and in utter disbelief, I watch as the plate shatters into pieces.

"Don't ever talk back while I'm talking," a finger is pointed at me. "Do you hear me, boy?"

"No!" I shout back. Big mistake I know. "My name is Mathonga..."

The rest of my complaint is blocked by her grabbing me by the collar.

“What did you say to me?” She growls. I’m not hurt by her actions, but the hatred so evident in her eyes.

“Stop calling me boy, my name is Mathonga.” My voice trembles in her presence, giving her satisfaction.

“Don’t think you’re special because your father favours you, you are nothing boy, nothing. I should’ve aborted you the second I knew my womb was rotten. Or maybe,” she lets go and steps back. “Maybe you should do what I failed to do... kill yourself. This family will be much better off without you.”

The rest of my things are kicked aside, I watch with horror as they scatter all over the place.

I’m standing in this empty rondavel, paralyzed by Dalisile’s words, unable to move an inch after she’s long gone. Her words keep ringing in my

ears, alive and dominant.

MATHONGA-

Eight

VUKUZAKHE

Perhaps this is a mistake. He thinks as he strolls beside the petite young man pushing a trolley full of items down the parking lot.

There's an undisputable attraction he can't look past.

That day at the river— they went too far, farther than allowed—farther than their families would tolerate.

A Sangweni and a Khanyile. It's a sin on its own, an atrocity the devil would love to watch on a big plasma TV over a glass of sadism and amusement.

There's a pull, he wants to be close to him, closer than he's ever been to anyone—closer than they were that day at the river. He wants to be under his skin, tasting everything he is and everything he's got to offer.

A thirty five year-old man surely ought to know his sexuality, Vukuzakhe is no outsider to the feelings stealthily lurking in his heart, he knows what he feels. He knows why he suddenly has his eyes on a man.

Omnisexual also known as pansexual, the white man calls it.' Google has been around longer than he has, and thanks to it, he was able to find out why as a man he's attracted to other men.

He didn't grow up with the confidence he has

now, his teenage years were confusing to him. From having speech impediment, to sounding less like a man when he spoke, to being attracted to both genders.

As he came into his manhood, he came to understand that it's not gender he fancied but the person themselves.

He's never dared to go beyond shaking a man's hand, the thought scared him. Thanks to alcohol he was able to conquer his fears.

Funokuhle feels awkward when Vukuzakhe gets the car door for him, it feels more like a deliberate favour than a kind gesture. More scary than tense and dreadful than awkward.

"You don't have to do that." Funokuhle hesitates, scrawny hands enclosing around his chest.

Vukuzakhe doesn't say anything, instead he plugs his hands in the pockets of his pants, eyes flickering up and down the length of Funokuhle's small frame.

The stare makes Funokuhle shrink into his overalls that do nothing but make him look skinnier.

He's unable to hide from the man's fixated stare.

Vukuzakhe's lips draw into a slow smirk, "You're a minion."

"Excuse me?"

"You're ridiculously small. Your body I mean. It reminds me of a minion."

"I'm not short, if that's what you're implying. You're—you are just too tall. A gorilla." The last word is whispered under warm breath. Lean shoulders moving up and down in a tentative

dance, the motion finds Vukuzakhe and tickles him, a light chortle stems from the big man.

“Did you just call me a gorilla?” Vukuzakhe asks. The question shocks Funokuhle, he thought it wasn't that audible.

He fidgets, trying to move past Vukuzakhe so he can get in the car. Their shoulders graze, it's enough for Funokuhle to freeze mid-step. His eyes shoot up to glance at the giant looking down at him.

“Ex—excuse me.” The boy needs to pass, there's only space fit for a meerkat to slide through. He can fit of course, he's as lean as Pumba's Timon.

“What happened?” The question is random, that's why Funokuhle welcomes a frown, wanting to know what it's about.

“The bruises on your arm?” Vukuzakhe is touching him, no permission has been granted. Just one night with him and this Khanyile offspring thinks he can go around touching other people’s sons.

Funokuhle quickly averts his eyes to the arm that’s been held prisoner by a gentle warm hand. Big hazel eyes widen. They scan his chocolate colored skin, studying the fresh markings before pulling down his sleeve so the tall snooty guy would see them no more and he won’t have to ask questions that have nothing to do with him.

“Well?”

“It happened at work.” Funo thinks he owes him no explanation.

“What, you got in a fight with one of the cows?”

Vukuzakhe. Funokuhle would laugh, in fact the query is ticklish, but he doesn't humor his boss' son.

“Something like that, what about you? Those scratch marks look pretty bad.”

Funokuhle is looking up his neck. Something flashes in Khanyile's eyes resembling a power stain, and vanishes just as quick. He's fixing the collar of his shirt, wondering how the hell the scratch mark got there. It wasn't there in the morning.

“Mosquito.” He's capping.

“Ntandoyethu!” That voice! So authoritative, so demanding. Vukuzakhe can't recognise it. He'd turn to inspect who it belongs to but he finds it hard to remove his gaze from the trembling little man standing in front of him. It appears Funokuhle is quietly losing his mind, somewhat

afraid to say the least.

“What’s wrong?” Vukuzakhe questions the young man’s widened gaze, thick russet lips trembling under a shaky breath. “Ntando?” Vukuzakhe whispers.

“What are you doing here?” The stranger has made it to them, his darkened expression on Funokuhle. Must be his uncle. Vukuzakhe concludes to himself. He at least looks like it, the pot belly, his greying beard and droopy yellowish eyes that reveal his regular beer intake.

“I- I’m...” The small man seems to catch what Vukuzakhe has, he’s stuttering as if his words can’t stand being inside his mouth.

“Who is this?” The stranger turns his gaze on Vukuzakhe, annoyed at how tall this Khanyile giant is as he’s looking up at him. Intimidating is what he’s becoming.

“Vukuzakhe Khanyile.” Surprise! Surprise. Vuks didn’t stutter. He extends a firm hand towards the oldie... my bad... Vukuzakhe extends a firm hand, which grandpa overlooks.

“P—Pule...” A trembling Funokuhle balks, eyes sloppy and dishonest. “He’s my... he’s my boss. We came here to get some items... items for the livestock.”

He’s explaining himself, too much actually. Vukuzakhe seems to think so. A frown finds residence on his face, as he observes both men intently. The younger is afraid, anyone can tell by how he’s shrunk into his blue overalls, and the older is pissed, the dark shade in his yellow eyes recites it word for word.

“Are you okay?” Asks Vukuzakhe.

He doesn't think when his hand glides to touch Funo's, its denied access at its arrival as the lad scuttles backwards. He's not really thinking what's behind him because his back roughly hits the car door. A choked gasp leaves his mouth as he winces in pain.

"Ntando!" The two men in his presence rush to help him only to stop midway at the realisation that they both showcased their concern.

Vukuzakhe is considered with a deep frown, and conical eyes. He returns the glare since he can't grasp why an uncle would worry for his nephew this much. It's almost as if... as if...

"I'm fine." No one asked him, but Funo tells them anyway. Pule's shoulders tense, "Let's go home." He's already touching the boy who backtracked at Pule's incoming hand, eyes wide and full of fear.

Vukuzakhe is no blind man, he sees what's going. He's seen it and it's not sliding down nicely.

"He's got work." Vukuzakhe plays a protagonist. The pule guy... he doesn't flap an eye, his gaze is on this boy who is now standing next to him.

"I'll take him to work." Pule is unable to mask the anger in his voice. "Right, Ntando?"

Ntando as Pule calls him... as everyone call him, winces a smidgeon.

"Y—yes," The air appears to vibrate with strain, he tries to stand tall like a man. But something about Pule's presence has him trembling under his skin. "Pule will take me to work."

"Who is this?" Vukuzakhe is getting too

comfortable, they just met like yesterday and probably shared more than a connection, but that does not grant him the right to meddle.

“His uncle.” Pule spits, it’s a short answer in a tone that tells him it’s none of his business.

He could argue and ask for proof, but he has no right of any kind.

Like a deer caught in headlights, Vukuzakhe watches the pair walk off to a red mazda, it's an old car, his grandfather must have drove such during his time.

Funokuhle’s feet hesitate with each step and his so called uncle is striding with so much confidence. Maybe it’s not confidence, maybe it’s unspoken anger. Something is amiss, Vukuzakhe wants to find out.

His gaze meets Pule’s dark eyes as they drive off, now he’s more eager to know why the man’s aura borders on something evil. He gets

in the car, retrieves his phone from his pocket and sends a text.

Ntandoyethu Sangweni. Don't leave anything out.

AMANDLA-

A blanket of thick clouds nurtures the skies, streaks of bold light and thunder come as a roared promise of rain. Strange weather it is, strange because this lousy village is consecrated with rain just once a year. On the seventh of July to be precise.

No one has answers to that, the matter has been brought to the chief before, and the only explanation he came with was that it rains on his son's birthday.

You can imagine how the villagers felt about that, they were not happy whatsoever.

Today... today the heavens are here with a promise to make it rain, the day after.

“Get the washing outside. God has finally heard our prayers.” This is a happy old woman. I want to tell her to get it herself. It’s her washing and I’m occupied with the cleaning.

“I’ll do it once I’m done gogo, I’ve been at this since morning.”

“Yey wena, get the washing outside man.” Yoh! Does she have to yell?

I take my time with scrubbing the pots, I have work tomorrow, so I need to finish this. Working as a petrol attendant is no child’s play. A six to six job, thankfully I haven’t started working night

shifts. It would be a shame to leave this complaining old woman alone throughout the night.

“Sizani must come and get her daughter. I can’t live with an unruly child.”

Sizani is my mother, she works in Johannesburg. Her job is to look after old white women who have become invalid. I hate her job, I hate that she left me with her mother, I hate that she didn’t care I was doing my last year in school when she left and I hate that I only see her three times a year.

As for my father, he woke up one day, said he’s going to buy bread and never came back. The bastard must be the CEO of Albany by now.

“Haibo gogo?” I’m offended, I’m not a bad child. I just have too much work to do in this house, sometimes she forgets that I work and need to rest on my days off.

Placing the pot aside, I turn to face her. She’s seated on a kitchen chair, sipping on a cup of tea. Must be nice.

“You know I still have the video of you and gog’ Doris dancing to isencane lengane on her 70th birthday?” She’s shocked. Hee! This gogo must not know me. “Be nice to me gogo, I know things.”

I escape her complaint as I rush out to get the stupid clothes from the washing line.

I can’t get a hold of Mathonga, his phone takes me straight to voicemail. It’s frustrating really. I don’t feel his love anymore, well when we’re not together. It’s as if he’s nothing but a mere

dream.

I'd go to his house in search of him, a reckless thing that would be. It's getting late anyway.

THE KHANYILES-

There's a heavy storm coming, for the first time in years, it's going to rain in Izingolweni—on a day that is not Mathonga's birthday.

The weather forecast didn't foresee any rain today, in fact, it was meant to be as sunny as Miami.

There are strong winds, and it's dark outside, dark as night. Never mind it's 6pm.

The lightning is unmatched, striking with vicious

force, a few trees have been reported hit, falling victim to the lightning that strikes without mercy.

The thunder is deafeningly loud, ear-splitting, a very sensitive booming to the human ear.

All this has happened within the last four hours and no rain has been detected, not even a tiny drop.

“Khethiwe are the windows closed in the rondavels?” Shouts the daughter-in-law of the family, she’s full of commotion, closing whatever window she finds open.

“I don’t know.” Maids have the right to boredom, don’t they? But Bongiwe disagrees, the young maiden is granted a hectic look. “Go and check.” Bongiwe shouts, now running around, covering everything that’s mirror with a white

cloth, only to be graced with Khethiwe's wide eyes.

She's on the verge of tears. What a weakling. Bongiwwe reflects and accepts an eye roll.

"It's... there's lightning outside, sisi." She tells Bongiwwe, hoping the witch would have mercy on her.

"Go check if the damn windows are closed. Or you will find yourself walking to your mother's house in this damn storm." Ah! Such anger that matches the thunder.

Khethiwe flinches, tears immediately stream down her cheeks, uninvited.

A sob takes a peek then goes back into her mouth... How disrespectful.

She takes off running on wobbly feet, fear dancing behind her with threats to even scare

her farther when she gets outside.

“Watch where you’re going?” Another shout from Bongiwe when Khethiwe collides against a brick wall... Yawn!

Wait! The wall has hands, it’s steadily holding her. She would’ve kissed the floor and probably lost a tooth or two.

“Hau ntokazi?” It’s not fair that this one has the deepest voice, out of all the brothers.

Bongiwe fights the urge to roll her eyes, and hides how much she does not like Ntabezikude with a friendly smile.

“What’s the hurry?” Ntaba asks with his deep Zulu... deep hoarse voice that would make any woman turn their head.

“Sisi said...”

“It’s women stuff, nothing you need to worry about.” Bongiwe interrupts, slithering her way to them. A furrowed brow is what she meets when she gets there.

“She’s crying!” There is no care found in his voice, Ntaba is not even bothered about it. He just wants to know because he wants to know.

“Argh!” Bongiwe growls. “Khethiwe is so weak, she thinks she’ll be struck by lightning if she leaves the house. I told her to go close the windows, there’s a storm coming and she decides to cry about it.” Boredom is heard in her voice.

“Mmmhh!” He hums, unbothered still. And just like that he turns and walks, “I’ll do it.” He’s gone before the ladies can protest.

“Uyabona wena?” Bongiwe pulls Khethiwe’s left ear, like she has every right to do so, like she helped her mother carry her in her womb. “Your days in this house are numbered.”

With one shove from Bongiwe, a shaky Khethiwe stumbles away, tears dancing on her round face.

“Where is everyone?” Now this voice... this voice has Bongiwe trembling with fear. She turns to meet Vumile’s blank face, yet worry has moved into his eyes.

“Vukuzakhe is not home yet, the other boys are around.”

Vumile frowns at how she referred to his sons as boys, she catches her fault and drops her gaze with a clearing of a throat.

“Mathonga? Is he with them?” The worry has moved to his voice.

“I haven’t seen Mathonga since breakfast.”
Bongiwe replies. It’s a thoughtful response,
brows furrowing in question.

Vumile rushes past her, calling out for his last
born son. Bongiwe snorts at the worry
displayed by the chief. Mathonga is an adult
who is capable of impregnating a woman, he’s
probably with one of his girlfriends. That’s the
theory Bongiwe has come up with.

Vumile’s shouting brings everyone into the main
house, everyone but his first and last born.

“Where is my son?” He’s almost out of breath,
pearls of sweat pecking his wrinkled forehead.

“Vukuzakhe is...” Bongiwe shuts up as she gets
a glare from the deepest pits of hell itself. It
sends a chill down her spine. Vumile is too
uptight for her liking.

“What’s going on?” Hlabela asks, he’s wearing reading glasses and carrying a bible in his right hand.

“Mathonga is not home, his phone is off.”
Vumile explains, panic striking him like lightning.

“Really?” Yes! Dali, Dali is here too, wearing a bored look. “How old is that boy that you have to worry about his whereabouts?”

“Have you seen what’s outside Dalisile? No one has seen him since breakfast. My son is not home, he might be injured somewhere.”

“My husband is not home too.” Bongiwe murmurs to herself, she’s lucky she’s standing on the other side of the sofa and no one caught her retort.

“Or dead.” That’s Dalisile’s response to her husband complaint.

“What did you say?” Vumile hisses, taking a step forward. Like a lioness, she’s standing in the midst of her sons. Hlabela, Ndleleni and Ntabezikude. Really, Vumile won’t be able to do anything to her. Or would he?

“I’m just saying, he’s not the smartest boy around here. He was probably driving too fast, lightning struck his car and he died on the spot. It happens to the best of us, I say bayede, the universe has spoken.”

She almost sounds merciless, that all eyes turn to her, judging, some astounded.

For the life of her, Dalisile can’t explain how Vumile moved so fast and slapped her across the face. No one can, all they hear is the loud sound of a clap and a scream from the woman.

MATHONGA

Nine-

THE KHANYILES-

The boys watch in horror at what their father just did in their presence. This man has never laid a hand on their mother, not in their company at least. Anger is evident on him, pulsing from his entire body, vibrant and terrifying.

“How dare you?” Vumile is an Alpha male and it’s not a surprise that his voice matches the thunderous rumble outside.

“You hit me, Vumile?” Argh! Rhetorical questions are so boring.

“Baba!” Ndleleni hisses, nose flaring and eyes

burning with rage. He's not a fan of his parents, that does not mean he will watch this man abuse his mother.

A woman.

Ndleleni wants to say more, as he's now shielding the woman who has neglected him all his life, giving her undivided attention to Vukuzakhe.

"Stay out of this Ndleleni." Vumile snaps.

Not again. Hlabela sighs in exhaustion, he's a bit upset. Then again, they've always known their father has some patriarchal bullshit... I mean traits hidden in him, if he's never beat their mother in front of them, he's done it in private.

Ntabezikude is gracing a smirk, almost sadistic.

He emits a loud yawn, moves to the expensive white leather couch, grabs the TV remote and goes on a channel searching adventure.

He's given brief attention before Ndlela steals it back with his authoritative voice, damn and it's directed towards the wrong person—his father.

“Since when do you hit women?” Ndleleni is not pleased at all.

“Ndlela...” Dalisile intervenes, grabbing the young man's hand. Disgust visits Ndlela's face, he moves his hand from her reach, side eyeing his mother.

“Did you hear what she said about your brother?” Vumile reminds him, Ndlela seems to go down memory lane, back to seconds ago. He clenches his jaw, now caught between right and wrong.

“So what?” Dalisile shouts. “He's not god that

we have to kiss the ground he walks on.”

“Watch your words Dalisile.” Vumile sizzles, pointing a threatening finger at his wife.

“I’m tired of watching my tongue. I’m your wife Vumile. You loved me once, before that leach was born. You let him consume all the love you once felt for me, leaving me empty, with nothing.”

“We’re not doing this, not in front of the kids.” Vumile grunts, glaring.

“No, by all means don’t let us stop you bazali. The stage is yours.” The amused voice comes from the direction where the TV is located. All eyes turn to Ntabezikude. He’s stingy with his stare as he continues watching television.

Serial killer documentaries are his bad habits.
'Most Evil' being at the top of his list.

A loud tongue click visits the man on the sofa,
he welcomes it with a light chuckle.

"This is fun, don't you think sis Bonggi?"
Ntabezikude says as he sends a playful look
down Bonggiwe's way, the lady quickly wipes the
smirk pouncing on her face. Eyes all out and
heart thrumming against her chest.

"I—I don't know what you're talking about bhut'
Ntaba." Bloody shit! How could he tell she was
enjoying the family drama when he wasn't even
looking at her?

"Fighting will not help find Mathonga, we should

be out there searching for him.” Deputy Jesus... Maybe he’s St Paul’s reincarnation. Everyone deserves a Hlabela in their life.

“You people are worried about Mathonga, I don’t even know where my husband is.”

This is what happens when you’re given too much freedom. Bongiwe is still pasted away from the family, but she is part of the drama. You can’t miss her where drama is concerned.

Someone is fiddling with the door handle, all eyes turn towards it, forgetting the disrespect they were subjected to by the daughter in-law of this family not so long ago.

The heir walks in, not looking as neat as he was when he left, sleeves rolled up, revealing thick veiny hands. He’s done away with the damn tie.

Relief bounces on the walls of the dining room at the sight of Vukuzakhe, but worry refuses to leave them alone. Mathonga is not home yet.

“The gods must be angry, did you see your car mother? It’s wrecked.” That’s the first thing he says, he does not greet nor wave to acknowledge their presence.

“My car!” Eyes expanded, Dalisile enquires.

“It was hit by lightning, you can’t tell me you didn’t hear it.”

How can they, when it sounds like world war Z out there?

Ntabezikude is the first to move, he carelessly tosses the remote on the sofa and jumps over it, his move resembling an untrained ninja.

Everyone but Vumile follows him out, they

would love to see what has happened to Dalisile's precious car.

The strong wind pushes against them as they step out, they push back till they make it to the parking area.

Who wouldn't scream in anger after their car has been struck by lightning?

Hlabela carries his vacant hand on his head, looking up at the dark clouds, strips of lightning flashing here and there, resembling unrestrained anger.

Both with the deafening thunder, warning them to move back to the house. Clearly it's not safe out here.

How is it that the sound of thunder is swirling with joyous laughter? Vukuzakhe is the first to

turn, knowing who it belongs to.

He shakes his head, seeing how his brother—Ntabezikude is laughing as if he's watching a comedy show.

Arm clutched around his stomach, head thrown back like a kid and mouth wide open and loud.

This must be a joke from the heavens, no human can be this funny. Trevor Noah and Kevin Hart collaborating would be a shame. Ntaba would surely be tenderly bored.

“Ntaba stop this nonsense of yours.” Dalisile shouts, she has to with this crazy loudness out here. The thunder, the wind and lightning.

Dalisile pushes Ntaba to get him to stop laughing like a maniac, but her baby has grown to be a brick, unmoving. She clicks her tongue

when he doesn't. "Ntabezikude?"

Ntaba pauses, a sadistic smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. Eyes mischievous and uncanny.

"What did you do mama?" Ntabezikude.

The question catches her off guard. What did she do? She didn't do anything. But why are her eyes shifty, unable to keep eye contact?

"The gods have their eyes on you." Ntaba adds to his laughter, annoying his mother in the process. Dalisile snorts, perhaps she's a bit afraid.

"The gods? There is only one God ndoda." Ah! Hlabela, Hlabela.

Ntabezikude pays him no mind, he's walking around the scorched vehicle, inspecting every

inch of it with a satisfied look on his face.

He chuckles, shaking his head clearly approving of what's before him.

The show is interrupted by Vumile, he's carrying an umbrella, a heavy jacket donned around his broad shoulders.

“Baba, where are you going?” Vukuzakhe asks. His father must be crazy to want to go out when the sky is bathing in wrath.

“To look for your brother.” Vumile answers, sending a glare to Dalisile.

Vukuzakhe is confused a second, his eyes rush to count his brothers. They are all here, except Mathonga.

“Ma... Mathonga? Where is he? Where is my brother?” He's a stuttering mess, fighting to

speed the syllables moving out of his mouth.

Dalisile is not impressed by the worry on her son's face, she clicks her bitter tongue and heads back into the house, bumping into Bongiwe on her way in. Another tongue click is released.

“Where is Mathonga?” Vukuzakhe snaps, panic striking him on the chest.

“We don't know.” That's Ndleleni.

“What do you mean? You people have been home the whole day, and no one knows where he is?” Vukuzakhe is not happy about this. “I trusted you, all of you to look after him. He's... he's a baby.”

Look at them... nodding as if he really is a baby.

The brothers know how overprotective Vukuzakhe is of all of them, Mathonga mostly.

“We have to find him.” Vukuzakhe says, walking towards his car but a hand grabs his arm.

“Don’t go, let your brothers look for him.” Bongiwe begs. “You haven’t been home the whole day, please stay.”

The other brothers are on their way to their cars, Ntaba is standing next to Vukuzakhe’s car, waiting for him. Vumile is driving out of the premises, wasting no time at all.

“Go back in the house Bongiwe, we’ll need someone to call us when Mathonga gets home.” That’s an idea, but Bongiwe does not seem to think so. She’s shaking her head like a peevish child. Her arms surround his waist, she buries her face on his chest.

“Please myeni wami, it’s not safe out there. Stay with me, please.”

Large hands find her cheeks, a gentle touch.

“I won’t let anything happen to me.” His nose brushes against hers. “My brother is out there, alone.”

Rolling one’s eyes should be an extreme sport, Bongiwe feels the itch, too close. She pushes it back down. Must everything be about that spoiled brat Mathonga?

“Promise you’ll come back home, to me.” She says.

Sigh!

“I will.” Yeah, with Mathonga. Otherwise he won’t come home at all.

“I love you.” She does— to death. Soft lips land on his, he receives the kiss.

“Yeah, me too.” Took too long, but he’s said it. That’s all that matters. Bongiwe watches as the Khanyile clan drive out of the premises in search of the Khanyile brat.

FUNOKUHLE-

He didn’t take me to work like he said he would, he did the complete opposite actually.

Pampered me like a prince and took me to KFC. I had fun I won’t lie.

But something is not right, I caught it a few times in his eyes, when we had quiet moments, awkward moments.

He gave me looks that brought chills down my

spine, chills that curled in my stomach and made me shiver at the memory of his punishments.

I don't know if I still have my job, Mr. Khanyile was not happy to see me leave with Pule. It's not like I had a choice, it was either I followed him or risked losing my job.

Pule is not a man to be defied, and I'm not really enjoying being a herdsboy. My father though... that man will kill me when he finds out what happened.

I can only hope Mr. Khanyile can keep a secret, like he's kept our secret so far. I must be an idiot to have allowed him to touch me the way he did that night, I allowed a stranger inside me and enjoyed every bit of it.

Or it must have been the alcohol.

“Ntandoyethu.” Pule’s voice brings me out of my musing. We’re at his house, he brought me here after the date. I wanted to go home, but he insisted on bringing me here.

With this strange weather, I don’t think I will make it home safe.

Two hours have passed since the movie he selected started, it’s over now. Thank God.

I hate action movies. Too much blood, too much killings and foul language is said after every word. I hate action movies. He knows it but chose the damn thing still.

“Yes.” I answer the calling, my fingers tapping a familiar rhythm against my thigh. I’m suddenly not sure about being curled up on the couch beside him. His arm is firm and possessive around my shoulders.

“I don’t like that man you were with.” What must I do about it?

We’re not made to like every person we come in contact with.

I say this but deep down I know why he’s decided to take this road. My heart thuds when his arm leaves my shoulders, he scoots back so he’s squarely looking into my eyes.

“Was he the one you were talking to last night?” He asks.

Was I that obvious? I could’ve been talking to my father for crying out loud. “Hey, I asked you a question.”

I should be thankful he’s still gentle with his words, his voice not giving any form of anger. But why am I trembling under his gaze? Sitting up straight, I swallow past the stiff fear in my throat.

“Don’t keep me waiting.” His teeth don’t make room for each other as he hisses, eyes taking on a familiar rage.

“No, my father had called. Asking about my location.” I lie, like I always do. It’s stupid because he sees past me, he knows when I’m lying to him.

“I see.” He’s reading my eyes, searching, invading my privacy.

My eyes skim around, doing their utmost best not to meet his.

“Who is he?”

My face pales. The tone of his voice sends an icy feeling down my spine, he’s mad... livid.

“What?” My nails scrap against the red velvety couch, in search of a grip where none could be found.

“The man you were with, who is he?” I know who he’s talking about.

“I—I told you... he’s my boss. We had gone to buy...”

“If I were you, I would think before I answer. You know how much I hate it when you lie to me.” I wince at his reply.

Now I know why he pampered me, he wants to punish me, and when he’s done remind me how much he loves me by providing proof of how he takes care of my needs.

He’s done it before, I should’ve known.

“Look at me, Ntandoyethu.” The tone he uses takes me back to when he was a teacher, when he’d exercise his authority on me. I bite my bottom lip, trying to stop the nerves travelling

through my body.

“I said look at me.” My body shudders at the sudden outburst.

Inch by inch, my eyes shift from my shaking legs, past the sneakers on his feet, past his fingers tapping on the glass coffee table, his heaving chest, the veins pulsing on his neck not stopping until I meet his intensive stare.

“What did I say about seeing other men?” He’s on his feet now, and I’m shuddering at his stare down.

“I’m... I’m not doing anything with him.” I’ve become defensive as I have anticipated his next move. “He’s my boss, Pule. I swear to god, we haven’t been doing anything. I didn’t do anything

wrong... I didn't... didn't betray you.”

Panic comes in contact with my being, before his fist finds my cheek, harsh and ruthless. Striking like a boxer determined to win a fight.

The impact throws me on the floor, taking a defensive mode, I curl my body into a ball, and use my arms to cover my face.

Something crashes on my abdomen, his foot. It comes again and again and again. Leaving no room for compromise.

“I let you walk free and you become a whore.” He grunts, not stopping his kicks.

“Pule please.” I’m not going to cry, I never cry. He loves it when I cry, it makes him feel like Mohammed Ali, on top of the bloody world.

I feel every harsh kick, I hear every insult, every curse word. I can't see his face though. He's having his way with me, not caring about how he's hurting me. He sits on my stomach, forces my head up. I don't open my eyes, not wanting to see the evil in his eyes.

"You're a whore, Ntando. A dirty piece of slut." His hands find my shoulders, I grunt in pain when he continuously crashes my head into the floor.

"Stop, Pule. Please stop." The ache has me begging for mercy. Pule ignores my screams for help, he's not going to stop until he's satisfied. My life is at his mercy.

MATHONGA-

Ten

VUKUZAKHE-

It's impossible that he's disappeared without a trace, Izingolweni is not that big a place for a person to go missing without anyone taking notice, a grown man for that matter.

Vukuzakhe wanted to keep it in the family but that was not Vumile's plan. The entire town has been notified of the little prince's disappearance. Those who wanted to help have gone out of their comfort zones.

"Try his phone again," Vukuzakhe tells Ntabezikude. They have just left a guest house, it's the third one they've checked, leaving with bad news seated on their shoulders.

"I did that two seconds ago, ndoda." Ntaba's protest finds Vukuzakhe in a bad mood.

"I don't care, try it again." He's shouting at the wrong person, Ntabezikude is not affected.

“You need to calm down, I’m sure he found some girl and got lucky.” Ntabezikude.

The chuckle must have left his mouth with bad intentions, Vukuzakhe clicks his tongue and orders his brother to call again. He obliges and meets a mechanical voice of a white woman telling him nonsense.

“Ai ke, I don’t know anymore.” Ntaba emits, his eyes betraying what his voice doesn't. He’s angry, a rare thing to see.

“I don’t like this at all, I swear if Mathonga is doing this on purpose, I’m going to punish him.” The announcement by Vukuzakhe has Ntaba rubbing his hands together like a petulant child.

“Ohh! Can I help? I want to be the one to tie him up.” Ntaba chirps.

Frowning at the suggestion, Vukuzakhe takes his eyes off the road to catch something akin to excitement on his brother's face.

"Not like that sdididi," Vukuzakhe chides, "What is wrong with you?"

His question is ignored by this big child who now is looking out the window, arms across his chest and lips curled up, displaying how disappointed he is.

"You're so boring." That's Ntaba's answer.

NALA-

Ten steps from the sitting room to his bedroom, seven to the front door and five to the kitchen. I count as my mind wages war with my being. I could take a left and run out of this house, maybe go right headed for the knife in the

kitchen, or I could go straight. Straight into the lion's den.

Escaping would be easy, it's always easy. But it also means death, death for Thabani and Thobani. He'll kill them if I ever leave this house, he's said it before and that man never lies.

They are with him right now, I can hear their tiny giggles seeping out of his bedroom. They think he loves them, he tells them all the time. He's a master manipulator. Their eight year old eyes only see the good in everyone, they believe whatever is laid for them on the table.

But I see through his lies, I see it every time he takes what is not his, I see it every time he forces me into this ugly red dress, and makes me do things I don't want to do. Things that make me feel dirty inside out.

“Sis Nala, uncle is calling you.” That’s Thobani’s voice, their voices sound the same but I can tell them apart.

My mother’s twin babies, she loved them from the time she nurtured them in her womb. Unfortunately, she didn’t get to raise them.

She gave birth, held them in her arms a second and the next her eyes were staring into space, wide and unblinking. I was eleven years old, a child myself and couldn’t understand what was going on. Why my mother stopped breathing.

Her best friend, Mam’ Julia and her husband Petros took us in. He’s the devil waiting for me in the bedroom he shares with his wife. That fifty six-year-old pervert has no shame.

“Sis Nala.” I don’t like that bastard using my brothers.

My feet are numb on concrete as I force them to move, fear and disgust bubble within me. I reach for the solid wall for support, trying to act brave. Something I am not. If I were brave I would have taken my brothers and ran, death be damned.

My heart thrums harder on my chest with each knock. He demands that I knock before entering his room.

“Wait.” All of me shivers at the sound of his voice, bile rises with threats to throw out the fat cakes and atcher I had for supper.

His steps resonate on the other side, then the turn of a handle.

My body trembles in response, and refuses to cave in as he opens. The boys run out, bumping into me. I don't have the strength to tell them to stop, not with what's about to happen.

They don't know what's going to happen inside this bedroom, they've never bothered to ask why every night I dress in a skimpy-hideous red dress, put on makeup and enter Petros' bedroom. It's possible he lied to them about everything, he's good at it.

With lustful eyes he locks my arm in a tight grip and pulls me into the room. The door shuts with a kind of finality that sends accustomed signals, rippling through my body. His eyes are all over my body as I back myself against the wall, looking for protection.

He's wearing his police uniform, reminding me that he's a constable and he can get away with

anything.

“My beautiful Nala.”

The same kind of lust in his eyes is laced in his voice. He steps closer, eyes luring me into a deep hole I want to find myself hidden in.

“Kneel.” Caving beneath his dominating command, I sink to the floor and lower my gaze, giving to the world that has destroyed my life.

“Are you wearing anything beneath that dress?” At his usual question, my heart sinks and drops into the acid in my stomach.

“Answer me.” He bellows, taking a step closer. My eyes are on his combat boots, glittering with tears of sorrow.

“No...” The word quakes its way out of my mouth.

“No what, Nala?” His hand grips my braids, there’s no gentleness in it.

“No master, I am not wearing anything.” Tears accompany the shaky reply. He demands that I call him master.

“Good girl. I want to see you.”

He wants me naked, that’s what he means. I hesitate, not wanting this. I’ve never wanted this, since I was twelve, innocent and naïve. I’ve never wanted any of this. Tears paint my cheeks in two steady streams.

“Your punishment will be doubled, I did not give permission for you to cry.”

What exactly am I being punished for? What did I do in my past life to deserve such treatment? Is it because I don't know my father, or it's that my mother died while I was still a child, unable to fend for myself and my brothers?

The hard tiled floor becomes harder and harder under my knees, the pain makes me want to jump up. But this is nothing compared to what this man is about to do to me.

"On your feet, eyes dropped." He lays another command, and not wanting to add to my punishment I do as he says.

"Strip, then get on the bed. I want you on your stomach, ass out and hands spread out."

"Please don't do this." I plead like I do every

night.

“Don’t test my patience, we’re going to have a hard time if you keep acting a fool.” His voice is venom. “Now do as I say, or I’m taking one of the twins and you will never see him again.”

I can’t lose them, they are all I have.

“Do you understand me, Nala.” I force a nod.

“Words Nala.”

“Yes master, I understand.”

“Good, I revoke my decision. Leave the dress on, I want to tear it off of you. Now go.”

My feet are heavy and woozy as I tread towards the queen-sized bed he shares with Mam’ Julia and do as he says.

All my attention is stolen by the sound of his boots, mooching on the floor. My head spins

when I hear the sound of his belt buckle. Tears are here, burning behind my eyes, wanting an escape. I can't let them, or they'll get me into more trouble.

"Good girl." He says, running a hand down my spine. My body cringes in disgust at the touch.

"I'm going to give you a few spanks for those tears you shed back there. Do you understand?"

I don't answer because I don't understand shit. He doesn't dwell on my silence but continues to harass me.

"I want you to count for me, Nala."

The dress is pulled up, revealing my nakedness, I clench my teeth as the need to scream for help engulfs me. A tight slap finds my left butt

cheek, it burns that I want to cry out. I'm barely coping with the first one when he abuses the second one.

"Ten spans Nala, ten spans is what I'm giving you. If you don't start counting, I won't stop until you do."

"Three." I count the third slap, voice breaking through uneven syllables.

"No. Start over."

"One." The number is cried out.

My butt cheeks are on fire by the time he's done. There are tears, he shouldn't see them so I bury my face on the mattress to get rid of them.

"Good girl. That was heavenly." The bed moves as his weight meets it. "Now for some real fun."

I can see him from my peripheral vision as his

pants drop to the floor. He's shirtless, I don't know when he removed the shirt. Not wanting to see his nakedness, I shut my eyes and pray that God takes my life.

FUNOKUHLE-

Pain.

It's the first thing I feel when I open my eyes and a touch of cold harassing my skin. I'm still in the living room on the floor. Fear has me by my balls, afraid to get up but I do anyway. I have to get out of here.

I don't know how late it is. I don't care to know. The important thing is for me to be away from this place.

The living room door is wide open, allowing a gush of wind access. I have to get out of here. My lungs scream with pain as I push my body up, using the sofa as leverage.

A few steps later, I'm out in the dead of the night. It's windy, the thunder has calmed down, it rumbles with faint sounds.

The cold is not so bad, I can bare the weather. It doesn't make me want to hide under layers and layers of clothes. Quietness greets me as I step into the dark empty streets, and terror grips its arms around me.

I won't find transport at this time of the night, even if I do, I have no money on me.

Having no time to throw a pity part, I drag my painful body across the street, limping and grunting in excruciating pain. Everything hurts like hell, but I push... I push myself further and

further away from Pule's house.

Tears burn behind my eyes, I don't know why. I'm not a crier, crying is useless, it doesn't change the situation. It changes nothing.

I'm about ten minutes away from his house when I spot headlights coming my way, my heart jumps to warn me of the danger I might be in. If that's Pule's car, he'll drag me back to his house.

My feet halt, not knowing whether to move forward or go back where I came.

Either way I'm doomed. I'm not fast enough, I realise when the car stops a few feet away.

Relief nudges at me and laughs when my eyes zoom in on the vehicle. It's a black SUV, Pule's car is small. The driver rushes out and immediately attacks me with questions, it takes a while for me to see who it is.

I should've ran the other way.

“Ntando, what are you doing outside at this time of the night?” He’s touching me, I escape his touch with a frown on my face. Why does he sound concerned?

It’s too late to hide my battered face, Mr. Khanyile blinks back in shock, extending his hand to examine the bruises. He’s so touchy it’s beginning to annoy me, or is it the pain grazing through my bones? I don’t know anymore.

His jaw ticks with something, it’ll be forward of me to say anger. What would he be angry about?

“Who did this to you?” He starts, not stuttering. The streetlights are bright enough for me to see the dark shadow in his eyes. “Who did this to

you?”

I don't answer him, my focus is on the anger on his face and the beat of my sprinting heart against my ribcage.

He turns back around, rushing to his car. I'm thinking he's leaving but he opens the back door, dips his hand in and it appears with a black sweater.

“Put this on.”

I almost snort at how it won't fit because of his height and size, I shrug the idea and almost disappear into the over-sized sweater that covers my knees. It smells like him, I think. He must be the type that uses the same fragrance.

I remember this scent from the night we shared together, strangely how I want to hide in it and never surface.

“Tell me what happened. Who did this to you?”
He places his hand on my shoulder. It’s only now I notice that my body is trembling, I shift back to get away from his burning touch.

He won’t let go, his hold shifts and then I’m wrapped up in his embrace until I practically disappear into his wide chest. My heart aches with misery, refusing to surrender even though I fight for control.

“Who did this to you, Ntando?”

Ntando? Ntandoyethu? Should I tell him how much I loathe this name? It’s not what my mother named me. It’s what my father and brothers want me to be, it’s what they force me

to be.

Unable to hold them at bay anymore, I let unwanted tears fall on his shirt.

“Funokuhle.” The name leaves my mouth before I can process it. No one outside my family knows this name. Maybe I have trust issues. “My name... is Funokuhle.” I have no idea why I’m telling him this. What I expect from him.

“Funokuhle.” It sounds sweet rolling on his tongue, the way his breath carries it... it’s as if he cherishes it. He’s said it before, that’s how it feels like. “Who hurt you, Funokuhle?”

I know the answer to his question, it’s at the tip of my tongue. But that’s not the answer I’m going to give anyone who cares to ask. I

thought about this, went over it a few times while escaping Pule's house.

'I was mugged by a group of boys, I didn't see their faces.'

Fighting to control the unwanted sob, I try to give him the false reply, but where sounds escaped, words fail.

"It's okay. Don't cry." His arms solidify around me, and for the first time in years I feel safe.

"I'm here." He says. What does he mean he's here? Here where?

"This is wrong." My voice is weak but it carries.

I let go of the darkness and him to meet his gaze. Our connection holds, his eyes and mine, not straying away from our silent conversation.

“Come with me.” He says, taking my hand in his. Last time I was with him, I did something stupid. It’s his fault I’m in this mess, Pule beat me up because of him. “Funno?”

He says my name as if it belongs to him, as if he has the right to. I drop my gaze when he bends his knees to meet my height and look into my eyes. A hand glides to my cheek, it’s cold yet warm and parallel to safety.

“Let me take you to the hospital.” No. No hospitals.

“Leave me alone.”

“Let me help you, we can report this...” I back away a small step, his gorilla height making me feel crowded. The second his hand leaves my cheek, loneliness embraces me and I wish he hadn’t let go. Maybe I’m a mess, maybe I don’t

know what I want. Protection... that's the first word to come to mind.

"No, I didn't ask for your help. Leave me alone." My remark causes him to frown, although it's indistinct. "No hospitals, no police station." Pule can't go to jail, I'll never forgive myself if that happens.

"Fine, but you're coming with me, kid."

I shouldn't have looked into his eyes, now I can't find the words to throw at him. A wave of silence passes between us, but on my side it feels like a century.

Everything is on standstill until his hand starts to stroke the back of my head, this is a first for me. Not even my father has done this. 'We are

men, we don't show affection' he would say.

My knees give out, proving themselves disloyal. He must think I'm weak, I want to protest but he has me under his spell.

"You're bleeding," It's more of a statement than a question, he's inspecting his hand glazed in blood. I didn't notice that before, this is why my head feels heavy and light at the same time.

"Let's go." His hand takes mine, I follow him as he guides me to the car. He opens the back door, I hesitate a bit until his arched brow forces me to jump in and curl myself right at the corner... arms hugging my none existent figure.

My eyes meet a man's, his brother. I remember

him, he's more famous around Izingolweni than his other brothers. Ntaba... I've heard people call him.

He smiles, until it's a grin. His eyes though are not smiling, they are empty, unreadable.

"Koti." (Bride.)

He says, with that stupid grin laced on his face. Not knowing what he means by that, I nod and send my greetings.

"Hi... sir." I have to greet, he is the boss' son.
Argh!

The greeting is acknowledged with a wink. I find him strange.

The driver's door clicks open and close, the scent on the sweater I'm wearing, and the one I found in this car doubles, shooting straight to my stomach. The tingling feeling is foreign to

me.

“Why are you gay?” Ntaba says to his brother as soon as the car moves, wasting no time. Don’t they know he’s attracted to men? I wouldn’t be shocked if he’s kept it from them, coming out in this part of town is a death sentence on its own.

“Who said I’m gay?” Mr. Khanyile sounds offended, I’m probably observing more than I should.

“You are gay.” The remark comes with a chuckle. Mr. Khanyile gives Ntaba a glare as if he’s the devil himself.

“You have a big mouth Ntaba, shut it.”

Ntaba’s quiet laughter fills the car again, he’s like a child. I hear he’s 31, you can’t really tell. Actually with all of them, they have young blood.

“Okay bhuti. Are we taking our bride home with us or to his father’s house?”

Ntaba’s question causes me to choke on my saliva, I meet Mr. Khanyile’s worried gaze in the rear view mirror.

What does he mean bride? Does he know what happened between his brother and me? I expect a hefty response from Mr. Khanyile, but all he emits is a loud tongue click.

MATHONGA-

Eleven

MATHONGA-

Nothing is going according to plan, this is the

first time they have him in their presence. None of them thought it was going to be this difficult.

He's unconscious, lain on a long table in dark room flickering with red lights.

Five men dressed in black cloaks are surrounding him, not one is brave enough to come close. Something is not right, there's heat each time they try to touch him, unbearable heat that burns with a promise to vanquish them.

They are on the outskirts of the village, in a place arched by tall thick trees. Far away from his father's warm home.

Taking him outside of Izingolweni should have the boy powerless, it's what they had convinced each other and have been proven otherwise.

00:00am has come and gone, a small ceremony to keep him bound and unconscious for seven

days has been put to rest. Two of their men have been struck by lightning, sending them straight to their demise.

It's unacceptable... They've come to a decision. The leader has to be told. She's expecting them soon, with good news. They decide that one of them will deliver the news.

The chosen one sets off, it takes him less than five minutes to reach her chambers and enters without knocking nor permission. His head falls at the sight of a woman seated on a chair situated in the middle of the room, her lap is home to a black cat.

The golden head wrap on her head and necklace adorned around her neck prove that she is an empress of some sort, in her right hand is a snake head sceptre.

The glare she sends the man drops him to his knees right before her and lowers his head in respect.

“How dare you, enter without knocking.” The woman barks, slamming a clenched fist on the chair’s armrest.

“Forgive me, Ndlunkulu” the apology trembles from his mouth. “We have a problem.”

The woman frowns at the sound of the announcement.

“What is it?” Her voice has settled, unlike her anger.

“The boy is untouchable.”

“What do you mean the boy is untouchable?” Asks the woman, anger seeming to find its way back to her voice.

“We can’t touch him, Ndlunkulu.”

“I heard that, you idiot,” She’s losing her patience.

“They have refused with him. There seems to be a hedge of protection around him.”

The announcement brings her to her feet, eyes burning with rage, she stomps towards the man on the floor.

“Who the hell defies me?” Her voice fills the large room, bouncing on walls with so much wrath.

“His mother.” The man answers, with no ounce of confidence found in him. He steals a glance when the lady on the throne bursts out in spine chilling laughter.

“His mother hates him, she wishes for his death.” She articulates with pride.

“I’m not talking about the woman who gave birth to him” A head shake. “I mean the woman who has loved him since he was a child. She prays for him, he’s hidden behind her, Ndlunkulu.”

“What? No, I will not be defeated by weak humans. Do you hear me? I’ve wanted that boy from the day he was born. This is my chance, my chance.” She shouts, grabbing the man by the black cloak. Fear is tinted in his eyes as they meet hers, although bigger than her in structure, he trembles in her presence.

“We see fire around him, Ndlunkulu. We can’t keep him here, or we will all die.” The words hurry out of his mouth as if he’d die before delivering the message.

The woman growls in anger, pushes the man that he stumbles to the point of almost falling

and points the sceptre at him.

“Release him. Throw him in the deepest forest, let’s see if this woman who prays will be able to save him from wild animals.” The order is given but not accepted, the man’s eyes are wide with panic and shock. His knees kiss the floor again.

“He will die.” Comes the reply from the man.

“If he were to die, he would’ve died years ago.”
The storm in her seems to have ceased.

“Mathonga NgwaneKaNgwadi Khanyile, we will meet again.”

VUKUZAKHE-

The west wing is vacant, just one or two staff members can be found there. It’s the safest place to keep his little secret, he would’ve taken

him home, but the Minnie minion is against it. It's past midnight, his father would not jump for joy at his arrival.

Vukuzakhe unlocks the door to one of the rondavels, they are met by white sheets and blue curtains as he turns the light on.

The room looks expensive, funo is not sure if he should enter. His father's house is nothing compared to what his eyes are beholding.

"You can sleep in here, no one ever comes here." Vukuzakhe starts, looking down at the kid who hasn't spared him a glance. His battered face is tumbled in shame.

"I don't want to be an inconvenience."

Funokuhle's timid reply makes Vukuzakhe a pint-size grumpy. He takes up a scowl, leaning his heavy weight body against the door frame. They are standing too close to each other, no

one has a made an effort to create some space.

“You’re not.” He replies softly, hand landing on the small of Funokuhle’s back, the boy tenses under the touch. “Get in, there’s a shower and clean towels. I’ll bring you a change of clothes.”

A shower? Change of clothes? Naked in his boss’ house might not be a good idea, the thought makes him uncomfortable. He wouldn’t want to repeat the same mistake twice.

“Thanks.” The first reason he walks in is to escape his boss’ hand burning his skin, the second is that he’s in pain and needs to rest.

He’s now standing in the middle of the room, unsure of what to do. The gaze Vukuzakhe has pasted on him has him squirming under gravity.

Boss is staring, too long, burning holes. He clears his throat when Funokuhle fumbles with the hem of the sweater he's wearing.

"Someone will come and check that scar on your head."

"No doctors please." Funokuhle argues, he's got someone to protect.

"Don't worry he's a friend, if you want to keep this confidential, then it'll remain so."

Vukuzakhe clarifies, scurrying in as if the younger has hit his pinkie toe against the corner of a wardrobe. He stops himself just as his hand arises to caress Funo's cheek.

"Do you want to tell me what happened?" He's hoping the young man will confide in him.

"No." Funokuhle turns upon spotting a seat sited by the window. His feet lead him there, with plans to sit. Nevertheless, he can't bring

himself to settle down, rather he remains standing, facing the man who came to his rescue.

“How is your head?” The worry in Zakhe’s voice has not depleted.

“Fine.” It must be a lie, he was bleeding not so long ago.

Vukuzakhe sees through him, his brows crinkle as he stares without words. The boy is growing uneasy, the only escape he finds is on the sleeves of the sweater. He fiddles with them like a nervous school kid before picking at his short fingers, and plucking out the dirt hiding in them.

“I didn’t know you were my boss... there’s so many of you it’s hard to keep track. I wouldn’t have let you touch me if I knew.” Random!

The boy's eyes are all over the place,
Vukuzakhe needs to see the truth in them.

“What if I wanted to touch you? What if I wanted what happened between us? What if I say I enjoyed every minute of it and I want more?”

“I'm not going to sleep with you again.” He's still not looking right at him, it could be shame or he's grown shy out of the blue.

“I think I didn't articulate myself properly,”
Vukuzakhe delivers, letting his feet saunter to the bashful young man. He stands as close as a lover, needy hands touching the minion.

His arms curl around Funo's waist and pull him closer to his chest. A gasp is knocked out of the lad's chest, thick lips part. At this close range,

he has no choice but to return the resolved gaze.

“I want more of you,” confidence has a name, Vukuzakhe Khanyile. “I want to discover more, I want to invade your life, your space. I want to invade your heart Funo. I want everything that is you.”

“You don’t know me,” the words leave his mouth like a wisp of air.

“Well then, let me know you. Teach me, you. You’re special to me, Funo. I want to keep you for myself.” Vukuzakhe leans in until their foreheads touch.

“I can’t accept this.” Funokuhle’s shaky voice transports the dispute in a chariot of a whisper.

“We are worlds apart. Please, whatever you are thinking forget about it.”

Not wanting the touch anymore, he squirms until his boss releases him.

They are caught in a moment of silence, with Vukuzakhe boring holes at him while Funo is trying his hardest not to meet his gaze.

“Shower, I’ll check on you later.” Finally, Vukuzakhe finds his voice. “You don’t have to be afraid anymore, I’m here now.”

The speech is cut short, the big man’s feet shift under his weight. He shuts the door with a click and almost jumps out of his skin at the figure standing outside the door.

“Dammit Ntaba, you scared me.”

He's leaning against the wall, smiling ridiculously at his big brother.

"Do you want me to give Bongive excuses as to where you are? I've got a list." Ntaba states, ignoring the accusation. He pulls out a slip and unfolds it. "1: You were kidnapped by inkabi and they want her as ransom. 2: You drowned in the river, and were eaten by crocodiles. 3: You've had enough of her and eloped to Egoli with a little man who has big eyes. We'll explain your sudden appearance in the morning. Pick."

"When did you write this?" Vukuzakhe moves away from the door, not wanting his brother's words to reach the wrong ears.

"In the car while you were stealing look at Koti through the rear view mirror." Ntaba answers,

following Vukuzakhe away from the small rondavel.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about Ntaba. Don’t spread rumours.”

“Bhuti, I’m that brother who’d help you kill your wife and hide her body for you.” The remark is chilling, his eyes don’t lie as he appears thrilled by the idea. “Just say the word and my dear sister in-law will be singing with angels before you kiss Koti goodnight.”

“Are you on drugs?” It’s hard to believe what he’s hearing, he raised Ntaba, and he was never like this as a child.

“I’m offering my loyalty, ndoda. I’ll have you know, I’m the only useful brother around here. Hlabela would offer to pray Bongwiwe away, Ndleleni was born useless. Mathonga still

smells like baby formula.” The pride in Ntaba’s voice has Vukuzakhe shaking his head in worry.

“Stop talking nonsense and go find out if Thonga is back. I’m going to go out and continue looking for him.”

“Who will watch over koti?” Who will watch over Funokuhle? Big brother sighs, searching for a solution.

“He’ll be okay alone,” Vukuzakhe replies.

Ntaba’s thoughts are different.

“Shame poor boy, he reminds me of aunt Sne’s cat when it’s rained on.” Ntaba articulates, hoping his brother takes the memory train with him. “I mean... the resemblance is there bhuti, you can’t deny it. So I say no to leaving him alone, stay with him. He’s scared, go make your

man feel safe.” Ntaba has become serious, strange happenings.

“I need to know if Mathonga is safe.”

Vukuzakhe won't budge, he'd give up everything for Mathonga, for his brothers. He re-claims his phone from the pocket of his pants and starts checking for messages, there is nothing from Mathonga.

Disappointment makes him a friend by force, a sigh joins in as he rubs his oily forehead in frustration.

It's a good thing they don't have to worry about the raging storm, Mathonga is the only thing on the list now and the young man in the room.

“He's safe, don't worry.” Ntaba assures him, meeting his eyes with a solemn gaze. “Thonga is our brother, we'd feel it if something

happened to him. The ancestors are with him, the same way they were with him twenty four years ago when the fire..."

He struggles to continue, and drops his eyes. Vukuzakhe is sure he spotted hurt in Ntaba's eyes, he does the most unusual thing... pulls his little brother in for a hug. It hurts to think about their brothers who died, it hurts to talk about them.

A clearing of a throat breaks the embrace, Ntaba is responsible for it.

"Save some for lover boy, he needs them more than me. Be gentle with him." Ntaba says.

"I don't know where you get these assumptions and I will not dispute with you because it will be a waste of time."

He's not about to reveal the truth to his brother, not by a long shot. However, he won't deny it either. This is something he wants to protect, Funokuhle is something he wants to protect.

"Go speak to baba, let me know what he says."
Vukuzakhe.

"I will." Ntaba takes off, but something stops him on his fourth step. Vukuzakhe sighs and plugs his hands in his pockets while ogling at his brother walking back to him.

"I have a year's supply of condoms if you need any." The offer is whispered and received with a roll of the eyes.

"Don't test me, Ntabezikude."

It's a reproach firm enough to get him to stop, but the word stop is not in Ntaba's vocabulary. He places a hand on Vukuzakhe's shoulder, squeezes, and looks into his eyes with a smile

on his face and a slight head nod.

“Make me proud, Ngwane.”

Vukuzakhe shoves his hand away, annoyed.

“Fusegi, Ntaba.”

The response to the insult is childish laughter, and there he goes walking away as if he did not just test his big brother.

“Remember. Be wise. Scrutinize. Condomise, bhutiza.” Ntaba sings, loud, it’s for everyone to hear. Vukuzakhe is glad this side of the wing is empty, he saves his retort. It’s the tongue click he can’t hold back.

He turns around, the rondavel in full view. He makes a decision to continue searching for his brother. First he needs to call his doctor friend, and check on Funokuhle.

MATHONGA-

Twelve

VUMILE-

They met when he was at his lowest. His life was spiralling out of control, it felt like it when his six year old son, Mathonga had fallen ill.

They didn't know why he couldn't speak or move. A traditional healer told him to look for the man with the answers, the man who would cure the child.

He didn't specify which man, but Vumile knew who he was talking about.

Vumile left that smelly mud house swearing to himself and the gods above never to return there.

Seeking help from a spiritual person became

risky for him, he wanted his son alive, but destroying him in the process was not worth the trouble.

His brother's wife mentioned something about a God of miracles, a God who gives when you ask. A healer who raises the dead from the grave. Vumile had heard of him of course, he just never had time to entertain thoughts of him.

Despite being oblivious to this powerful deity, he agreed to tag along to church.

It was a Sabbath morning. The first few hours were boring as sin, sleep summoned him with a soothing lullaby until the voice of a praying woman caught his attention. He sat up straight, rubbed his tired eyes awake and stared at the woman like a crazed serial killer while she conversed with God.

He was the only one at church who had his eyes

open.

Introducing himself was not a problem, she was welcoming and understanding when he told her about his sick son. Like any devoted Christian, her first solution was to pray for him.

A prayer warrior she was and that's what made him fall in love with her.

"Mathonga will be okay, our son will be okay."
She had told him last night when he came knocking at her door, their door rather because you know, he had to build the woman a house... a place she'd call home. Away from her father's house.

"The God I serve never fails, he is a miracle

worker. Let's pray." The words that followed were hard to believe for Vumile. How could he when his son was not with him.

She brought him to his knees, she did the praying while he did the weakening. Nothing in him pushed him to pray, God had broken his heart and he didn't want to speak to him.

"You're a good woman Nandi." He told her after the prayer that restored his hope.

"Your food is getting cold baba." Nandi awakens Vumile from a trance he's trapped in, he blinks to see her standing before him with a cup of hot pipping tea.

"Ngiyabonga Mashamase." He appreciates

when she places it on the table next to the plate of warm breakfast. That's right! The chief did not sleep at home last night.

"Stop worrying about him, you'll only stress yourself." She slides into a chair beside him, eyes full of worry.

"It's morning and I haven't heard anything."

The plate of food is pushed aside, he's lost his appetite.

"It's all in God's hands, baba." They look into each other's eyes like a young couple, her warm hand finds his under the table. Vumile appreciates the squeeze. "Mathonga is not going anywhere baba, he's here to stay. There's something special about our boy."

Our boy!

Vumile loves to hear that, this woman is golden. A smile reaches his ears, and pumps his heart until it starts dancing to the echoing sound of Nandi's sweet words.

"You are special Mashamase, have I ever told you that?" A smile is brought to her face.

Look at them making each other smile.

"You did the day Zamo was born."

Ah yes! That glorious day. Vumile nods contentedly, eyes doing their best to showcase a smile too.

"My baby," is said with pride. "Where is she? I haven't seen her yet, I thought she was sleeping when I got home last night." Vumile.

"She slept over at a friend's house." Bustling eyes are hidden from him, Nandi knows he's

against their daughter sleeping at people's houses as if her father did not build her a home.

"I don't like this, Mashamase. What would people say?"

He's talking crap now, that's why she removes her hand from his and pulls her chair back so she doesn't have to smell him. He can be frustrating sometimes.

"What people baba?" She's not looking at him.

"People don't know who the father of my daughter is. I'm labelled as a loose woman who slept with a married man and had a child out of wedlock. What more can they add to that list?"

His heart cracks and shatters. Furrowing his brows in discomfort, Vumile takes her hand.

She belongs to him anyway.

“Mashamase.”

Nandi snorts at the name, if he calls her that again, she will scream. He should be coming up with solutions not trying to soften her up.

“I love you.” He says.

This is where he wants to be, this is the woman he wants in his life. He'd do anything to protect her and the little family they've built together, but he has children who mean more than she does to him. They come first, he'd choose them over her, given a chance. He's chosen them since the day they decided to be together, he chose them when she fell pregnant with his child.

He chose them when he held their new born

daughter, his only daughter. He chose them when he couldn't sleep at night because his wife wanted to argue the whole night through. Till this day he continues to choose his sons over everything.

Nandi is different from Dalisile, probably that's why Vumile loves her so much. God had her in mind when he thought of creating a woman, sometimes he can't believe she loves him like she does.

Sneaking in and out of the house he built is starting to get annoying, but it's the only way they'll keep their secret. Or the only way he'll keep their secret rather.

She's tired of being the other women, although he's convinced her time and time that she's the only one in his heart.

“When are you going to tell them about us?” It’s about damn time.

It appears Vumile will not be having breakfast today, his tea has gone cold along with his appetite.

“Soon.” Vumile replies.

Nandi wants to ask him why he’s suddenly angry, it’s the clenching and unclenching of his jaw that’s birthed the question in her head.

“Soon is seventeen years ago, Vumile.” Ouch! She hardly calls her chief by name. The surprise on Vumile’s face is very evident.

“You know I’m trying MaShamase, there’s so much on my plate right now.”

“What about your daughter? She wants to know her siblings, you’ve kept her away for far too long, something you shouldn’t have done to

begin with.”

Vumile frowns.

She loves him, and he knows that, but he’s looking at her as if her mission in life is to hurt him.

“Nandi.” He rarely calls her by name. “Am I a bad father?” Guilt has found him and the grip is tight.

“What is a bad father?” She wants to say yes, just so he can finally take responsibility and give their daughter her place in his life.

Her question has him giving her that look again.

Nandi would nurse his feelings, tell him he’s the best father in the world. But not right now, right now she needs to secure a place for her daughter.

“Zamangwane will meet her brothers, soon.”
That’s his response to her question before standing up with his cup of tea, leaving her to deal with the full plate of food on the table.

“Soon?” Nandi.

An incredulous chuckle from Nandi stops him, he turns to find tears in her eyes. Yeah! They are always on standby.

“Sthandwa sami.” A whisper, her tears pull him back to her. He places the lukewarm tea on the table and kneels to meet her height, a hand cradles her cheek. “Ukhalelani?” (Why are you crying?)

“I’m tired Ndwandwe. How long do I have to live like a widow?”

Ndwandwe’s chance to reply is stolen by someone walking through the door, four curious eyes shift in search. A young girl dressed like an emo stands before them, her size 32 body slumped against the doorpost.

“Zamangwane!” Nandi pronounces.

The girl’s eyes skyrocket, she folds her arms across her chest with an attitude of a teenager going through puberty.

Vumile though is happy to see his daughter. The glow in his eyes can’t be missed, he stands, ready to greet her with a hug.

“Zamangwane.” There is love in his voice as he calls the name he christened her with, she should be in his arms, embracing her father. However, the look of anger on her face has not left her.

“I hate that name.” She snaps.

A tongue click is dished out by the unruly looking girl, she takes off and disappears in one of the rooms.

Vumile is speechless, so is Nandi. She sighs and decides to do the dishes. Vumile will nurse his own heart.

VUKUZAKHE-

Leaving Funokuhle alone in his father’s premises was harder than he thought. The same man who’s chosen his little brother over everything, and everyone chose to stay with a man he hardly knows.

When he told Funokuhle he was leaving after the doctor had examined him, there was a look in the young man’s eyes.

Zakhe didn't know what it was exactly. It could've been desperation, need, or he just didn't want to be alone. Whatever it was, it forced Zakhe to stay and watch over him while the boy slept on the bed like a new born baby.

Zakhe sat on a chair, facing the bed, and bat eyelids through the night.

His mind kept record of every movement Funokuhle made, how he tossed and turned, mumbled in his sleep and the funny sounds as if he was drowning. It went on until morning.

“Where are you, Ngwane? Your brother has been found, he's at the hospital.” Bongiwe had said over the phone about less than an hour ago, before dropping the call.

Part of him believes she wanted him to know that she's upset he didn't find his way home last night.

Of course guilt didn't let him go that easily, he was with another man when his wife called, trying to get him to calm down after he woke up from a nightmare.

They've just arrived at the hospital, Funokuhle is with him, walking silently behind him. He's not supposed to be here, but this stubborn giant wouldn't drop him off at his father's house.

Zakhe hears voices coming from the room Mathonga's said to be in, he's a little disappointed that he's not the first one here.

"Stay here." Zakhe orders Funokuhle, this morning his voice is not as tiny. Must be his morning voice.

He gets an unreliable nod from the boy before entering the room.

His shoulders are slumped as if he's carrying the weight of the world on them, there's this haze in his eyes, evidencing lack of sleep.

As expected, Bongiwe is here, feeding Mathonga oatmeal. She shoots Zakhe one of Dalisile's famous glares when their eyes meet and clears her throat, pushing the chair back with the weight of her body. It screeches before the sound of her heels tap on the floor as she walks to meet him halfway with a smile on her face.

"Myeni wami." He's greeted with a kiss and a smile he knows is fake. "I'll talk to you at home." The words are whispered into his ears, he winces a little when she pinches him on the side. No one sees it, but Zakhe feels it. Clearly this is about him not sleeping home last night.

“Ndodana.”

“Baba.” He greets his father first, then his wife who is now smiling like a perfect makoti.

He would tell her to stop being fake but his father is here, and as far as Vumile knows, these two are like the youth and Sassa grant, inseparable.

“I knew Mathonga was going to come home to us safe.” Bongiwe says.

Her arms are around his torso and head on his chest, restricting his movements.

“He was found by some school boys who were on their way to school, lying unconscious on the side of the road.” Vumile explains. He looks better than he did at Nandi’s house.

“I think we should reward them baba, buy them

schools shoes or groceries. We wouldn't have found our Thonga if it wasn't for them."

Bongiwe says, directing a warm smile towards her father-in-law.

Vumile looks impressed and this is what Bongiwe lives for, to impress her in-laws. She's confident that Vumile will always choose her for his first born.

"Thonga." Zakhe finally greets his brother. He peels himself off his wife and moves to hug him. "You gave us a scare."

"I'm okay, you look worse than I feel. Like you died and came back for revenge." Laughter softly leaves Zakhe's mouth as his brother's observation tickles him, he thinks Mathonga must be okay to be teasing him.

The laughter transitions, Vukuzakhe lets out an exasperated sound, frustration unified with exhaustion. "What happened to you?"

The room becomes thick with tension.

Mathonga sighs, eyes staring into thin air. "I'm not sure, I remember having a fallout with Dalisile. I wanted to go out for some air, but the more I drove, the angrier I became. Then the skies darkened out of nowhere, I saw a woman standing in front of my car. She didn't move when I pressed the honk, that's when I hit a tree trying to avoid an accident. I don't remember the rest."

"Did you recognise the woman?" Zakhe has suddenly become a detective.

"No, her face wasn't clear." Mathonga.

Zakhe lets out a heavy sigh, his hands roughly rubbing his forehead. There are dark circles beneath his eyes, he's dog-tired.

"We need to find her, she's probably the only person that knows what happened to you while

you were out.” Zakhe.

It is a good suggestion, Vumile seems to think so. He’s about to say something when his phone beeps with a message. Silently, he reads it and excuses himself.

“We should let Thonga sleep, the doctor said we shouldn’t tire him.” That’s Bongiwe, she’s found her place next to her husband again.

“I’m fine sisi, I don’t need to sleep.” He looks finer than fine. “There’s a girl, bhuti. I need you to check on her.”

Zakhe chortles at his brother’s sudden randomness, he’s so focused on Mathonga that he misses the envious look on Bongiwe’s face.

“Girls are the last thing you should be thinking

about.” He moves from Bongiwe’s side to get closer to Mathonga.

“Please bhuti, something is not right. I have a feeling she’s in trouble.”

“Who... who is she?” The question is coated with layers of jealousy. Bongiwe’s eyes flash with something dark and her brows raise in anticipation, she’s waiting impatiently for Mathonga to answer her question.

“You don’t know her sisi.” Mathonga dismisses, but you don’t dismiss Bongiwe. “Her name is Nala, I’ll text you the directions.”

This one is for Zakhe

“I’ll check on her, I’m a girl too, she’ll feel safer with me.” That’s her theory, her husband does not bother to look her way. The jealousy in her

voice is more than enough to tell him what she's thinking about.

The room is awkward, it's bearing heavy silence. They are saved by the door opening, a calm-happy Ntaba walks in carrying a blue plastic bag with bananas and apples. He's whistling Mafikizolo's emlanjeni which Zakhe grimaces at.

"Bhuti you've got competition, I saw koti leave with a Sdumo look alike." Ntaba says pointing towards the door, calm as a cucumber. Everyone is looking at him, waiting for him to explain further. But Zakhe quickly grasps it, he hisses a curse word and runs out of the hospital room.

"Who is koti?" Bongiwe asks, a fake smile stretching her mouth.

Ntaba chuckles, kisses his little brother on the

cheek and peels a banana for him.

MATHONGA-

Thirteen

MATHONGA-

Over the course of four weeks, my mind has not been with me. My spirit is down, and no matter what I do I can't seem to stop thinking about Nala.

She's nowhere to be found, I've been to that house a number of times only to find it empty, or the people who live there just won't open for me?

The lingering worry refuses to dissipate, Nala is in trouble. I just know it. My instincts are never wrong. It's not something that came to me in a dream, but something I feel deep inside.

I need to find her, I guess worrying about her has put a strain in my relationship with Amandla. She complains a lot lately, mostly about how I'm not spending time with her.

My plate is full, and I also have to worry about my ancestors giving me the silent treatment. I don't know what I did wrong.

There are hours missing from my life, hours when I was unconscious. Something happened to me during that time, I keep thinking they will show me in a dream, but no one has come forth yet. I'm starting to think they have deserted me.

Maybe it's time I tell baba about them, that they exist. Remind him how he used to acknowledge them. The risky part about this is that he will dismiss the thought and ask me to abandon them.

“No we are not merging with the Chinese, we don’t do business with outsiders.” Zakhe’s voice snaps me out of my brown study.

We’re in the cosmic boardroom, this meeting has been going on since morning, it’s almost lunchtime and I am dead tired.

Hlabela and Ndlela still look refreshed, they love everything business.

Ntabezikude is a lucky bastard, he’s allowed to lie on the couch during a meeting. Okay, maybe not allowed, he does whatever he wants because he can. A crisp white shirt and jeans do not count as formal.

Baba and Zakhe have warned him about his casual wear on a work day, their objections have fallen on deaf ears.

He looks painfully bored while fondling the screen of his phone.

Did I mention that my ass feels numb from sitting on this swivel chair for longer than an ass should? Someone must be sued for this.

“I hear you, Ngwane, but merging with them will put Khanyile Holdings on the map. State Grid Corporation is by far the largest utility in the world. The entity maintained the number 2 position in 2017, just behind Walmart.” Ndleleni steps in.

A yawn follows his statement. It's Ntaba, he's carelessly flapping his big feet, touching the edge of the armrest.

“What's Walmart? Can we talk about things we're familiar with, please?”

Really, he would know what Walmart is if he

were invested in this company as much as everyone here.

“Vele you don’t know what it is, bhinca.” (Village boy)

I tell him, just to get myself out of the boredom I’m trapped in. This meeting is mind-numbing as hell.

“Ntaba focus please. We’re in a meeting, not a chillas. Sit up, will you?” Zakhe can be strict, and Ntaba does not care.

“Sorry,” Ntaba says and makes zero effort to move even a bit.

“Ubaba has a different vision for this company, merging with the Chinese will be going against what he believes in, Ubuntu. Khanyile Holdings creates opportunities for black owned businesses, we take care of our own.” Hlabela, the black Jesus.

This one must have made it on planet earth by default.

“What happened to Dlozi InCorp?” Zakhe.

“Mr. Mkhize cancelled the meeting due to personal reasons.” Zakhe’s assistant says, he looks as tired as I am.

“Explain, Godswill.” Zakhe.

Godswill is his name. I’d slap my parents for giving me a name like that. Apparently his father, a Zulu man found himself a Nigerian woman and the rest is a story to tell his future generation.

“It’s his son’s birthday sir.” Godswill replies, scrolling through the notepad in his hand.

“That’s incompetence.” Zakhe sounds affronted,

it all has to do with the meeting being cancelled. He takes business too seriously... my brother. "Get me that meeting with him as soon as possible."

"It will be hard to get a hold of him."

"Don't give me excuses Godswill, get me a meeting with Mr. Mkhize. This meeting is adjourned."

Music to my ears, I thought he'd never dismiss it. The assistant rushes out, only to bump into Bongwiwe. She's carrying a picnic basket.

"Great, lunch. Umakoti ungowethu ngempela." Ntaba says, jumping to his feet. The basket is hidden from him as he tries to grab it.

"No, this is not for you. It's for my hard working husband." She sends a smile to her "hard

working husband.” It’s not returned, he rarely returns smiles.

“Okay, sala kee wena with your hard worker of a husband. The lazy bum is out of here, my brain is fried.” Ntaba arrogantly steps out.

“Before you boys leave...”

“Boys?”

Zakhe appears disrespected by the words uttered by his wife, she flaps her fake lashes before clearing her throat.

“I’ve reserved dinner for the whole family tonight, I’ll send the location to the family group chat.”

The second family group chat she means, wait till she finds out we opened a private one and she’s not included.

“What is it about?”

Ndleleni sounds uninterested, he's standing with hands in his pockets, bearing a frown on his hard face.

"You'll find out later."

There's no arguing with Bongiwe, she will cause havoc if any of us miss her dinner.

"Is this necessary?" Zakhe asks.

Good question, she walks up to him and leans up to give him what appears to be a kiss on his ear or she whispered something. I'm not entirely sure, his facial features don't give anything out.

Bongiwe turns to us, am I the only one who can see through her pretentious smile?

"7pm, please don't be late."

That's our queue to leave, I guess.

VUKUZAKHE-

"You're late, it's 8:30pm"

He did not think he'd find her waiting for him, she had mentioned something about a family dinner, but that must've slipped his mind because you know, a man in love is always where his love is found and for Zakhe... it's not here with his wife.

Funo has not been to work in four weeks, had he had the courage, Zakhe would've gone to the Sangweni premises to ask for him.

His phone has been off, there is no other way to contact the minion. These are days when he

feels useless, there is no sign of the boy that stirred something strong inside him.

That day at the hospital, when he went out looking for Funokuhle, he almost went crazy when he couldn't find any trace of him.

“Aren't you going to say anything?” Bongiwe snaps as she stands from the expensive couch, courtesy of her in-laws.

She went all out on the evening gown she's wearing, just like she went all out with the dinner arrangements.

“Where is everyone?”

His eyes are scanning his surroundings, in search of the rest of the family members.

“Baba is in his room. The others have gone ahead, I decided to wait for you like I always do.” There's malice in her voice, her eyes are

narrowed in rage. "Where have you been?" She asks.

Looking for a man.

Zakhe's shoulders would slump, but he needs to stand firm when addressing this one, she's a volcano ready to erupt.

"You know I was at work, Mabuza." He senses the accusations coming, hence clenching his jaw in a silent protest. Bursting out in anger won't help him, this he knows already.

"Why can't you be a better man to me, Ngwane? Why do I have to chase you around just to get your attention? Have I not been a good wife to you? Have I not loved you enough?"

He huffs simply because she's asked him this a

million times before and the answer has not changed. Right on this same spot, in the middle of the living room.

“When did our love become unrequited?” She finishes.

This is the question that has him huffing again, he’s not sure if their love is one-sided. There is love in his heart for her, it’s just that they have differences they can’t sort out. Marriage should not feel like war, and that’s exactly how it feels with Bongiwe.

“I need to take a shower.”

And this damn tie around his neck feels tight, even though it’s hanging loosely. He slackens

the noose farther, takes it off and throws the bloody thing on the couch. He steers his steps towards the kitchen, in search of that little moment of peace. But, his dear wife follows him.

“I’m talking to you, Ngwane.” She’s about ready to shout, it’s buzzing at the tip of her tongue.

“Don’t patronize me, Bongwiwe. Just don’t, okay?”

At his words, Bongwiwe laughs, not that what he said is funny. But she’s had enough of him and his childishness. The glass he just took from the shelf is grabbed from him and smashed against the wall. When did she become this angry?

“Patronize you? Is that all you have to say to me?” She’s yelling.

Maybe Vumile should have put up thick walls, these ones have ears.

“Why did you do that? And please keep your voice down? My father is in the house.”

“No I will not keep my voice down,” she’s dismayed and Bongiwe does not keep her voice down when her wrath has been tempered with. “I’m tired of keeping my voice down. I’m tired of pretending that I’m happy, hell, I’m tired of being the perfect wife. Maybe it’s time baba finds out who their son really is.”

“What are you talking about?”

What is she talking about, really? Does she know about his shenanigans? Did she perhaps find out that he slept with another man, and

enjoyed it, and is now looking for more?

An angry Bongiwe folds her arms on her chest and says, “That you are a useless excuse of a man. You are a loose cannon who pushes his d!ck in every hole he finds. Gosh you can’t even wear your pants right in this relationship, you have failed to do your job as a man.”

Anger latches on his face.

“Bongiwe!” He shouts, landing a hot slap across her face, it’s not hard enough to throw her to the floor.

“You hit me, Vukuzakhe?” Her eyes are wide with shock, this cannot be happening. Three years, three years and this man has never laid a hand on her. “You hit me?”

Zakhe is just as shocked, he's grown mute trying to put the puzzle together of what just transpired. He extends a hand to touch her abused cheek, Bongiwe steps back, anger written all over her surface.

"You hit me, Vukuzakhe?" Tears, this is a first. She never gives in to tears. Not this fierce, strong rock, that never breaks no matter what is put in her way.

"You... you provoked me." Dammit! He's stuttering again. "You don't speak to me like that Bongiwe, I am your husband."

Suddenly, he doesn't care that they are shouting. His hand is tight around her arm. Bongiwe squirms to free herself, to no avail until giving

up becomes an option. Clearly men are stronger than women.

Zakhe's features soften, so does the grip on her arm. An apologetic sigh emerges from him. "I'm sorry." Too lousy to take the pain away. "I didn't mean to."

"You're going to pay for this." There are still tears in her eyes, once upon a time he would wipe them in a jiffy. Today is a different story, she's overstepped her boundaries. "You will regret putting your hands on me."

"Ndodana."

His father's voice turns him around, he's at the kitchen entrance, staring inquisitively.

Vukuzakhe notices how he's wearing a suit, and has his car keys in hand.

"You're home?" Zakhe nods to answer his father's question. "Why aren't you ready? The others are waiting?"

"I'm not going baba, you all should enjoy." He side-eyes his wife to find her glaring at him.

"Nonsense, it's a family gathering. Umakoti here, went all out, don't let her hard work go to waste. You of all people should appreciate her, you are her husband after all. Now go change, we'll be waiting here."

Now, how do you say no to Vumile again? Oh yeah! You don't say no to this man.

Giving his wife a onceover, Zakhe takes off

after she tells him his suit is on the bed. It doesn't take long for him to get ready nor does it take long for them to reach the hotel.

Upon arrival, they are met by flashes of cameras and a bunch of people with mics talking above each other. He doesn't answer any questions asked by the news reporters. There are more of them when they enter the restaurant, his entire family is seated on a long ass table adorned with every lavish thing you find on a rich man's dinner table.

"A press conference?" Zakhe is asking his wife who's standing next to him, gracing a smile because the world is watching and they have an image to maintain.

"Yes my dear husband, we are the Khanyiles, so

why not?"

He finds her answer very stupid. He doesn't fight her when she takes his hand and starts ushering him to the rest of the family.

"What's going on Bongiwe?"

"You're about to find out and don't worry, I won't mention the slap." She kisses his cheek, and goes to take the stage. Zakhe is sweltering under the black tux she chose for him, it's new actually and very unnecessary.

At the table, he greets his mother with a kiss, again public service.

Hlabela, Ntabezikude, Ndleleni and Mathonga acknowledge his presence before he settles down. There are glasses of champagne ready for everyone, and a mug of Mageu for Ntaba. Zakhe shakes his head at the sight, he's accepted how different this one is.

“You sure know how to choose them, bhuti.”
That’s his forward brother Ntaba, laid back on
the chair.

“What is this drama all about?” Mathonga asks.

“I have no idea.” Zakhe answers, he’s kept in the
dark as well.

“Whatever it is must be big, a whole press
conference.” Ndlela laughs.

“Mother,” Zakhe calls a faraway Dalisile, she
blinks herself away from her trance. “Do you
know what this is about?”

“How would I know? No one tells me anything in
this family.” Her eyes are on her husband who’s
seated beside her, not the supplicant of the
enquiry. Vumile denies her credit.

“May I please get everyone’s attention?” The daughter in-law starts, and everyone’s attention is what she gets.

“Thank you for availing yourselves at such short notice.” This one is for the reporters.

“As you all know, I’m married to the heir of the Khanyile clan. Vukuzakhe Khanyile, the one who will take over from ubaba Ukhanyile one day. Baba thank you for accepting me into your family, thank you for taking the fatherly role in my life. I will forever be grateful to you and your wife mama Khanyile.”

Dalisile is spotted faintly rolling her eyes, the boys are still oblivious as to what is happening. No one has dared to utter a word, knowing how Bongiwé can blow up, provoking her would be a bad idea.

“I hope you will accept my baby the way you have accepted me.” The daughter in-law announces, sporting a prideful smile, as her hand gently lands on her expensive garment to caress her flat belly.

Her eyes quickly find her husband, he’s on his feet, eyes wide and mouth ajar. The brothers are staring as well, disbelievingly.

“Congratulations sthandwa sami, you’re going to be a father.” The announcement is confirmed by an overly excited wife. “I’m pregnant.”

That’s enough confirmation, I’m sure they get it now.

There’s commotion, the flashes of light and

noise double. Reporters asking one question after another.

Zakhe is frozen, watching his wife elegantly stride up to him. Her lips touch his, more than once.

“I’m pregnant.” She repeats, wrapping her arms around the man who’s turned into a statue.

The embrace does not last long, she’s stolen by compliments from Vumile and his other sons along with the reporters. Dalisile does not look like a happy woman right now, she’s trying for a smile. One that would fool outsiders.

A tap on his shoulder causes Zakhe to blink the shock away.

“Breathe brother, you look like a dying goat.” Mathonga advises beside him. But that’s the thing, he can’t breathe.

“Bongiwe 1—Koti 0. Let the games begin.”
Ntaba randomly announces, and gulps down
the Mageu as if it were water.

MATHONGA-

Fourteen

Mature rating for graphic sexual content. 18+

Note: This chapter contains gay sex.

VUKUZAKHE-

Darkness started claiming the night with its
heaviness, he wasn't sure why he stayed with
the boy after saving him from drowning.

A bottle of wine he found in his car kept them
company.

“If you want to kill yourself, at least do it while intoxicated. It will give you courage.” He said to the boy who was still angry that he was pulled out of the river, when all he wanted was to cross over to the afterlife.

Drinking sounded like a good idea, Zakhe needed it just as much. Life was showing him his mother and given an opportunity to forget, he took it.

They sat close, on the sand, under the blanket of stars, facing the river.

The full moon provided enough light for them to see each other. Zakhe spoke while the young man listened, they didn't know each other's names but it felt comfortable sitting together, as if they were not strangers.

The bottle was almost empty when Zakhe's

mind started wandering, his eyes were on their own mission, studying Funokuhle as if he were some kind of lab experiment.

His side profile a sight for sore eyes, even under the dark skies, Zakhe could see Funo heaving. Clearly he affected him.

It didn't take long for his hand to wander as well, landing on Funokuhle's cheek. A gentle touch, hence the boy was not deterred.

"You have beautiful skin." A drunk Vukuzakhe said, eyes adoring the young man whose skin looked like it tasted of chocolate.

Their eyes locked, sexual tension filled the area despite the small distance between them.

Zakhe intertwined his vacant hand with Funo's, his thumb gently stroking the boy's back hand.

“Have you ever had sex under the stars?” Zakhe asked out of the blue, shocking himself and Funo.

It was too late to take the words back, they were out there, either to create damage or about to let him live his fantasy.

Funo’s eyes grew wide, he was thinking what Zakhe was thinking.

“We’re strangers.” The young man whispered, leaving his lips ajar after the last word released. Zakhe saw it as an invitation in which he hastily accepted, smashing his lips against the boy’s.

His mouth was fierce and needy, kissing Funo with fervent desire that the lad grew dizzy, or it could have been the alcohol.

“You taste different.” Zakhe mumbled, slowly nibbling on the younger’s bottom lip.

His hands found Funo's wet t-shirt and pulled it over his head without breaking the kiss, pants followed, leaving the young man exposed—naked as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after accepting a dare from the serpent.

“You're beautiful.”

Funny how Vukuzakhe could see it all under the moonlight, his eyes had turned red and grown small—lust swimming in them. Zakhe was on his knees as he unbuckled his belt buckle and pulled down his pants along with his trunks and let them fall down to his knees.

Big hazel eyes widened at the sight in front of him, at how big and full the Khanyile giant was.

“Are you going to stare or help me out?” Zakhe asked.

It was Funo’s turn to smash his lips against the giant’s, maybe he wanted him to stop talking and pleasure him.

Zakhe’s fingers curled into the younger’s hips, as he slowly pushed them down until he was topping him.

“Open for me, I want you to open for me,” thin legs spread apart at Zakhe’s order, and he positioned himself in between them.

“Prepare me.” The young man said.

Perhaps he thought the man he was exchanging lips with didn’t know what he was doing.

The instruction was the last the young man gave when Zakhe wet his thumb, using his

saliva, and rubbed it against Funo's tight rim. It was gentle and slow as it slid into him that his breath spiralled out of his lungs.

Three fingers later that found his prostate, Funo was a trembling mess, moaning and pleading for Zakhe to penetrate him, and that, he did.

"Oh God." Funo cried, and sucked in a breath as Zakhe pushed in slowly. His fingers were already digging into the man's broad shoulders, teeth clenched to suppress the pain he felt from his tight opening being penetrated.

"Are you okay?" Zakhe asked, the boy nodded, face contorted in pain.

Worry struck Zakhe's features, he knew he was hurting him.

He paused and leaned down to whisper over Funo's lips, "You feel so good, I badly want to sink into you." A brief kiss followed.

“You’re very verbal.” Funo’s reply made Zakhe shake with laughter.

“Must be the alcohol.” Vukuzakhe.

“It’s not fully in yet.” Was Funo’s casual reply.

“I’m almost there, I don’t want to hurt you.”
Zakhe murmured, his warm breath whiffing the boy’s face.

He wanted to remind him that they didn’t have protection, but voted against it, thinking it will ruin the moment.

“You’re half way there, just do it already.”
Frustration sounded in Funo’s voice, Zakhe could only chuckle.

He looked into the lad’s eyes, as he slowly sank deeper that the young man started to feel stretched and full, not to mention uncomfortable. As long as there was pleasure

in it, he found no problem.

His head fell back on wet sand when Zakhe started moving, softly and gradually.

There was no turning back and Funo could do nothing but succumb to him, surrender to the stranger.

“Oh God, I’m going to pass out.” The words left the lad’s mouth in tremors of whisper, arching his ass up to meet Zakhe’s thrusts. In the midst of the pleasure, he found the courage to say, “Slow down... please.”

As asked, Zakhe reduced speed, a smirk engraved on his mouth before covering it with Funo’s, he couldn’t get enough of kissing him. Perhaps he did taste different, like a drug he couldn’t resist.

“No... I... plea... please.” Funo pleaded, tightening his legs around him, Zakhe tensed at the feeling of his d!ck being strangled by Funo’s tight hole. His body rippled with tremors at the sensation.

“Please what? Use your words.” Zakhe mumbled, humour found in his voice. His c#ck nudging Funo deep inside.

It drove him insane having his prostate poked in slow motion.

“Faster... please. I’m so close,” Funo cried out, tears gushing out of his eyes.

Zakhe was unapologetic in the way he f#cked him. The young man bit down on Zakhe’s shoulder to muffle every sound desperate to leave his mouth.

His eyes widened to the size of golf balls, as a stuttering voice came into his ear, “You’re so loud and I like it, but we can’t risk being seen.”

Oh, what are the odds of being spotted having sex at the river at night?

“I can’t hold it in anymore, it hurts so good.” Funo sobbed, unable to stop his tears from overflowing. His voice sounded low and strangled to his throat.

Warm lips found his, kissing him like he deserved to be kissed.

“Then go for it, fly.” The same lips instructed the young man, maybe because he was close too, and needed to release as well. His entire body craved release.

However, it felt too imperative to blow, literally. Zakhe was so close he had to hold his breath for seconds and try to breathe, while clenching his ass cheeks to stop himself from exploding.

The young man stroke himself, matching Zakhe's hurried thrusts.

"Oh God!" Funo whimpered and screamed, supremely full, and tightened his legs around Zakhe's hips.

"Yes, yes." He screamed the second time, as an orgasm waved through him hard and strong.

His whole body felt every ounce of it, from his head to his toes and back up again.

"Good boy."

Zakhe's words seemed to drive him crazy, he wouldn't let go of the older guy when he continued hitting his prostate again and again, driving him to the brink of extinction.

It was a full minute when Zakhe groaned, subduing himself on top of Funo. The giant

jerked with his release, hid his face into the younger's neck and let out a deep sigh.

His weight pressing the skinny boy down, Zakhe pulled back, levelled the fatigued little man with a steady gaze.

“You should have told me, you're like a drug.”

“What?”

“I think I've become addicted to you.” Zakhe said through a ragged breath.

Confusion took over from contentment, big hazel eyes widened farther before Funo pushed the man aside, and jerked to his feet.

“What happened?” Zakhe asked, watching him throw his clothes back on in a speed of a panicking person. “Did I say something wrong?”

He knew it wasn't something he did because Funo enjoyed it as much, he practically begged him to fuck him. He got up, to cover his nakedness, yet kept his concerned eyes on Funo.

“Wait!” This he yelled out when the younger took off running, as if a dog was chasing him.

Maybe he should have ran after him, eloped with him or something. Maybe he wouldn't be in the position he's in today. An unwanted pregnancy.

He's close to all his brothers, but since this one seems to know more than the others, he

spends more time with him. Like now, Zakhe is on the passenger seat in Ntaba's car who is slowly driving back to the Khanyile ranch.

No way was he going to drive with his wife, he didn't want her anywhere near him.

Zakhe did not utter a word since he was told there's a little him coming into this world.

The reporters were politely asked to leave under the pretext of the family having dinner privately.

Dinner was awkward, the four younger brothers seemed to catch whatever their big brother had, none of them struck a conversation with their parents nor the Khanyile bride.

"What's wrong with you? Who died?" Vumile had asked them and got no answer in return and that in turn made everything more awkward.

Ever dined with an elephant standing tall in the room? That's how thick the tension was.

"Do you want Toppers?" Ntaba asks, to break the quietness that's long been at home. The ride has been silent, save for the radio playing softly.

Zakhe shoots a glance at him, brows elevated.

"Chocolate flavoured Toppers are nice." That's just too random of Ntaba.

"You still eat that shit?"

When Ntaba was eleven, he ate those biscuits every day for a week until his stomach couldn't stomach it. They made him sick, and his father had no choice but to use an anema on him.

“You don’t know heaven until you’ve tasted chocolate flavoured Toppers.” Ntaba.

“And you don’t know hell until you’ve eaten more than you should.” Zakhe.

Ntaba is the only one who finds it funny, his brother is too stressed to laugh.

The silence that was kicked out finds its way back in, a deep sigh from Zakhe chases it out again and causes wrinkles on Ntaba’s forehead. He gives Zakhe a brief look to find him glancing out the window, head on the seat’s headrest.

“I told you that I had condoms,” Random Ntaba starts, too serious one would think he’s an idiot to say such things with a grave expression.

“Not now Ntaba.”

The dismissal is ignored, of course he would. He is Vumile’s son after all.

“Did you really sleep with her?”

This is none of his business, Ntaba is taking things too far. They never discuss what they do in the bedroom with their significant others. Maybe the younger brothers do, but Zakhe is too strict and too standoffish to be approached with the topic of the birds and the bees.

“We’re married.” Surprisingly, Zakhe provides an answer.

“What about Koti?” Team Funokuhle... This one seems to be cheering for him.

Zakhe looks at him, he seems to have expected this question and has some kind of defensive strategy in place. He clears his throat and straightens his back, giving the impression of strength. But he can’t fool the man on the steering wheel.

“I don’t understand Ntaba. How do you know so much?” He won’t be specific, yet. Just testing the waters.

“You’re my brother, you raised me. There’s nothing I don’t know about you.”

Zakhe doesn’t answer, not that he doesn’t have one. He’s just too confused to speak.

“Do you want me to drag the truth out of you?” Ntaba persists.

A sigh, “It must be all over the news by now.” He’s talking about the baby announcement. “He’s going to see it and think...”

Zakhe gazes out the window, and releases another sigh.

“He doesn’t strike me as the type that watches

TV. Even if he does, where is the harm in that? Unless you've already told him how you feel."

Ntaba.

Zakhe tips his head back, and glances over at his brother. "I did, I told him I want to be with him."

"Rich Forrester, look at the mess you've gotten yourself in." Ntaba.

His brothers are hilarious to tease, especially Vukuzakhe because he always looks tense and powerful, and people are afraid of him. But Ntaba goes to an extent to throw him off.

"I know." Of course he knows. "Bongiwe can't be pregnant, she was on birth control."

"You believed her when she told you this?"

"I had no reason to doubt her, we've been

married for three years and not once did she bring the baby topic up. Just the other day she was telling me we should have kids, four weeks later she's pregnant." He has his doubts.

"Bongiwe is a fighter bhuti, she's going to fight for this marriage. You know that, right?" Ntaba tells him.

He does, he sees it in her eyes every day.

"If you're going to love someone else, make sure you tell her so she knows where she stands. The road won't be easy, but you need to follow your heart. Choose yourself." Ntaba sounds too serious, it's crazy. Zakhe is taken deep into thought, it lasts a second. He's back to looking at his brother.

“You’re so invested in my business, you still have to tell me why you were arrested.” It feels like eons ago.

Ntaba frowns and shrugs his broad shoulders.

“It’s nothing serious.”

And that’s final, Zakhe doesn’t probe farther.

MATHONGA-

Everyone retired for the night right after we got home from the restaurant. No one wanted to talk about today’s happenings, no one but Bongwiwe, she wouldn’t stop.

She’s happier than my brother is about the baby, something is happening in their marriage. I’ve seen how sad he is when he’s with her.

Marriage! I don’t want to find myself trapped in it.

Lying down on the bed after a quick shower, I'm hit with a wave of drowsiness. My eyes are heavy and it's getting hard to keep them open, so I yield to it and let it take me.

In an instant, I fall into a clear dream. I'm still in my room, I know because I'm lying in my bed, facing up. My ears perk at the grumbling sound, normally made by a sangoma.

I shift my eyes around until they land on an unfamiliar old woman kneeling by the bed. She's glaring at me with so much anger in her eyes, shoulders shuddering and groans leaving her mouth.

It's out of instinct when I leave the bed to join her, I kneel in front of her.

"Thokoza gogo." Randomly I sing, clapping my hands in a rhythmic method.

“Chaza.” (Explain.)

For some reason I know what she’s talking about.

“Ngiyaxolisa. Ubaba has turned his back on you. He does not let us acknowledge you. It’s not easy to go against him.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”

I open my mouth to speak, my words don’t make it far due to the hand she raises to stop me from uttering a word.

“Wait, Ukhokho ufuna ukukhuluma nawe.” (Your great-grandfather wants to talk to you.)

She leaves without another word said, I don’t see where she disappears to because I’m focused on chanting the lyrics “Thokoza khehla.” While clapping my hands, repeatedly.

Suddenly he shows up in front of me, wearing a white formal shirt with its sleeves folded up, and black formal pants. Like the old woman, I can't really make out his face. However, he comes with peace, it breaches through me, I can literally taste it.

He kneels in front of me, retrieves an A4 piece of paper from his shirt pocket, "put your hands together."

I join them, he wraps the paper around my hands and starts praying, grunting and chanting things I can't make sense of.

It's not long till my body shudders violently.

"Relax, you're not supposed to panic, relax."

At his command, I fight to breath, counting my

intakes and outtakes.

“You’re not going to be able to walk, I will have to help you up.”

He does as he says, helping me up. My feet feel numb, I can barely move them.

“Where are we going?” I question, holding on to him lest I fall.

“Run.” He says.

With no questions asked, I limp my way around the room. I don’t know where the pain in my legs is coming from.

“It hurts.” I tell him, struggling to take another step but pushing on still.

“Keep running.” He commands.

The more I move, the stronger I become. As I turn to him, I find him smiling. It's warm and draws me nearer to him.

"Are you feeling fine now?" I guess he's talking about the pain.

"Yes."

He nods at my answer, "Your faith is about to be tested, you will be thrown into the fiery furnace. A storm that will be too hard for you to command. Some things will be hidden from you, for a purpose. But do not grow weary, be strong, remember that I will always be here to help you get back up." he says and disappears, leaving me alone and confused.

What was that about? There must be a meaning behind all of this.

“Vumile will have to be removed, he’s standing in our way.” It’s the old woman’s angry voice, I can’t see her.

“No, please. You can’t take my father.” I wait for a reply but nothing comes through.

“You can’t take ubaba, you can’t. You have no right.” I’m shouting, they have no right to do that. The peace the old man came with has exhausted, now I’m engulfed by anger.

Something cracks like a breaking of bones and in a jiffy my body tumbles to the floor, convulsing violently.

“Mathonga wake up.” My anger disperses at the sound of Zakhe’s voice, however my body won’t stop jerking, even when my eyes flick open.

I'm on the floor like I was in the dream,
Vukuzakhe and Ntaba are holding me down.

My big brother's grip is on my arms and Ntaba's
holding my legs.

"What's wrong Thonga?" I hear Ntaba's
question, yet fail to answer him. All I can do is
groan loudly, while clenching my teeth.

"Put a cloth in his mouth, he'll die if he bites his
tongue." At Zakhe's instruction, Ntaba dashes
away. My eyes won't follow him, they are
desperately fixed on Zakhe, pleading for him to
stop the trembling.

"What the hell is going on?"

I wish I could tell him that I have infuriated the
ancestors by showing anger towards them. I'm
an idiot, I shouldn't have done that.

Ntaba is back with my face cloth, he shoves it in my mouth with no gentleness.

“Why is he shaking so much?” Ntaba asks, looking defeated.

“Sothole. Ntunjwa KaLanga. Mthiyane. Ndwandwe. Zikode, Mabhuqa. Ngwane. Yehlisani umoya bantu abadala. He’s just a child, don’t punish him for the things he knows nothing about.” (Please calm down.)

There’s passion in the way Vukuzakhe communicates with the ancestors, like he’s done it before. He’s pleading for me, for my life. It takes a few seconds for my body to stop shuddering. He doesn’t give me a minute to breathe but pulls me into a hug.

“You’re okay now, Ngwane. I won’t let anything happen to you.” His words are comforting.

“I knew it, they shouldn’t have named him Mathonga. Now the underground gang thinks my brother is an ancestor. Baba has to fix this mess.” Ntaba seethes in anger.

MATHONGA

Fifteen

NALA-

Mam’Julia works for the department of Home Affairs, she’s been appointed to work in Mpumalanga for two months. Honestly, I wish she didn’t have to go. Petros has gone beastly on me.

He binds me on the bed, or a chair and does

whatever he wills with my body, sometimes he'd go to work leaving me tied to the bed post, naked and dirty.

When he comes back from work, he'd continue violating my body, until I'm exhausted and begging for death.

The boys are not around, he sent them away, he won't tell me where. He'll kill them if I try anything, that's what he said. I can't leave the house, nor open for anyone. There was a man here, looking for me... one of the Khanyile brothers. Petros recognised him the second he stood outside his premises.

He demanded to know why the chief's eldest son was asking the neighbours about me. He said there was no way that man would be looking for him, so it had to be me.

I had to defend myself and luckily the bastard

believed me.

It's after 2am, Petros has been raping me since 10pm last night. He'd do it, fall asleep and wake up minutes later to finish what he started.

He's handcuffed my hands behind my back, put a gag in my mouth. He said it's so that I'm unable to make a sound, it annoys him sometimes.

He is straddling me, eyes on my naked body... lusting after it, a slap on my thigh causes me to muffle a scream.

He removes the gag, stands on the bed and pushes his entire foot in my mouth.

"Suck it Nala, suck it the way you'd suck my d!ck."

Tears pool behind my eyes, they stream down my face.

“You’re not listening to me, I said suck it.” He snaps, shoving the foot deeper down my throat my eyes begin to water. Bile rises, I push it back down. Every mistake comes with a heavy punishment.

My breath finds me the second he takes his disgusting foot out of my mouth.

“Tears?” He says, looking down at me with a sadistic stare. “Today I won’t let you be my little masochist, I will let you cry. For some reason, it’s turning me on and I like it when you arouse me, my precious Nala.” I hate the way he says my name, he’s taken that away from me as well.

The weight of his body presses me down, a rush of cold seeps through me as he touches my private parts. I want to scream when he pushes himself inside of me, tearing me apart.

Tears take over instead, the bastard finds joy in them. He's smirking.

"That's right, Nala. Cry for your master. I love to see those tears." His hand glides to my throat caressing with a deadly gentle touch, before it tightens its hold, murky shadows pounce before my eyes. He's depriving me of air, he did this a few days ago. I lost consciousness and was out for two days, when I woke up, he told me I needed more practice.

I don't want to see him, how he's enjoying raping me. To protect my brain and prevent it from saving memories, I press my eyes shut.

He's growling like an animal, ruthlessly slamming into me. The hand around my throat tightens with every sound he makes. I cry in silence, cry out in pain.

"Look at me," It's a command. "Open your eyes,

come on.” Though I don’t want to, I have to.

“Beg for it nala, beg for me to fuck you.”

I can’t, I won’t. I want to beg for death, I want to die. What I hate the most about this, is that I can feel, I can feel myself orgasm. I don’t know how he does it, although my body rejects him, he makes sure I cum.

It feels like death to my soul, a betrayal to myself, to God and my mother. I hate being a woman, I hate that I’m so vulnerable and weak.

A painful gasp winds out of my aching throat as he releases it, it hurts to breathe. I’m frozen as he gets off the bed, his weight remains on me, suffocating... like he never left.

He’s disgusted by me, there is no way to hide

my naked body from his wandering eyes.

“Look what you’ve done now, you’ve made a mess Nala.” There is anger in his voice. “You look so dirty, and you smell. Who gave you permission to cum?”

“Kill me,” I scream out in agony and sorrow, tears pooling from my eyes. “Please kill me. Make it stop... I—I’m tired... please. Send me to my mother, I don’t want this, please.”

“Oh relax, don’t be so dramatic. You’re a big girl, there’s nothing you can’t handle.” He huffs.

“Your performance was terrible today, I am not pleased. On a scale of 1 to 10, I give you 2. And because of that, you are going to sleep in shackles tonight.”

He undresses one of the pillows and puts the case over my head, depriving my eyes of light and sight.

“Stay there and think about what you’ve done, if I hear a scream from you, I will shoot you in the head.”

I know he’s serious, Petros never bluffs. My sobs are loud though, pleading on my behalf, I can’t stop them no matter how hard I try.

“Tomorrow is your first day at work, make me proud. Sweet dreams sweetheart.”

The sound of his footsteps echo, I hear the door open and shut. He’s gone, I can’t feel his heavy presence anymore, but I know he’ll come back. He always does.

VUKUZAKHE-

Night has turned to daybreak, hours have

passed but the longing in his heart still lingers. It's been a tough four weeks, finally he got a break. The man he hired to investigate Funokuhle has come back with news.

The boy is in Johannesburg, working at a gay club. He didn't say what he does there, however Vukuzakhe is eager to find out.

There's more information, the investigator wanted to meet up, but Zakhe is keen to get his minion back.

He's in his rondavel, shoving a t-shirt, a pair of jeans, two trunks, and two pairs of socks in a duffel bag. He plans on buying a new toothbrush at the nearest garage, the one he's been using has passed its 3-month period.

The door to the bathroom slides open, her scent instantly fills the room. His eyes are disciplined,

fixated on the packing.

“Can we talk about the baby?” Desperation complements her question, he hasn’t said anything about the pregnancy. She wants to know what his views are, if he’s as excited as she is.

She’s getting closer, he tenses before she touches him. When she wraps her arms around him from the back his eyes opt for darkness.

“When I get back from eGoli.”

Yes, he told her about the trip. A business trip is okay, arguing with that would be the same as arguing with Vumile, and Bongiwane knows better than to do that.

“Before you go,” her hands are very exploratory this morning. “Make love to me, Ngwane. I miss you.”

“I’m running late, Bongiwe.” He hasn’t moved, nor twitched.

“Please Ngwane, I need my husband. I don’t know how long you’ll be gone.”

Her hands are all over him, they find his lower torso and slide down to his sack.

He gasps and closes his eyes again when she grips him, she still affects him and he’s very much aware that he’s attracted to her as a woman, as the woman he’s married to.

“Bongiwe.” A strained voice commands, his hand finds the strength to grab her curious hands and pull them away from his sanctuary.

“What’s wrong?”

The confusion in her voice is not a lie, some days he lets her touch him... some days he’s cold. It’s annoying really, she’s getting fed up by

his little boy attitude.

“I’m running late, I told you.”

Rejecting her seems to be an appropriate thing to do. Feeling brownd off by the touches, he shifts away from her.

His eyes almost drop out of their sockets when they sweep across the piece of clothing on her body. The respectable wife is wearing little to nothing, her skin is all out for show. Her face covered in heavy makeup, women think it looks good with long fake lashes. Out here looking like a peacock. His father will not like this, he’s an Adventist.

He comforts himself by concluding that she’s hiding the bruise his hand left on her cheek last night

“What is wrong with you Ngwane, it’s not like we’ll take the whole day.” She shouts.

But he’s not there, it’s the little number she’s wearing. It’s too short, open at the back, and it bothers him. Since when does she dress like street trash?

“Go change Bongiwe, my parents cannot see you in that.” He’d rather pluck their eyes out.

“Your parents have seen me in this, they never said anything about it.”

That was before they got married, during their dating days. It was New Year’s Eve, their wedding was set to be in two months’ time and well, Bongiwe wanted to savour her last days as a free woman.

“In front of you they didn’t.”

Ouch! That hurts. Her gaze falls, she suddenly feels dirty, but it mostly has everything to do with the way he's looking at her. The repulsion in his eyes.

“When did you become a bastard, Ngwane? You're so inconsiderate of my feelings.”

He's not about to entertain her tantrums, not this morning. He's got somewhere important to be. Bongiwé's eyes follow him when he grabs his duffel bag and heads for the door.

“Change. My parents think I'm married to a decent woman, not a prostitute.” He blurts out, with a pinch of allegation.

He grabs the door handle, ready to leave, but her next words stop him.

“What is that supposed to mean? What are you saying to me, Ngwane?”

He turns, face cold and inexpressive. He moves his eyes from her angry face to her belly then back up again.

“Is it mine?” The confidence that comes with that question throws her off guard. This is surely something she did not expect.

“What?” Bongiwe chokes the word out, eyes resembling saucers.

“How do I know it’s mine?”

“I’m your wife... we had sex.”

“That doesn’t answer my question Bongiwe.” His feet move, unfaltering. This anger of his is getting out of control, she knows because his stuttering is getting out of control.

“How dare you, Vukuzakhe.”

It's normal for her to give in to wrath. The man just questioned her loyalty.

“What do you take me for? I am your wife, I will never cheat on you.”

“Then, how are you pregnant? Just yesterday, yesterday Bongiwe, you were telling me that we should have kids and now you're suddenly pregnant?”

His statement throws her into a fit of wrathful laughter, “Are you not a man, Ndwandwe? Don't you have sperms?”

She's shouting as loud as she can, throwing her hands up like she just don't care. So what if she's a shouter? What of it? Who cares that men are to be respected around here? This one does not deserve her respect.

His face grows with anger, he steps closer, eyes fiery. Bongiwe knows this look, she saw it last night before his palm smashed against her cheek.

“Are you going to hit me? Hit me then.” She’s pushing him, and punching his chest. “Hit me, Vukuzakhe, so I can show people the kind of man I’m married to, a woman beater. This time I’m not going to hide the bruise, I won’t cover it with the expensive make up I buy with your money. I will leave it open for the whole of Izingolweni to see, for the whole world to see that, the chief’s son is nothing but trash.”

“Don’t try my patience, Bongiwe.” He wants to scream it out, however, for peace’s sake he has to keep calm. “You’re not worth it.”

He pauses to make sure he has her attention, and she's looking into his eyes where the truth lies. It hurts. His words seem to hurt lately.

"You are not worth it." Zakhe repeats, it's the same as spitting in her face.

He's walking away again, like he always does. Duffel bag strapped on his shoulder.

"I'm not going anywhere Ngwane, do you hear me? I will never give you a divorce." The noise in this place.

Condescension! He hears it in her voice and when he turns his head to sneer at her, sees it in her eyes.

"Will you keep your bloody voice down? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You are, you are what is wrong with me." The

voice is not kept down, her finger moves back and forth, pointing at him with gestures of accusations. “I’m not an idiot Ngwane. I know you’re going to Joburg to meet one of your floozies.”

That’s what she thinks, the skimpy dress was worn out of insecurity.

“I don’t want to hurt you Bongiwe, you’re pushing me to do the worst.” Although his words firmly stutter out of his mouth, they give her the wrong kind of chills.

“I hate you.” A shrill scream resounds as she plunges something into his shoulder, Zakhe winces in pain, and pushes her away. She stumbles back and it takes a second for him to see the scissors in her hand, it’s covered in blood—his blood.

“Bongiwe?” He’s pressing a hand on his shoulder, face coated with shock.

In a whiff, the door flies open and in walks an enquiring Ntaba. His eyes don’t deter from probing. He frowns at his brother pressed against the wall, what causes him stress is the blood stains on his shoulder.

“What’s going on here?” Angry eyes move to a shaken Bongiwe, her lower lip and blood stained hands are trembling. The weapon falls to the floor, she pulls her dress down to cover her bare thighs.

“Bhuti?”

Ntaba won’t remove his gaze from Bongiwe, she gulps when she notices him clenching his

jaw. Without another thought, Ntaba moves. Eyes glaring and fists clenched into tight balls, Bongiwe releases a second gulp, louder this time. Her eyes are wide and glistening with unshed tears, she moves them to her husband, silently begging for help. He's frowning, stern gaze on Ntaba.

"Ntabezikude." He calls, authoritatively.

Ntaba stops, "you're bleeding." He won't take his eyes off Bongiwe.

"I'm fine." Vukuzakhe.

"What did she do to you?"

"You're not supposed to be in here, this is my bedroom."

Shame hits Ntaba across the face, and he drops his head a smidgeon as his brother reminds

him that he's broken one of the rules. He swivels to face Zakhe, shame loses to him as he raises his eyes to look his brother in the eye.

"Tell this woman if she lays a hand on you again, she will see the walls of Jericho coming down."

There's something dark in Ntaba's tone that makes Bongiwe shiver, a lone tear escapes her eye. He's glaring at Bongiwe again, his beady eyes flash before a smile stretches his mouth. It turns into a wide grin in a jiffy, it's creepy and borders on sadism.

"Excuse me, I have holes to dig. Six feet under I believe." Ntaba articulates, hinting on something dark. No one argues with him when he uses the edge of his golf shirt to pick the scissors up. "I'll keep this... as a souvenir."

He walks out, leaving the door open.

Bongiwe does not breathe a word when her

husband grabs a jacket from the closet, and dons it on his body, he flinches as he does so.

“Are you okay?” No answer. “Let me take care of that wound, my husband.”

“I don’t want you anywhere near me, if you’re worried about my father seeing the works of your hands, relax.”

She has caused damage, perhaps she’s a sadist, takes pleasure in seeing her husband in pain. He denies her a glance or farewell when he steps out of the rondavel.

Bongiwe won’t follow, she would if Ntaba was not around. The man scares the shit out of her.

“Ndodana wait.”

What does this old man want now?

“Baba?”

“Uyaphi?” (Where are you going?)

“Egoli.”

“Why?”

“I need to attend to something very important.”

“What about the company? You can’t just up and leave, and your wife is pregnant. When will you come back?”

Must everything be about Bongwiwe? As a riled sigh parades from his mouth, he backs up against the white SUV, ignoring the throbbing pain on his shoulder.

“I don’t know. Hlabela and Ndlela are here, they will take care of the business while I’m away, and Bongwiwe is not alone, the house is full of people, baba.”

He’s done with this conversation, he pushes off the car to leave. Time is not on his side,

Johannesburg is not five minutes away, he still has to locate the person when he gets there and the plan is to find him today. He's wasted enough time already.

"Bongiwe is a good woman, have you seen how she takes care of this family?" Vumile. Zakhe doesn't care really.

"Maybe you should shift your attention to your last born, he's going through a lot and needs his father."

"What's wrong with Mathonga?" Vumile asks, suddenly worried.

"Talk to him."

Ah! This one is just like his father. Ordering people around. Vumile's face turns sour, there's a deep pungent eye contact between father and son. The elder carries his hands on his back, clears his raspy throat and nods.

“I want you at the breakfast table in five minutes, your trip can wait.”

Five minutes is what he doesn't have, he'll die if he waits one more second.

It's too late to argue with Vumile, he's headed for the house. This is how it feels to be Vumile Khanyile's son, you become a puppet. Zakhe throws his overnight bag in the backseat, bangs the car door softly and tails his control freak of a father.

Time is of the essence.

Why does Vumile have to be so strict? Now he's sitting at the breakfast table, next to the woman he wants to escape at least for a week. Her

attire is a long dress and matching head wrap, she looks like a wife. The one his parents ordered.

Her presence suffocates him, he's like a woman on her periods, everything and everyone irks the shit out of him today. Or it must be the wound on his shoulder, he's hiding it well with that black jacket.

Johannesburg is waiting for him, Funo is waiting for him.

As usual, mother hen is missing this morning. It's Mathonga's presence that has her AWOL.

"Are we eating or not?" The loudness of his voice transports the question to the kitchen, a sound of a breaking dish answers back. It must be Khethiwe, she's always a trembling mess when under pressure.

“You’re paying for that plate.” That’s his wife, it’s said as a joke but no one laughs, but Ntaba.

“Omunye falls pregnant and becomes a comedian.” Ntaba never misses a chance to speak. He is slumped back on the chair, sitting like a petulant teenage boy—mischievous eyes stuck on his sister in-law. “The Khanyiles have a dry sense of humour. Where does boy-boy get his sense of humour from?”

“Wow, I didn’t know pregnancy does that to a person.” Mathonga comments, he appears shocked and wowed by Ntaba’s confident declaration. “That’s amazing sis’ Bonggi, the baby must get it from your side of the family. Sisazo hleka la ekhaya.”

Any reply she might be considering vanishes in

an instant. How do you answer fools? Hlabela is laughing at them, Ndlela is sporting a serious face and Vumile... well— he's just here, enjoying his sons' presence.

"Aren't you going to check what's going on?" Ndleleni queries, he's talking to Bongwiwe. His question is ignored, it has everyone looking at her with arched brows. It's not like her to ignore her brothers-in-law. They know she lives to please them.

"Bongwiwe!" Zakhe snaps, she's not even here. Her eyes and hands are on her belly, innocence resides on her face.

"I read somewhere that pregnant women should not do any hard labour. Especially during the first trimester, it's too risky." That's her answer.

"Hard labour? You're only going to check on breakfast." Ndlela returns, grimacing at the charge.

“I know a man that sells wheelbarrows, Hlabela won’t mind pushing you around until you give birth.” Of course, one person would say this. Ntaba has no filter, they all know him.

“Grow up ndoda.” Hlabela returns.

“What?” Ntaba shrugs, darting an unbothered look at Hlabela. “We should get her a wheelbarrow, since walking is considered hard labour.” Ntaba’s reply is taken seriously by the pregnant woman, she’s close to tears.

“Are you saying I’m fat?” Wrong person to ask this question, his answer might cause her to cry the Nile River.

Khethiwe saves the day by walking in with dishes of food, she meets Bongiwe’s glare with

fear in her eyes.

Thank the culinary gods, the food makes it to the table. She freezes when she nears Ntabezikude, his scent is too intoxicating for her to handle. Everyone notices how she's shuddering next to a man who is not affected by her presence.

"Khethiwe, are you okay?" Mathonga asks, he's always worried about her. Perhaps it's the fact that she's within his age group and he's known her for so long.

"Ntokazi," finally the pompous bastard notices her. A smile plays on his face, a bad move really. Khethiwe has become the Statue of Liberty. How is she suddenly so affected by this Khanyile fool?

"How is the Ntaba that lives in your head? I

hope you're treating him well." Hlabela gasps at Ntaba's question, there's laughter belonging to the last born. Zakhe and Ndlela won't entertain Ntaba's egotism. Khethiwe tugs at the sides of her lengthy apron, eyes on her feet, probably counting her toes.

The unsolicited heavy attention is taken away from her by a girl walking into the dining room. Someone pushes their chair back and stands, shock written in their eyes. It's the baby of the family, Mathonga. He seems to familiarise with the skinny girl standing at the doorway with a jug of orange juice in her hand.

"Nala?" Mathonga murmurs, guardedly. "What are you doing here?"

Her reply is taken by Vukuzakhe, he's on his feet fixing his jacket. The tall man looks tense,

beads of sweat have pearled on his forehead.

“Madoda, take care of each other. I’m out of here.” He announces, pats Mathonga on the head, and one... two step... he’s out of the house. His wife can’t call out to him, Ntaba is staring at her with a blood curdling smirk on his face.

MATHONGA-

Sixteen

MATHONGA-

The day started like any other, it came draped with a veil of regularity. Everything has changed now, the girl I’ve been looking for is here, in my father’s house.

Nala didn’t protest when I pulled her back to the kitchen, away from everyone’s prying eyes. I could feel their eyes burning every piece of me,

not once did I dare look back. My brothers can be forward.

I've asked her a question, one she has failed to answer.

What is she doing here?

Her eyes are flaccid, there are dark circles around them. She appears to have lost more weight. She shrugs and turns away from me. I give her the space she's silently asking for and stand back, the kitchen island standing as a wall between us.

"Are you going to tell me why you're here?" I query.

She's resorted to washing the dishes, a way to avoid me. I really don't like this, I don't want her slaving in this house.

"Work, ndlunkulu hired me." She replies, without sparing me a glance.

That's strange, Dalisile does not involve herself with staff matters. She's too full of herself.

"Why would she do that?" I move to stand next to her, she tenses, pausing the work and turns to face me. But keeps her eyes away from mine.

"You don't want me working here?" She asks. The strain in her voice enough to fuel my uncertainties.

"No, that's not what I meant." It is, it is what I meant. "Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you."

"I didn't know, you were." She says, keeping her voice too soft. Her eyes have not looked at me since we entered the kitchen. "Why were you looking for me?"

She's back to washing the dishes, I want her to stop and give me all of her attention.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Nala.” I place my hand on her shoulder, she panics, jolting away from my touch, heaving like she just ran a marathon. “I’m sorry, I... I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Just... don’t... touch me.” She squeaks, almost whispering the command out. The fear in her eyes screams at me.

“I’m sorry, Nala.” It’s vital she knows how apologetic I am. Now I know she’s terrified, judging by the tremble of her hands.

“Are you okay?” I ask, when she clasp her hands together.

“Look, I don’t want to lose my job. Ndlunkulu will fire me if she finds you talking to me. I thanked you for helping me at the police station. If I had money, I would give you, but I’m broke.”

“I don’t want your money.”

“My body then? That’s what you men are good at, you take and take and take.” She snaps, reluctantly. Anger is painted in her voice.

Just these words reassure me that something happened to her.

“Nala, what...” With this, my hand shifts to cradle her cheek, she shrugs it away.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Did someone hurt you, Nala?” I ask, I don’t know why I persist in touching her, even after she’s told me not to. There’s a force pushing me to comfort her. Slowly, I take her trembling hands. They are small in my hands, frail and cold. Looking down at her, I wordlessly plead with her to look me in the eye.

“Your hands are warm,” she speaks, her voice

trembling as she eventually looks up at me.
“They feel like my mother’s hands.”

Tears! I want to wipe them away and crib her in my arms, but it will only scare her away. I can hear how she draws in a deep breath, her tear-filled eyes now closed.

My hand leaves hers, it’s out of my will when one cups her cheek and the other weaves through her hair.

Nothing is said between us, only a staring contest takes place. My eyes are unblinking while hers release a dam of tears.

“I want to help you.” I tell her, honestly.

My body doesn’t move when she shoves me away, keeping to the promise I’m about to make, my hands hold on tight.

“I won’t let you go, tell me what’s going on, so I know how to help you.” I express, wincing silently as I hear my voice tremble in fear... fear of the unknown.

I know fear, I have known it since I was a child. However, this is a different kind of fear, I can’t put my finger on it. It is loud heartbeats, confusion and more confusion.

A sad smile appears on her pale lips. “Don’t act like you care about me, we’re strangers.”

She pulls her hands back and allows her shoulders to fall. I see a high wall around her. Breaking it won’t be easy.

“Did someone hurt you, Nala?” That’s what it sounds like to me, the pain in her eyes is very much visible. She’s trying hard to hide it, but I see through her, her soul is on fire and she’s

begging for help. “What are those marks around your neck?”

How did I not notice them from the first glance, she’s not the lightest girl I’ve met, but anyone can’t miss those fingerprints.

“Ngwane KaNgwadi.”

Soft hands yank away from mine, making way for coldness. I crane my neck at the sound of my father’s gentle voice, his presence makes an imposing sight. He’s glaring at the innocent girl beside me. “As’khulume.”

He leaves, without penetrating the threshold. I’m not okay with the look he just gave Nala.

“Please stay here, don’t go anywhere. I’ll be

back.” I make sure to look into her eyes so she sees I mean it. I don’t wait for a response but follow the chief.

FUNOKUHLE-

Joburg feels like a foreign country with its bright lights and loudness. I can never get used to it, I miss home.

My father has no idea where I am, I can’t even contact him. Pule took my phone.

I left KZN unwillingly, without my approval. The day Pule dragged me out of the hospital, he lectured me about my “whoring ways.”

Apparently he found out I spent the night at the Khanyile homestead and his mind convinced him that I slept with one of the brothers.

Vukuzakhe Khanyile.

Little does he know I have already given myself to him. That moment we had, although intoxicated, snatched a piece of my soul. It now belongs to Vukuzakhe. It's a piece that Pule will never have.

For a moment, Pule convinced me that he was taking me to a getaway in Durban to apologise for beating me up.

I wasn't on board with the idea, it was repulsive and I wanted to discard it, thinking he'll turn on me when we get there. By the time I realised he had some other plan up his sleeve, he was already taking the route leading to Johannesburg.

Here I am, weeks later, waiting tables at a gay club while he stays at home and collects all the money I make.

I don't know what happened to his teaching job,

he hasn't told me anything and when I ask why we're here, he'd lash out and start throwing punches.

"After robot."

I get a few looks from passengers. I thought it was only done back home where people stare at you for having the audacity to raise your voice in a taxi.

Preserving an eye roll, I arch my back preparing to jump off. The backseat is a curse, no one wants to sit there, and the same people don't want to move when we have to exit the taxi.

All eyes are on me, I can't stand the attention, so this time I don't hide my eye roll. What the hell are they looking at, anyway?

“Yey, don’t bang my door.” The driver yells after me. My brain is out of it, I hardly noticed I banged the door.

“Ngiyaxolisa bhuti.” My Zulu is too deep for these Joburgers, they must pick up I’m from the village because one of them makes a nasty comment about my rural upbringing.

“Open that door and close it again, properly.” The driver shouts.

Haibo, wenja!

To avoid conflict, I do as told. Men are violent animals, trust me, my life is surrounded by them. This one looks like he carries a gun.

Standing on the side of the road, surrounded by nightlights, I wait for the taxi to leave before crossing the street.

I feel eyes on me the second I enter the bar, maybe it's that I'm known as introverted around here. Four weeks in and I haven't made a friend, not that I care.

Friends are not something I fancy, besides that, Pule forbids me from making any. He knows my every move, he's changing for the worst.

Throws fists around like Mike Tyson and the man knows nothing about the word sorry.

I want to go home, I don't want to be here with him. There's no escape for me.

"Hey kid."

I was hoping to find the staff room empty, Dumi is the worst possible man you can be left alone with. He's the manager.

I'm not comfortable with the way he looks at me, the snide remarks he makes, thinking he's flirtatious.

"I'm not a kid." I rejoinder, and regard him with a roll of the eyes. He greets me with a wink when I swoosh past him headed for my locker.

"Whatever you say, kid."

Bloody fool.

Frankly, I'm not a kid. I'm officially twenty four. I won't even touch on how terrible my birthday was.

I hear a slight chortle behind me, and a temptation to turn around taps me on the shoulder.

I won't entertain Dumi, I need to change into this tedious uniform, do my job and go back to that small flat in Hillbrow. Pule calls it home, I call it a dungeon.

We have a small toilet, in here. It has a single basin where most stuff members wash their bodies after hours. Usually it smells of urine, sometimes you catch a deep smell of sex.

“Want me to join you in there doll face?” The mockery in his tone is what puts me off. “I promise I won’t bite.”

I turn to face Dumi, a small quirk of his lips tells me what’s on his mind. He’s a very graphic person and has never hidden the fact that he wants me. I’m not interested, I will never be interested in him. He looks like the type that would fuck anything that makes him ejaculate.

There’s no mirror in this bathroom, however I know I look like a prostitute in these boy shorts. They are paired with black cross belts and a

bow tie. No shirt or anything to cover our upper bodies. It's humiliating and I have no choice but to brace it, Pule forces me to brace it.

This is the only place where I can make us enough to pay for rent and buy groceries... he said.

Dumi is still here when I come out of the bathroom, talking to a colleague. A boy who could be in his teens, I've never struck a conversation with him, but I've wondered what he's doing in a place like this.

"Nice ass, doll face." Dumi critics upon my departure, he is a proud pervert. I choose to ignore him and head on to the club. It's after 7pm, work starts at 7:15pm. I'm on time.

The volume cranks up with each forward step I take, the bass vibrates in my chest as I enter a

packed club. From teenagers to old folks who refuse to embrace their age.

Dumi was being an ass that I forgot to ask him what my duty is today. Sometimes we wait tables, sometimes we entertain rich men who are wealthy enough to buy this whole place.

Straight married men who come here for a quick fuck. It is fortunate I haven't fallen victim to any of them... yet.

Someone grips my hand and tugs me through the multitude of people, to the dance floor. It's an old white man. With all these spiralling disco lights, I'm able to spot that he's one of those rich bastards looking for something to poke their d!ck in.

“You’ll call me, sir Ethan tonight.” He orders, piercing me with an intense gaze.

A cold shiver harasses me, nerves and worry kick in. I’ve been lucky so far, what went wrong today? “Yes, sir Ethan.”

An uncanny smile lengthens his thin pink lips, I fail to return it, gulping down the fear clawing at me.

Lord don’t let it be me tonight, I don’t want to find myself blowing some old, wrinkly c\$ck.

“Good. You look fresh, boy. I can’t wait to have a taste of you.” His eyes are lustful, a cringing sight.

“Did you hear me, boy?”

If he calls me boy one more time... dammit!
What will I do? I am powerless in this place, in this city.

“Yes, sir Ethan.”

He snorts a laugh, it must be the way I pronounced his name. My English is not that good, however I can make out a couple of words.

He leans in to kiss me, roughly until a faded metallic taste soaks my tongue. My lips are bleeding.

How will I explain a bruised lip to Pule? He said to make sure these men don't touch me, he's an idiot. He got me this job knowing what goes on in this place.

Sir Ethan's eyes darken, sweeping through my bare skin. He reaches into the pocket of his khakis and mines a reedy leather collar.

“You won't need that necktie.” His nicotine

breath fans my face as he touches me without permission, he lets the tie fall to the floor and replaces it with the leather collar.

“Ahh!” He nods, clearly not noticing how disgusted I am by this whole thing. “You look like a goddess, beautiful. I love your melanin, I hope you taste like chocolate.”

He’s losing me with his fancy words, so I don’t answer, instead, I school my expression. I am repulsed. He kisses me again, bruising my lip again.

“Now dance for me,” he commands.

I can’t even dance to save my life, but not wanting to lose this job because Pule will kill me if I do, I entertain him.

A smile finds his face when I start to move my

hips, searching for a rhythm. His arm tightens around me, pulling me closer to him. Hungry eyes are staring at me, very suggestive.

“Don’t stop.” He beckons, I didn’t realise I had stopped.

It’s the way he’s touching me that makes me want to pull back, keep a distance between us. His face is on my neck, tongue licking my sensitive skin. This dance or whatever it is we're doing feels too erotic for public display. I can feel eyes on me, judging me.

“Funokuhle!”

I recognise that shrill voice. My heart stops and races, my vision turns into a black hole. I’m afraid to turn and find that he’s really here.

“Funokuhle.” The only man I gave permission to

call me that, repeats.

There's a peculiar stirring in my belly that forces goosebumps on my skin, harassing the melanin on my casing. Heart doing a funny dance, I jerk away from the oldie, and gradually spin on my heel.

There he is, in all his rugged mannishness, unkempt yet elegant. Vukuzakhe Khanyile is here.

How can I forget the undeniable murky characteristic? A demon with little to zilch traces of an angel, in my eyes, from what I have perceived and picked on in the time spent with him.

“You... you came?” I murmur, fleeting words

that instantly get lost in the wind. He's angry.

"Who are you?" Sir Ethan asks, almost sounding territorial. He has no clue that the man in front of me has every right to claim me as his own.

"Funokuhle." Vukuzakhe echoes, anger latched in his voice. I shift my gaze from him to Sir Ethan then him again. How do I get myself out of this disaster?

"The boy is with me." Sir Ethan says, gripping a hand around my arm. Vukuzakhe frowns, looking at the white man's hand. In a slow manner, he raises his eyes, glaring.

"I don't know who you are, but you're mistaken. Funokuhle is with me, you're stepping on my grounds."

The way Vukuzakhe says this is spine chilling, plus he speaks English as he should. I'm not surprised, his father had enough money to send

him to the best schools.

Sir Ethan looks at me, eyes narrowed in annoyance.

“You should’ve told me.” He says, and walks away an unhappy man.

Vukuzakhe played the name card, that’s how he won, while Sir Ethan called me boy. Or it must be his understated Thenos mannerism.

He’s looking at me like I matter, like I’m somebody in this lousy world. He’s standing too close, closer than Pule would agree, not as close as Sir Ethan was.

“Funokuhle, what is this? Why are you in a place like this?” He asks, his voice hard and snappish.

My wish to fade into oblivion is grunted when his smoky eyes capture mine in an enticing trance, only I fade into him and the warmth he

carries whenever our paths meet.

“I didn’t think... you would come.” I wanted him to come, I hoped he’d come for me.

“You’ve been expecting me.” His statement poses as a question, I shouldn’t have said that. Uttering the truth is a toxic trait I rather detest. “I had to come. Where have you been? Why did you leave?”

He continues when nothing leaves my mouth.

There’s something about the way he’s looking at me. Something that makes me want to break down and hope he catches me.

But that’s not me, it can never be me. I don’t break down, I’ve been through the worst and I’m still standing.

“What’s going on Funokuhle?” It’s something about the way he says my name that makes me fix my gaze on him. His voice is warm and comforting. “Why are you in a place like this?”

“Is it not obvious? I’m working.” I snap, respectfully.

Darkness clouds his eyes, they crescent and not into a smile. The clenching jaw tells me he’s not pleased.

“As what?” Is snapped, that I flinch at how aggressive he’s suddenly become.

Shadowy eyes judging the gear on my body, I know I look like a prostitute.

I’ve been looking like a prostitute since the day I accepted this job, it’s the club’s couture.

“Tell me.” He says softly, making me think he’s not really expecting a direct reply.

I could tell him that he just saved me, that had it not been for him, I would have had sex with a disgusting old white man. I could wrap my arms around him and thank him for coming right on time and ask him to take me away from this place. Away from Pule.

Not knowing where to keep all my pent up emotions, I swallow them down, and hide my disgraceful gaze from him.

Tears fall down from my eyes wetting my cheeks on their way to the ground, I did not intend for it to happen. I feel his hand on my shoulder, soft. Our chests align as he pulls me into his arms.

“Come with me.” He says. “I will take care of

you.”

I consider his words for a moment, desperate to be taken care of for once. My legs are shaky, stubborn and frozen on the ground. Maybe my head is scattered, I don't know if he will take care of me like he says he will.

My father failed to keep his promise, my brothers followed in his footsteps and Pule... he also broke his promise to take care of me. Am I that weak that I need taking care of?

Vukuzakhe makes a decision for me, circling his arm around my back to lead me away from the swarm of people, swaying like trees in the wind.

"You're not leaving my side this time," He says as we walk out of the club. I never want to come back here.

MATHONGA-

Seventeen

VUKUZAKHE-

It's been fourteen kilometres of dreaded driving... from Sandton to Northcliff. For a while, he thought he'd collapse before they get to their destination.

He's driving with one hand, the other is pressed on his lap. It feels numb, moving it would worsen the pain, the wound on his shoulder, hidden behind a black pullover.

A sickeningly metallic scent disturbs his nose, it's a vile pungent scent that stifles his senses and suffocates his breath. It's been there for a while. The car stops at a red light, he takes this opportunity to inspect the wound. Hissing in

pain, his fingers clasp the ripped flesh to check the damage.

They come back thick coated with blood that has spread into his shirt, the bright red has darkened, taking on a brownish hue. He can't have Funo worry about him, this is why he hasn't taken the jersey off.

He's ignored it for far too long. If he continues like this, he'll end up with an infection, if not at the hospital. There are wet wipes in the glove compartment, he uses them to clean his hands and continues to drive as if he's a healthy man.

On his way to Johannesburg from KZN, when driving became a hard task, he had to stop and nurse the wound. There was no time to find a clinic or a pharmacy.

Multiple calls from Bongiwe clawed at him,

although ignored, she wouldn't stop blowing up his phone. He hasn't bothered to open the missed calls and messages from her, like he'd told his father, Bongiwé is surrounded by people.

Funokuhle is his worry, he's finally with him. He can relax now and perhaps take care of himself for once.

There's a pharmacy in Mountain View Centre, Northcliff, minutes away.

His car stops at a red traffic light, third one on the row. A soft moan grips his attention, reminding him he's not alone. His eyes abandon the road, as he turns to look at the young man peacefully sleeping on the passenger seat of the black Hammer. His thin body now covered with Zakhe's coat.

For a second, he thinks he's losing his mind.

Chasing a man all the way to Johannesburg, it's crazy how a heart can control a person.

It didn't take long for Funokuhle to surrender to a deep slumber after they got into the car. Poor thing must be tired, Zakhe thinks.

The pharmacy is still open, he parks the car and makes sure not to make any sounds dashing out of the car. He has to hurry back, Funokuhle might panic when he wakes up and finds him gone.

8pm is approaching, the roads are bustling and overfilled with cars, rushing to different destinations.

The pharmacy is not packed, minutes later, he walks out with a bandage, a bottle of Dettol and some painkillers. He can see Funo from the exit, he's awake and looking like a lost puppy.

Zakhe picks up his pace, but a hand on his shoulder stops him. Protective instincts kick in, he's quick to turn around, furrowed brows at play.

The frown deepens at the sight of the machinelike, dark-skinned man in front of him. He's wearing a black, short-sleeved golf shirt, the chinos are the same colour as the shirt.

His broad shoulders are a table to thick-ribs, and black dreads hanging on the sides of his chiselled face. His rich and dominant demeanour making him appear dangerous.

First impressions give off an arrogant bastard, when he's nothing of the sort. Zakhe sneers at how the man raises his brows at him, as if he were one of his employees, eyes dark and lifeless.

"Kenneth! Do you make creeping up on people a

habit?" Zakhe asks, the man did scare him a little there. But he won't admit it.

"You look like you're about to have a heart attack." Kenneth's deliverance is slow, voice deep and syllables carefully conveyed. Hands now hidden in his pockets.

Zakhe tips his head a little, "You're a bastard." Is said in a more amused tone.

"That's a compliment coming from you, Zakhe." Kenneth's retort is followed by light friendly chuckles.

"Kenneth Mkhize, you old fool." Zakhe sings amusedly, it's his turn to place a hand on Kenneth's shoulder, it's brief.

"Vukuzakhe Khanyile, long time. What are you doing in Johannesburg?"

Zakhe can't tell him, it's too personal. They

know each other through business, have become acquaintances... it's not a ride or die type of relationship. The dark man's eyes shift past Zakhe's tall build, to find a curious young man inside a black Hammer staring back.

"Mathonga has lost weight, is he sick?" Kenneth. Zakhe frowns, falling into a tiny confusion.

"That's not him, the boy in the car is a friend." Zakhe explains, although he doesn't owe him one. "On that note, I can't stay and chat. I have something important to do."

"You're sweating." Kenneth is surprisingly observing too much, and his attentiveness has Zakhe furrowing his brows. He clears his throat.

"I'm fine," no he's not. He's in pain.

Kenneth shrugs.

“Can we meet, say Thursday? I’m going back to Izingolweni this weekend.” Zakhe, he’s been wanting that meeting with Kenneth for a while now.

“Is this about the cancelled meeting?” Of course it is, Zakhe doesn’t have to answer that. “I’m a busy man, Zakhe.”

“We all have families to take care of, Kenneth. That does not mean business has to stop.”

He gets another shrug from Kenneth, “Sure.” That’s the dark skinned man’s answer.

“Greet Zithobile and Dlozi for me.” Zakhe sends his salutation. A nod is Kenneth’s response, he turns to the opposite direction, and ambles away. Zakhe is the least bothered, knowing Kenneth is a man of a few words.

Big hazel eyes meet his when he jumps into the car, the door shutting lightly behind him. There's a staring contest, no one is bashful enough to look away.

"Pule brought me here... to Joburg." An unexpected confession. Funo's eyes dart away, as if shame has reproached him.

"Hey look at me." Zakhe mumbles, one of his fingers lifts Funo's chin so he's looking at him. The latter's intent stare is too deep, as if he's looking into Funo's soul. "Who is Pule to you?"

His eyes are expectant, and Funo... well he wants to give him what he's asking for. Darn the world if he could, his world.

"He's my boyfriend." Hesitantly, he gives in.

His confession pricks at Zakhe's heart, he's not

okay with this but he doesn't show it.

"I see," comes a tense tone. "Do you love him?"

Sure Zakhe has to ask, he'd take Funo away if he could, claim him as his own.

"I do, I think I do." Their eyes are still locked, and Zakhe is not sure what he's looking at. If he sees the truth in Funo's eyes. It hurts to hear him say he loves Pule, when what he wants is for Funo to love him and him alone.

"What if I say I want you to love me? What if I say I want to love you? Will you let me?" Stupid questions, but his heart is in control right now. Funo blinks, he scoots away from Zakhe with a clearing of the throat.

"You're married." Yes, Funo knows. The wedding band is evidence.

"I know." It's a truth Zakhe wakes up to everyday, a truth he can't escape. What he plans to do with his wife, he's not sure. What he

knows is that he deeply likes this man, more than anything and he wants him around for a very long time.

“What do you want from me?” Funo asks, confidently ogling at him.

“Your heart.” Zakhe’s answer is certain, he’s a man who knows what he wants.

“What about your heart? It already belongs to your wife. How will you give something that is not yours to give? What will your family say? Do they know you’re attracted to men?” Funo asks.

Large hands frame his face, “Hey, calm down. Tell me what you want, and I will give it to you.”

The comment is halfway between a question and a command, somehow, Zakhe sees the answer in Funo’s eyes.

“Safety.” Funo says.

That’s the first thing on his list, he’s never wanted anything so bad than to feel safe.

“Come here.” He is caught in Zakhe’s arms. “I will protect you from him, from anyone.” It’s a promise. His hands drift across Funo’s back in a soothing pattern.

“He’s going to come for me... Pule... he won’t give up.” The young man stammers the words out.

“Then I’ll kill him if he does.”

Funo stiffens in his arms. What does Zakhe mean he’ll kill him? Does he mean literally? The hug breaks, two men glance at each other. Zakhe’s hands become active, gliding up Funo’s neck. He clips open the necktie, and tosses it out the window.

“You don’t have to be afraid of anything, stop thinking too much. Don’t be so hard on yourself

and don't second guess yourself. You are worth it Funokuhle. You don't have to do anything you don't want, you don't have to live your life in fear." Sincerity radiates in his eyes, again, Funo finds himself locked in his gaze.

"He beats you up, doesn't he?" Zakhe adds.

Funo allows his eyes to fall, he finds it bewildering that this man can read him, yet it's so soothing. He nods, bashfully. He misses the anger on Zakhe's face as his eyes are trained downward.

"I have a house around here," Zakhe changes the topic, and starts the car. "We're going to stay there for a couple of days."

MATHONGA-

“What’s going on with you?”

“Baba?”

“Vukuzakhe told me you’re going through something.”

This is what he called me for? It’s hours later, he dragged me with him the entire day showing me his land and livestock. I’m not sure this father understands how boring old people are, I’d rather be talking with Nala, thank you. We’re standing outside the Kraal, looking over at the cows grazing about.

“I’m not sure you’re going to approve baba.” I know he won’t. Look at him frowning at me like I’m speaking Pedi.

“Approve what?” He asks.

Three goes nothing.

“I think I have a calling, the ancestors come to me in dreams.”

His frown deepens. What will I do with this old man of mine.

“Mathonga...”

“I know we’re church goers now, but that’s no excuse to turn our backs on them. They exist baba, I just think it’s time we acknowledge them.” Should I tell him what the old woman said? Maybe, it will shake that old Shembe hair of his, it’s suffocating his brain that he can’t even think straight.

“I had a dream, there was an old woman. She said you’re standing in their way and if you continue to do so, they will remove you.”

The look on his face tells me he knows what I’m talking about.

“It was just a dream, Ngwane.”

“No it wasn’t,” I will argue with him until all that

hair shades off. No way am I going to lose my life over this. “Why are you running from them baba? What are you hiding?”

The way his eyes widen, I’d laugh had this not been a serious matter. He’s definitely afraid of something.

“I have a meeting to get to, go back inside.” He dismisses and turns to walk away. That’s it... I wonder if Khethiwe knows a good hairdresser around here, course hair is not good for old people.

My day has been wasted away... for what? A stubborn old man who won’t listen to me.

Nala is still around I believe, I told her I was coming back. But baba kept me away the entire day, giving me no chance for an escape, it was on purpose I know it.

Throughout the day, I’ve been stealing glimpses

of her, working tirelessly alongside Khethiwe. It's late now. I plan on driving her home, we'll get to talk and hopefully she will open up.

My brothers are nowhere to be seen, Dalisile has been gone the entire day. I wouldn't be surprised if she has a second family somewhere in this country. I wouldn't put it past her.

The kitchen is noisy, that Nala and Khethiwe don't hear my footsteps when I walk in. I'm standing in the corner of the kitchen, silently watching them at work. Watching Nala rather.

"You're giving off serial killer vibes, stop staring."

Exactly, what does Ntaba plan to do with his life?

"I wasn't." I lie, blinking away from Nala's figure

situated by the kitchen sink. She's wiping dishes washed by Khethiwe, the two ladies seem to be getting along pretty well. I like what I see.

My brother does not get that I'm busy here, he joins me just to disturb my peace.

"It was at this moment the family realised that the last born was not normal. He had a demon of some sort, some would call it, but some said he was just a loner. The third born guessed it right, his little brother was a serial killer in the making. He'd find him standing in kitchen corners, glaring at young women, planning the perfect murder."

I'm flabbergasted by Ntaba's narration, he watches too much serial killer documentaries.

"Shut up, I'm not one of those freaks you're

always watching.” I chide him, but my dear brother seems to find me funny. He’s laughing like a little kid. Head thrown back and eyes watery. I can’t deal with his childish nature.

The sound of a breaking plate forces us to turn toward the sink, Khethiwe has broken another plate. She’s trembling, eyes wide and fixated on Ntaba. Nala drowns in confusion, her gaze moving from Khethiwe, to us and the broken pieces on the floor.

“What’s wrong with Khethiwe? Did you sleep with her?” I whisper to my brother who laughs in response. This one needs to go back to crèche.

He doesn’t answer my question, but rushes to help pick the pieces up. My gaze finds Nala, she’s looking back at me. She looks more at peace than she did earlier.

Okay... she’s coming over, leaving the lovebirds alone. I move to meet her, so she doesn’t think

I'm unwelcoming.

"Hi." Her salutation.

"Hi."

"Khethiwe says all servants live here, is it okay if I get a room as well? I wasn't appointed one and..."

"No, it's okay. It's perfect..." Her brows twitch at my abrupt reply. I sound too excited, don't I? "I mean, there's a vacant room. I'll ask Khethiwe to clean it up for you." I compose myself, hoping I don't look like an idiot.

"Thank you, I don't mind cleaning up myself." There's a small smile on her face, it disappears briskly only to be replaced by disgust. "I need a favour, my... uhh. My father won't believe me when I tell him that servants are expected to

live here...”

“Please stop referring to yourself as a servant.”
I tell her, I hate that word.

“He’s very strict. Is it okay if your father tells
him for me?”

“I’ll do it, give me his number.” I say, extending
my hand out for her phone.

“No.” She snaps, too quickly. “It has to be the
chief, he won’t believe it if it’s one of the sons.”

Something is going on with her father, the fear
emanating in her eyes is too loud. The disgust
on her face when she mentioned him...

“Okay, I’ll speak to ubaba.”

“Thank you,” and... she smiles. It’s beautiful.

“Do you want to take a walk? I’ll show you
around, Nkandla.” I ask.

She laughs, lightly. I figure she remembers referring to this place as Nkandla.

“Maybe another time, I’m tired, I want to sleep.” Nala declines, politely so.

“Sure, you can retire for the night.” I sound like a petulant child, but I don’t care. I summon a shaky Khethiwe, and ask her to accompany Nala to her room. She’s too fidgety, it’s suspicious.

My eyes are undisciplined, watching Nala walk out of the kitchen with Khethiwe.

My senses are hit by the smell of sorghum, banana with a mixture of chocolate. It’s Ntaba, his face too close to mine, observing, digging, prying. A box of banana flavoured Mageu in his hand, on the other is a packet of chocolate flavoured Toppers. This combination is a call for sickness, how does he even stomach that?

“You’re too close, your breath stinks.” My complaint proves useless when he laughs in my face, it’s not annoying but childish.

“You seem to forget I used to lick off yoghurt from your mouth when you were a baby and you loved it, you love the smell of my breath.”

He says this unbothered. Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard the story. Awkwardly, I rub the back of my neck. He has a way of making me feel shy.

“Did you sleep with Khethiwe?” This is a great escape for me, besides, I don’t want him asking me about Nala yet.

He doesn’t laugh this time, rather moves to settle down on one of the bar stools. I join him, waiting for an answer. He’s not going to give me a verbal response, I guess the head shake was enough.

I’m offered Mageu and biscuits, kindly, I decline. I don’t eat poison.

“Don’t you like Khethiwe?” Yes I’m still stuck there, I want to know the reason behind her sudden behaviours.

“Is there a reason not to like her?” He says and he’s so chilled about it.

“Then date the poor girl, let her live her fantasy.” I’m serious. Ntaba chucks four biscuits into his mouth, and downs the entire box of Mageu. My head shakes at how he looks like a monkey with that full mouth.

“Have you seen me, and have you seen her? An ant and an elephant would never share a bed, the elephant would surely squash the ant.”
Ntaba.

“You’re insane.”

“I’d split her in two.” He finishes, funny how he’s not arrogant about it. I think he’s genuine.

“Please tell me, you’re not talking about sex, hulk Hogan.”

“That’s what relationships are about, sex and more sex. God said be fruitful and multiply, what he meant to say was... have sex, people. Lots of it, and enjoy it.”

God forgive my brother, he has a brain of a child.

“So you are having sex, but with someone else? Khethiwe will die if she hears this.” I tell him, only to get an ignorant shrug from him. He really does not see Khethiwe that way.

“What about love?”

This I must hear.

“I wasn’t created to love, what is love anyway? And what about you?” He turns the tables.

When did it become about me? I’m trying to be Khethiwe’s wingman, here. Come on.

“What about me?” I ask.

“Are you going to marry two women? I’ve always known you aspire to be Vumile, one woman is never enough.” He knows about baba’s girlfriend?

“You know about Mashamase?”

Ndlela must have told him, he wasn’t here the day we found her cooking.

“She is a woman who’s looking for love, it is unfortunate she found it with Vumile. I wish her all the best though, Dalisile will not let that man go.” Ntaba.

“Sometimes I think you know too much for someone who lives in his own world.” My statement is laughed at.

“I also know he has a daughter.” Ntaba breaks the news.

“What?”

“Would you like to meet her?”

He's serious...

"Ntaba, I don't understand. We have a sister?
How old is she?"

"You stopped being the last born seventeen years ago." Oh my God. And why is he so chilled about this? "You can meet her, if you like."

"You've met her?"

"I meet her every day." He replies, finishing the last bite of the biscuits.

"How do you know all of this? How did you find her?" I have to ask, sometimes he knows too much it creeps me out. Ntaba stands, my gaze follows him to the fridge. He's going for round two of Mageu, wow...

"Your father thinks he's James Bond, even God fears Vumile Khanyile, honestly hats off." He says.

"This is shocking bhuti." How did he manage to

hide a whole human from us? He chuckles, turning his back to me. I think he's leaving.

“Ngafa, ngafel’ubala.”

Really? He’s singing to ‘Ngafa’ Shwi Nomtekhalala’s classic, as he walks out of the kitchen. Everything about Ntaba does not make sense. How is he so random?

MATHONGA-

Eighteen

FUNOKUHLE-

The drive to his home consisted of nothing but the radio presenter’s updates on music and the news. I preferred that over a conversation with him. I have revealed too much and I fear he will want to find Pule. That man is dangerous, he’s never going to leave me in peace. He’ll want to

hurt Vukuzakhe and I can't have that.

"This is your home." Vukuzakhe voices when we enter the house, making me feel somewhat strange.

We've just arrived at his house, it's beautiful. I expected a mansion, but it's simple, cosy and does not make me feel out of place. It's a moderate size, a single-story. The interior goes well with the house, earthy colours but very sophisticated.

"You're so sappy." I tell him, because well, this is something you'd hear out of a telemundo. I'm hearing him laugh for the first time, it's breathtakingly beautiful.

"Let me show you around."

This I did not expect, there really is no reason for him to show me around.

He takes me on a small tour, showing me the rooms. Four rooms later, we find ourselves in a stylish bedroom. The mustard colours give an impression of a woman's touch. Must be his wife.

"You can sleep in here, the bathroom is that side. There's a small cabinet in there, you'll find a pair of sleepwear." Points to a door opposite the queen-sized bed. "Don't worry, they will fit. I'll order us something to eat while you take a shower."

I want to ask if he's okay, he's sweating. Must be the jersey he's wearing. He turns and leaves before I get a chance.

A quick bath later, feeling refreshed and clean, I step out of the room. The house is so small that it's easier to find my way around.

A smell of KFC draws me toward the kitchen, and there he is... dishing up pieces of chicken, rolls and gravy on the side. He's changed his clothes as well, a dark shirt with matching pants. Pyjamas, I think. Unless he's the type that wears a two piece.

"Hi." I greet, I'm an idiot. He whips his head and a smile crosses his face. It almost knocks me off my feet, I have to practise my breathing so I don't fall.

"Hey, I hope you like KFC. I didn't know what to get and this was the first thing that popped up on the app." Typical.

"I don't mind." I join him, only to find that he's dished up one plate.

"Aren't you eating?" It will be weird for me to dine alone, while he's watching.

"I am." He points at a bowl not far from the

boxes of KFC. I don't know what I'm looking at, it does not look edible.

"It's Amasi and bread. Fried chicken gives me heartburn." He explains.

Someone call 10111, this is an insult to the Amasi company. There are four stools in this kitchen, yet he sits next to me. Lord he smells so good, fresh actually. I think he took a shower too. My heart is acting like a whore. Twerking to the scent.

"So, you've been searching for me?" I start a conversation, I think I'm chewing too loud. Better we talk than listen to the sound of food going down my throat.

"Yes, I hired someone to look for you." Quite blunt I see.

"And you found me." I'm glad he found me.

Why am I not freaked by his little obsession?

“I found you,” he says, eating like the food tastes so heavenly. It’s quiet again, sounds of spoons and bowls and me chewing take the centre stage.

“The sweater... uhh... he burnt it.” Here I am being casual again. I must be confessing like someone under oath, he will start thinking I’m weird. His brows raise in confusion, tongue flicking from side to side over his teeth. Clearly sweeping away access food.

“What?” He asks.

“The day I left with Pule at the hospital, I was wearing your sweater. He burnt it, he said it smelled like you.” A laugh escapes my mouth, I sound like a jealous lover. “Funny because he thinks he knows what you smell like.”

Stop it Funo...

There’s a smile on his face, in his eyes too. Me

and my big mouth.

“So, do you like my scent?” He asks.

Great, just great. I’m not going to answer him.

“That’s fine, my Minnie minion.” Vukuzakhe says, a stern expression on his face.

I clear my throat, an unexpected timidity coming forth. No one has ever claimed me as their own, not my father, and not Pule either. All this talk makes me soft and needy, I want to hide in him, under him, beneath his skin and possibly in this heart he’s offering.

The stern face opens up in a timid smile once I meet his eyes. “Whatever.” My reply is said to hide the heat burning my cheeks, if I were a few shades lighter, I’d be caught red handed. To stop myself from uttering nonsense, I take bigger chunks of the greasy chicken.

Vukuzakhe’s plate is empty, he stands to drop it in the sink. Oh! He’s washing it. Clean freak I

see.

“I want to go to bed, I’m tired.” I tell him when he turns to face me. It is the honest truth. I haven’t had proper sleep in weeks.

“Okay, let’s go.”

Huh! What?

“Are we sleeping in the same bed?” I ask, shock embracing me.

“I’m not leaving you alone, Funo,” and that’s non-negotiable. “You may go into the room, I just have to turn off the lights. Don’t worry about this mess, I’ll clean it up.” Again, the man is off before I can say anything. I lick my fingers clean and wipe the rest of the dirt on my shirt, terrible habit.

The guest bedroom is not far from the kitchen, I

won't go into his bedroom, it will be too awkward if I do that. The bed is neatly made, I remove the cushions and slide in, snuggling into the fluffy pillows. I have become too comfortable actually, it could be that I have shared something deep with him. My soul.

There's a slight knock at the door, he does not wait for an answer but let's himself in.

"Are you sleeping?" He can't see because I'm facing the wall.

"I'm not." I reply, my heart is acting funny. How do I stop it? I feel like a virgin bride getting ready for her deflowering. The other side of the bed is empty, I think he will get in there, but no. The man lies down behind me, pulling my back against his chest as if it's the most natural thing in this messed up country. Our bodies fit perfectly into each other.

"Relax." He says.

It's not a command, I hear it in his tone. His presence is comforting, wrapping me up from the inside out and for the first time in a long time, I feel safe.

BONGIWE-

He's not answering his phone, she's left multiple messages, cursing him. This can't be her life, it just can't. Her man is slipping from her hands and no matter what she does, she can't seem to get him to look her way.

Vukuzakhe is her life, she's not about to lose him, not to anyone.

She's standing by the window of her bedroom, eyes flitting back and forth. Her mind is not with her, it has followed her husband to wherever he went. Unlike him, it doesn't have a destination. She can't think beyond the ten tollgates.

Vukuzakhe is up to something, this, she is most certain of.

Brushing the thin white curtain aside, she narrows her eyes as she sees Vumile and Dalisile following each other to the main house. They appear to be quarrelling.

Curiosity whispers in her ear, urging her to go find out what's happening. She brushes it off, letting the fabric drop back into place. It's late anyway and she's not a friend of the dark.

So much is on her mind, she needs to release, speak to someone.

Her phone burns in her hand, as the urge to call her mother refuses to leave her alone.

She dials the number, walks to the bed and lowers herself there. Impatience teases her, waiting for her mother to answer, so typical of that woman... never available for her children.

“Ntombi.” Her mother’s voice irks her a second, it could be the cold tone she’s used.

“Vukuzakhe wants to leave me, mama.”

Bongiwe complains, ignoring her mother’s attitude. She’s not entirely sure about her claim, Vukuzakhe has not confirmed anything.

However, fear is an enemy that constantly bullies her into believing he’s going to leave her.

“Is it because of the pregnancy?” Her mother sounds calm.

“How do you know about that?” Her brows raise in suspicion, she does not recall telling her mother about the pregnancy.

“It’s all over the news and papers.” Her mother replies, reminding her daughter of her little dramatics. Bongiwe is taken back there, she had no other choice but to make a public statement . It was the only way her husband would accept the baby he said he didn’t want.

That's what she thought, at least.

"He never wanted kids and I thought maybe he'd change his mind after finding out I'm carrying his baby. I thought he'd tap into his loving side. He was once a loving man, mama. He took care of me and my needs. Now he wants to leave me, I can't allow that. Vukuzakhe is not leaving me, mama. I will never allow it."

"I hear you my child, but an unplanned pregnancy is not the way to fix a marriage. It worsens the situation. You can't use a baby to fix a man."

"I have done nothing of the sort, but fight for my marriage. Falling pregnant is the only weapon I can use, Vukuzakhe is changing mama. He doesn't look at me the way he did back then, I'm not sure he still loves me. There's another woman, I can see it in his eyes."

“Have you asked him if he still loves you?”

That’s a good question. Bongwiwe sighs into the phone. Maybe she would’ve asked him if he actually gave her the time of day.

“Didn’t you hear what I said mama, he doesn’t love me anymore. This is why I fight him back.”

That’s all she’s going to tell her mother, she won’t mention that she stabbed her husband today because that’s not what a girl from a respectable family does.

“Don’t tell me that you put your hands on him.”
A reproaching tone from her mother.

“It’s the only way he’ll listen to me, Vukuzakhe frustrates me so much. What kind of a man is he? Why can’t he be like ubaba? Love me like I’m the only woman in the world.”

That’s always been her fantasy, ever since she was a child. She always wanted to marry a man like her father and when she found Zakhe,

Bongiwe thought God had finally smiled upon her.

Becoming Mrs Khanyile was a dream every maiden in Izingolweni dreamed of, she was finally going to live in that homestead, leading along Dalisile Khanyile. Izongolweni's most envied woman.

Her dream came crushing down when she realised her husband was not the Romeo she always dreamed of.

"Bongiwe, you do not hit a man. Not every man is like your father, and who says he's perfect? That man has made his own share of mistakes."

"Still mama, Vukuzakhe is not half the man my father is. He's a failure."

Anger finds her just from mentioning his name.
"I want to hate him so bad."

“That is one thing you are not going to do. What will happen to you if he divorces you?” Her mother has a point. She can’t let it happen. Letting go of the Mrs. Khanyile title would be a mistake one too many.

“I have to go.” She drops the call, not giving her mother a minute longer. She checks for messages from her husband, there’s nothing. He hasn’t opened the ones she sent on the green app. Flying down to Joburg won’t be a bad idea.

Nala-

Asking this favour from Mathonga is the only way I can escape Petros. He wants to help, he’s offering the help I desperately want. But how do I accept it without putting the twins’ lives in danger. First I have to convince Petros to bring

them back, then I'll tell Mathonga everything. I think I can trust him, his presence comes with a sense of tranquillity.

The time on my phone says it's twenty minutes after 10pm, I am dead tired. Khethiwe and I worked together to clean this place. The rondavel is very spacious, it accommodates a bed... a one seater couch, plus a small shower and a toilet. I can actually breathe.

For the first in my life, I can be in a room at night and be able to breathe.

It's unfortunate that I have to call Petros, the last thing I want to hear is his voice. He'll take it out on the twins if I don't call to update him.

Fear clings on to me when I start dialling his number, bloody fool does not let the phone ring more than once. He's been waiting for my call.

“Where the hell are you, Nala?” He’s shouting.

“I can’t come, apparently servants have to stay in the premises. The chief said it’s the rules.” I lie, I don’t mind being the mother of all lies as long as I stay away from him.

“That’s crazy Nala, what will I do with myself when you’re not here?”

Kill yourself.

“I don’t make the rules, you sent me here to do your dirty job, remember?” I snap just a little, my hatred for him wanting to burst out of my bones. I despise speaking to him, I should be dropping the call.

“Fine, but I want you home on weekends.” He’s growling like the animal he is. “Don’t fall in love with that boy, your job is to kill him. I don’t care how you do it, I want him dead and make it look like an accident.”

“It’s not going to be easy, I can’t just kill

someone. Humans are not cockroaches.”

“Yey, yey, yey. Don’t give me excuses, my boss wants that boy dead. Or the twins will be joining their mother in the afterlife.” The fool is still shouting.

The twins are the only reason I’m here, they are my life. I have no other choice but to accept this.

Petros wants that innocent man dead, and they are using me as bait and their weapon. I don’t know who his boss is, and why they want the chief’s son dead. He wouldn’t tell me anything, that’s the thing about Petros, he demands and expects you to act without asking questions. God forgive me for thinking I could do this.

“It will take some time, he’s always surrounded by his brothers.” I tell him.

“I don’t care Nala, kill Mathonga, or I kill those two rats you call brothers.” He roars and drops the call on me. There has to be a way to fix this

mess without getting anyone killed. My brothers and Mathonga.

MATHONGA-

Nineteen

VUKUZAKHE-

Really! Now I must send you an email to communicate with you? Answer my calls Vukuzakhe.

He woke up to this email from his wife, a throbbing headache and a sore shoulder. He thinks the wound is not so bad, going to the hospital would be dramatic of him. This is why he dressed the wound himself last night, after a shower.

It hurt holding Funokuhle in his arms, the pain

on his shoulder would not leave him alone and that invited insomnia. He didn't mind, it gave him an opportunity to watch the boy sleep and muse upon this crazy decision he's made. Date to marry, perhaps.

Crazy thought I said.

Not only is the water cold, the house too feels cold this morning, there's load shedding. He's not sure what time Eskom decided to be ruthless, it was in the early hours of the morning though.

He's ready to go out, an artless couture draped on his macho body. Jeans and a t-shirt. He'd be more comfortable in the clothes he has back home, the terrible ones Bongiwe hates.

"But this is Joburg, you can't dress like you're going to herd your father's cows. Your image has to match the businessmen in this place." Bongiwe would say. He doesn't care, they don't pay his bills.

Funo is fast asleep, he thinks of waking him up to tell him that he's heading out to a meeting. Then again, it would be too harsh of him. The man did say last night that he was tired.

His car keys, wallet, and cell phone are in his hand as he diverts toward the bedroom exit.

"Morning." An incoherent voice slithers his way, and stops him from taking another step. He turns to find the minion sitting up and wiping his fatigued face with the shirt on his body. Zakhe wants to chortle at the sight, he's seen Ntabezikude do this, a habit of his since early

childhood.

“Did I wake you?” He keeps his voice low. The young man shakes his head.

“There’s no electricity, you’ll have to eat cold food. I’ll bring something on my way home.” Home! He says it so casually, like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“You’re going out?” A frown creases on Funo’s forehead, he didn’t think he’d be left alone considering a crazed man might be looking for him. Might is taking it too lightly, Pule has probably turned Joburg upside down.

“I have a meeting, I won’t be long.”

Worry clings on to Funo’s features, it’s gone in a flash. The intense eye contact that constantly feels too deep is broken as he blinks away from

Zakhe's deep-set eyes.

"He won't find you here, Funokuhle." He's talking about Pule, it angers him how the teacher has drilled fear in this innocent young man.

Funo shrugs his skeletal shoulders, "I know." Bravery is evident in his eyes.

Zakhe's lips twitch with pride. He sits on the edge of the bed, grabs his hand and places a swift kiss on it.

"That's my brave good boy." Another kiss, it does nothing to make Funokuhle blush.

He's staring back, facial appearance resembling a deer caught in headlights. His tongue slowly moves across his lower lip, leaving it wet.

Zakhe observes him, carefully and unhurriedly. Watching every switch on his morning face, his stomach swirling like a whirlwind.

"Are you trying to seduce me?" Vukuzakhe

croaks, his arm firmly circling Funo's waist. The boy loses his breath for a millisecond as his bony chest collides with a gorilla-like chest. Zakhe's eyes travel to the lips he's so desperate to taste, the desire too strong. But he does not act on it.

"I wouldn't dream of it." Funo teases, gently pushing away from him. "Plus... I'm not a kid, you don't have to baby me"

The declaration has Zakhe clearing his throat, bashfully, he rubs the back of his neck.

"Okay Mr. Not a kid. Call me if anything happens." He stands ready to leave.

"I don't have a phone," he says it so quickly, giving Zakhe the impression that he does not want him to go.

"I won't be long then, just don't open the door for anyone."

“I can take care of myself, don’t worry.” Perhaps he says this because he sees the worry on Zakhe’s face.

Nevertheless, this is something Vukuzakhe would like to hear, a strong willed Funokuhle who does not need rescuing.

Hating goodbyes, Zakhe strides out of the bedroom without looking over at Funo. The sooner he’s out of here, the sooner he gets back.

It’s a weekday, so the busy roads are expected. He finds himself in slow traffic, busses, taxis and small cars heading to different destinations. He might not get back as quickly as he thought.

The sound of the radio is overpowered by his ringing phone, he reaches over to the universal car holder and answers his mother’s call.

“Mother?”

“Is this how you answer my calls, Vukuzakhe?”

“What is it mother?”

“Your wife tells me that you’re in Joburg. Am I that bad of a mother that you saw it fit to keep me in the dark?”

“Not everything is about you.”

“You see, this is the attitude that pisses me off.” Dalisile sizzles, sometimes she sounds scarier than Vumile when angry and Zakhe... well he cannot grasp why his mother is infuriated by his trip. “When are you coming home? Should I fly down there? Who’s taking care of you over there? You should’ve taken your wife with. It’s not like she has anything to do this side.”

“Mother please, stop.” He interjects, fighting the temptation to grunt at the woman who gave

him life. “You don’t need to come here, neither does Bongiwe. I’m fine.”

“Okay, but what about me? You don’t think about me when you make such decisions. Since your brothers died, you’ve stopped caring. You even cancelled your birthday Vukuzakhe, the happiest day of my life...”

“We are not having this conversation mother, goodbye.” He presses the red button to end the call.

What the heck does she mean the happiest day of her life? She lost two sons on his birthday, he lost his brothers.

Vukuzakhe was broken beyond repair, the pain of losing them suffocated him.

The birthday parties stopped, but each year on his birthday, his mother would buy a fancy cake and sing a birthday song.

He’d lose his mind, screaming and crying for

the ones he lost. Crying because of his mother's ignorance. It was years later that his family came to understand that they should never bring his birthday up.

Till this day, Zakhe curses that day. Instead of remembering it as his birthday, he remembers it as his brothers' death anniversary.

9:06am finds him in Mountain View Shopping Centre, MV café is where the meeting is held. It's still morning, the place is not as crowded as he would hate.

He's approached by a waiter upon arrival, flashing a customer friendly smile. He dismisses her by telling her there's someone waiting for him, there is no need for a table.

As he approaches a table where the man is situated, only then does he spot a lady seated with him. She could be in her late twenties, he

chooses not to dwell much into it.

“Mr. Khanyile.” The man is on his feet offering a handshake which is accepted without words.

“This is Anele, she’s a forensic psychologist.” He’s referring to the smiling woman beside him.

Zakhe refuses to look her way, his time is being wasted here. This man, a private investigator, the man he had sent Funokuhle’s name and surname to was given a task a month ago. A whole bloody month to find information on someone. He’s not happy about this.

“Dlomo,” and that’s all he has to say. Dlomo knows what is expected of him.

“I’m sorry it took so long, my son was sick and...” Dlomo’s useless excuse as Zakhe sees, bores him to death. He’s the first to settle down, followed by Dlomo and Anele.

“I don’t pay you to give me excuses, Dlomo.” Zakhe interjects with a raise of the hand. “How long does it take to investigate a person?”

Four weeks is too long for a man who is trained to pry on people’s lives. Dlomo gulps, eyes flickering from Zakhe to a dazed Anele. A waiter approaches to take their orders.

The poor guy will not be getting a tip today, he is sent away with nothing written on his note pad.

There’s an A4 white envelop on the table, which Dlomo slides across. Zakhe gives it a brief look, before furrowing his brows at the private investigator. Displeased does not begin to describe how he feels at this moment.

“I couldn’t find anything crucial on Ntandoyethu Sangweni. He’s clean, mother died when he was a baby. He’s gay and lives with his father and...”

Argh! This is too much. He should've stayed home with Funo, maybe cuddled him back to sleep or something.

"Tell me something I don't know." Zakhe snaps.

"The teacher is the one you should be worried about, his name is Pule Shabangu. He's a child predator, preys on students who are vulnerable and manipulates them into sleeping with him."

He hears what Dlomo is saying but it's not registering.

"Okay, what does that have to do with what I asked from you?" Zakhe.

"The boy was fifteen when he and the teacher began a relationship. He's attached to him, basically." Dlomo. Still not making sense, in fact, Zakhe is more confused.

"I brought Anele to explain everything to you."
Dlomo.

It frustrates Zakhe further, now he's going to be schooled on whatever this is. Couldn't Dlomo come up with something simple? Like Pule is a fugitive or he has three days to live.

"Firstly you need to understand what grooming is." Anele takes over. "It's an action taken by a paedophile to prepare a child for a meeting with the intention of committing sexual offence. Predators lookout for a risk. 'How risky is it that I am going to be caught? Am I able to groom this person? Am I able to groom the environment around this person? Can I manipulate them? Are they having problems at home? Are they missing something I can offer? Vulnerability, isolation, risk—all these factors are considered when selecting their victim."

A cold glint flashes past Zakhe's eyes, "You're

saying Funokuhle is a victim of child molestation?”

The lady nods.

“Yes.”

“That man needs to be arrested.” If stress needed a place to stay, then it has found a home in him. The load seems to intensify every day. His mother constantly expecting him to be the perfect son, his father wanting him to set a good example for his brothers, Bongwiwe fighting him for god-knows what and now this.

How much can he carry?

“You’re absolutely right, Mr. Khanyile.

Ntandoyethu was too young to understand or see his teacher’s intentions. The emotional impact of being groomed by a teacher is huge, often the first sexual interaction that teenagers had. They may not understand what’s going on

when it's happening, many may not understand they are being abused. Ntando has been with this man for nine years. Leaving him won't be easy, he's made Ntando think that life without him is impossible. Made him believe that he's the only person in this world who loves him. He's lived with this notion for nine years. Even if they part ways, the young man will always feel attached to the teacher. If his environment does not change, he'll want to go back where he feels like he matters because these predators imprint such thoughts in their minds."

How do you swallow such a heavy load? He knows he needs to fix this, get rid of Pule if he has to. The question is, how?

VUMILE-

He hardly caught any sleep last night, spent most of the time thinking about Mathonga and this thing he wants the family to venture in, this thing he's been running away from for years.

It's made him grumpy and very unapproachable, his sons know when to stay away.

Ndlela has been giving him unwavering stares, in his mind he's convinced that his father is stressed because of the woman he's seeing outside his marriage. It's not that he's a fan of his parents, he just hates everything that's happening around him.

People think their lives are perfect, little do they know that the Khanyile brothers lack the love of a mother and as far as Ndleleni is concerned, he lacks his father's attention. Then again, not everything is about him.

“I need you to sign some papers,” Ndleleni utters as he tramples into his father’s office.

His grumpiness overweighs his father’s. They haven’t buried the hatchet since that day Ongezwa Sangweni came to their premises to snitch on them. Vumile’s anger might have worn-out, but Ndleleni is not a man that easily forgets.

He tosses a file on his father’s desk, to him, it’s respectful enough.... As long as he didn’t throw it at his face. Vumile is greatly displeased, his features are a show and tell.

These are days he chooses peace, any other day he would’ve carpeted him and sent him home to think about his bad behaviour.

“Are you okay?” Vumile asks, as he pages through the file, leaving his initials where he should.

“I’m fine.” Comes a soft answer.

“Let’s have lunch, I miss you.” He does, it feels like he hasn’t seen his son in years.

“Sorry, I have other plans.”

No, no, he’s not sorry. Spoiled brat.

Vumile drags a heavy sigh, frustration taking over his calm emotions.

“I’m trying ndodana, at least acknowledge my hard work.”

He knows this one is the most hard headed after Ntabezikude, that one doesn’t even bother listening to him. He lives in his own world where nothing and nobody matters.

“I’m also trying to stay sane, being your son comes with a lot of pressure, baba. You expect too much from us, the only one who has it easy is Mathonga because he’s your favourite. The rest of us have to carry a golden image just so

you approve. You make mistakes and burst with anger when reproach. But when I make mistakes, I'm the world's worst son."

It's basically how he feels, being side-lined because you are not Vukuzakhe or Mathonga. Vumile stands to meet his height, he needs to see the truth in his son's eyes.

"Is this about you stabbing Sangweni's son? What did you want me to do Ndleleni? Throw a party after you almost killed a man?"

"No, at least don't embarrass me in front of our enemies. You didn't bother to hear my side of the story. Do you know how that made me feel?"

"Tell me, maybe I can make things right."

Vumile articulates.

He loves his sons to death, if anything they have made him who he is today. Without them, he

might as well give his life.

When Ndleleni shrugs, face emotionless and eyes showing no hope for them. Vumile's world comes crushing down. He's losing control, a grip over his family. Perhaps he's too focused on keeping his closet shut, keeping Nandi and Zamangwane out of sight that he's neglected his sons without realising it.

"Maybe it's too late." Ndlela murmurs, retrieves the file from the table and scampers out. The young man's body collides with his mother's, Dalisile grunts in pain while Ndlela clicks his tongue in disgust.

"And then? What's eating him up?"

Not that she cares, she's frowning her way toward her husband, hands gently dusting her expensive yellow-mellow two piece suit.

“Do we have a meeting?” Vumile questions, taking back his seat. To say he’s now in a foul mood would be an insult to the pent up emotions whirling inside him. He’s livid, vexed, and tangled.

“Why did you let Vukuzakhe go to Joburg?” She starts, arms folding across her small chest.

Exactly, how old is this Vukuzakhe?

“Your question does not make sense, Dalisile.” He has no time for this.

“Vukuzakhe can’t be going on holidays, he’s got a company to run. Remember he’s taking over from you very soon and...”

“Very soon?” Vumile is not surprised, this is not the first time she’s treaded this path.

“Argh!” A puff and a huff from the queen, she throws her arms. Her husband is exaggerating like he does with everything. “You know what I mean.”

“Vukuzakhe is a grown man, he knows what he’s doing.” That’s all he’s giving her, she wants to probe further. Her son is not with her and it’s not okay. Vukuzakhe has to be here, all day every day—breathing the same air as her. What in God’s name is he doing in Joburg, anyway?

“So, what are you going to do about it? He won’t take my calls anymore.”

That’s because you’ve been pestering the man. The desperation in her eyes annoys him. Does this woman know she birthed other sons besides Vukuzakhe? Surely she can’t be this delusional.

“Nothing,” and that’s stamped, signed and sealed. “Sit down, I want to talk to you about Mathonga.” Vumile.

Oh great! Her favourite topic.

There is no love between them anymore, but

this man gives her chest pains whenever he can. She pulls a chair and settles down opposite her husband.

“What is it now? I have things to do, Vumile.”
And a life to live, Mathonga is such a waste of space. She’ll never acknowledge him, no matter how much Vumile forces her.

“Mathonga has a gift, Dalisile. It’s something we’ve known for a while now but chose to ignore.”

Fuck her life! She’s half through a yawn when he finishes his speech. This man refuses to engage in a conversation about Vukuzakhe, but bolts like lightning where Mathonga is concerned.

“What are you talking about?”

Oh she knows what he’s talking about, pretending is a skill she’s mastered over the years.

“Don’t patronize me, Dalisile. You know what I’m talking about.” Vumile balls his hand into a fist and lightly slams it on the table. The queen is not startled at all, she scoffs at his dramatics. It drains him how unfeeling she is towards Mathonga.

“Maybe we should tell him the truth, I fear the ancestors will show him somehow. He won’t take it well, Dalisile.” Vumile pleads, something he scarcely does, especially to this woman.

“So today you decide it’s time to tell him because it suits you?” Dalisile.

“Not because it suits me, it’s about time we do it. Mathonga is old enough to understand certain things. He’s going to take over the throne one day and...”

She must’ve misunderstood, or he’s speaking Japanese.

“What did you say?”

Now Missy here has forgotten her husband does not repeat himself, hence the penetrating gaze.

For a millisecond, time seems to pass in slow motion while she waits for him to say something. Anything will do, anything but what he previously said.

“That will not happen, I won’t allow it.” She yells, making a mistake of pointing a finger at him.

“It’s not your decision to make.”

“I don’t care, you can’t do that to my son. Vukuzakhe is taking over from you, not that... that boy. He’s your first born, Vumile. Have you forgotten that?”

How can he, when it’s all she’s been talking about for over thirty five years?

“Vukuzakhe’s place is here, running the

business. He won't be able to handle the throne."

"And that boy will?"

"All my sons have different responsibilities in this family, Vukuzakhe is a businessman. He does it so well, he's happy here. You wouldn't know because you're so self-absorbed."

He's not far from the truth.

Dalisile shakes her head, eyes narrowed at her husband. "Say whatever you want to say about me, I don't care. What I will not accept is you trashing my son. You cannot strip him of his rights, he deserves the throne and you know that. And you... you owe me after what your crazy brother did to me."

Ouch! She's off-ramping now, Vumile's eyes widen with shock. This is not how he intended his day to go, being reminded of the cousin he

once loved like a brother.

Phumlani was his first cousin, they grew up together in the same house along with his other brothers. He went crazy after a girl in the village accused him of rape, the case didn't make it to court nor out of Izingolweni.

The only judgement he got was from the girl's mother after her daughter took her own life, the trauma driving her to it.

"You will never know peace, I swear on my daughter's grave." The village girl's mother had screamed these words at Phumlani.

No traditional healer was able to reverse the curse, and having done all they could, Phumlani was left to face the consequences of his actions.

“Dalisile?” He’s shocked to say the least, a thin line cutting his forehead in half. It’s been so long since they’ve spoken about this.

When she told him she was pregnant and that she wanted to get rid of it, he forbid her from doing so. Dalisile is a woman who does whatever she wants, but if her deflating marriage is at risk, she’d submit like a perfect wife.

“He ruined me, Vumile. Your brother raped me and you forced me to keep the baby. Not only that, you expect me to love him.”

She stands, her hands trembling as she focuses on her breathing. It’s not every day that she becomes a victim to weakness, she needs to snap out of it.

The terrible ordeal resulted in her detaching from her sons, but of course she needed an anchor to hold on to and her first born was the perfect match.

“This is all on you, everything. You should’ve banished that boy like you did your crazy brother. We wouldn’t be having this conversation if you were smart.” Dalisile.

“Mathonga is innocent in all this, he didn’t ask to be born. It’s not fair that you punish him for something he knows nothing about.” His voice is compliant, but there are traces of aggression in it.

“Say whatever you want Vumile, I will never accept that boy. Do you hear me? And you will not sideline my Vukuzakhe, or all hell will break loose. You think you know me wena, Vumile. Try me and I will show you what I’m made of.”

Her eyes are intent on his wild stare, heart

beating like a hammer in her chest. She knows Vumile is not a man you would cross and get away with it, her advantage at this point is that she is the mother of his children.

“Nonsense.” Dalisile storms out, leaving her husband still seated on his chair, face glazed with disbelief.

MATHONGA-

Twenty

MATHONGA

Warmth oozes into my heart at the thought of seeing Nala again, a week later and it's safe to say she is slowly letting me into her space.

She's very protective of herself and defensive most of the time, she is usually far removed from everything unless she is identifying a

threat coming her way.

This has me treading carefully around her.

It wasn't easy convincing her to spend her lunch hours with me, we've been at it for days now.

An hour with her is more than enough, I'd spend more time with her at home, if only she didn't have work to do.

Bongiwe overworks the poor girl, treating her the same way she treats Khethiwe. Intervening is a waste of time, my sister in-law listens to no one, but herself.

My phone beeps with Amandla's signal as I drive out the Company lot, a silent escape is what I made. I'll think about work when I get back.

*I'm not feeling well, please come and fetch me.

I'm at work.*

Amandla's message reads.

I only have an hour to spare, dividing it in two will not work. What do I do? Amandla is a nice girl, yes I'm still keeping her around. A huge part of me loves her, she's been there for me more times than I can count.

Honestly, what I feel for her differs from what I feel for Nala. I can't explain it. It's hard to ignore Nala, there's a pull. An unquestionable one.

Stopping at a red light, I text back.

I'm coming.

The petrol station is not far from where I am, in less than three minutes I park outside and there she is, standing by the door. Head dipped on her phone. I don't know how many times I have to warn her about this trait of hers.

Amandla would stare at her phone longer than she should, forgetting her surroundings.

She doesn't see me when I step out of the car and amble her way.

"Wesisi."

Her head flips up, eyes wide with fright.

"Mathonga, you scared me." Her voice shudders out of her mouth.

"That's because you were so engrossed on that thing. You know it's not safe to get lost in your phone in public? Anything can happen, Amandla."

"Calm down, nothing will happen to me. My

boyfriend is a seer, he'll see it coming." She smiles, widely.

I don't know which boyfriend she's talking about, I'm not a seer.

"Hau? When am I meeting this seer boyfriend of yours?" She laughs at my reply, throwing her warm arms around my neck. The hug is reciprocated. "What's wrong? You said you're not feeling okay?"

"I just wanted to see you."

"So you lied to me?" I ask stepping away from her.

This is not Amandla, she's not prone to telling lies.

"No... I ... I just didn't tell you the truth." Her

lashes flap, tears welling up behind her pupils. She is not a crier, what's wrong with her today?

"You can't blame me, Mathonga." She sniffs.

"I'm your girlfriend, but you've been ghosting me. Don't you love me anymore? Is there another girl?"

This is not a subject to engage in, in public.

"Let's get in the car." My offer.

With my hand on the small of her back, I lead her toward the car. Trudging without knowing where I put my feet. Strangely, for the few seconds we were standing, I hadn't been aware of their existence until they lifted. It takes less than a minute, a mere minute to run around the car and enter through the driver's side, and Amandla is lost in her phone again.

"Is that a new phone?" First time seeing it.

She nods, not granting me the attention I deserve. I drove here to see if she's okay and

this is what I get?

“Amandla, put that away please.”

“Sorry.”

She’s doing that flap thing again with her lashes, puppy eyes glancing over at me. She knows which buttons to push. I don’t say a word until she locks the screen and pushes the phone into her bag.

“My mother bought it for me.” Oh! We’re still talking about the phone. “Sometimes I love that woman so much, sometimes I don’t. She makes me angry most of the time, mostly because she’s not around.”

Amandla is rambling now. She’s the only person I know who has mixed feelings about their mother. What if she’s bipolar?

“Nothing compares to the love of a mother.”
Amandla likes to say.

Every so often she forgets I cannot relate. Sure I have a mother, but an absent one.

Since we’re going to talk about her mother, my ghosting her has been forgotten, might as well drive her home.

“She’s coming for a visit next week, her boss is finally giving her the weekend off.” She continues.

I don’t care, she knows I don’t care, yet she insists on telling me about the woman who mothered her.

The radio is not loud enough to drown her voice, and it’ll be rude of me if I turn it up. I don’t want to be reminded that my mother failed in

nurturing me.

“Can we go somewhere to get some food? I haven’t eaten since morning.” That’s her.

She sounds excited, unfortunately, I’ll have to decline. Nala is probably waiting for me at the park. I have forty five minutes before I go back to the office. Hlabela and Ndleleni aren’t kind since Vukuzakhe is away. They are slave drivers, those two.

“I have to go back to the office, maybe next time.”

Girlfriends are a lot of work. This one to be specific. What am I going to do with her?

“Really, Mathonga? What are we doing if we’re not going to spend time together? I feel like I’m in a long distance relationship.”

Regret scrapes through my bones, watching her slump down on the car seat. She folds her arms on her chest, eyes fixed ahead.

“I’ll make it up to you, Amandla. I promise.” I have to keep this promise.

I can be an ass sometimes, a huge example is me thinking I can entertain two girls at the same time. Maybe I want to keep them both, no long term decisions yet.

Time is against me, Amandla was still sulking when I dropped her off at her grandmother’s house. Sending me off with a fake smile, I’ll find ways to pacify her.

NALA-

Sis Bongiwe will kill me today, I asked Khethiwe to cover up for me just in case I’m late. And seeing that Mathonga is not here yet, I will most

probably be late. To be safe, I have to leave here at 1:55pm.

I don't blame Mathonga though, he's a businessman.

I can't expect him to leave the office for my sake, the least he could've done was tell me that this... whatever this is has been cancelled. The man is nowhere in sight.

Why am I even opening up to him? This gender is a different breed, a dangerous breed. God didn't mean to give them power, it must have happened by mistake. They have taken that power and used it to destroy women, the ones they should be protecting.

Maybe I shouldn't be here, I definitely shouldn't be here. What do I want to gain from spending time with him?

“I’m sorry for keeping you waiting.” A voice has me gasping. No longer staring into thin air, I open up to the world around me, meeting an apologetic look on his face.

“I thought you were not coming.” I think I’m glad, he came.

But I have to leave room for disappointment. Mathonga perches himself beside me, he’s carrying food in a blue plastic bag.

“No matter how long I keep you waiting, I will always find my way to you.” He says, casually.

My heart should not be reacting like this, it feels wrong and right at the same time.

The man is smiling at me as if he did not just make my heart do extraneous things.

“I brought food.” He hands me a white container, my mouth immediately waters at the smell of tripe. This is what we have most of the time, a lady not far from this bench sells the best pap

and tripe.

“What did I miss?” He asks, looking around the park, channelling his inner child who wants nothing but to smile and enjoy the day.

We usually spend most of the time watching people, you'd be surprised by how interesting they are. It's mostly fascinating for me, a prisoner of Petros. Freedom is something I will never take for granted.

Like that time I had gone clubbing in Durban with a friend, Petros was away for a few days and I needed to be away from that hovel he calls a house. I would've packed my things and left if he hadn't taken Thabani and Thobani with him. That bastard has a special place in the deepest pits of hell.

“See that couple there?” My finger navigates toward a young couple who are obviously over the moon with happiness. “He just proposed.”

“Really and... did she say yes?” He doesn’t sound enthusiastic, I can’t fault him. It’s not his engagement.

“Yeah clearly. Look at them, have you ever seen two people so happy? They have been like that for the past 15 minutes.” I don’t get anything back from him, he’s quiet. Eyes on the food in his lap, I want to ask what the problem is. Then again, I’d be prying.

“If I were here, we would have acted it out.” He speaks after a long minute. “It would’ve been fun, right?”

Mathonga is like a child, he’s smiling now. Strange creature.

“Yes, anything is fun with you.” I reply, nothing

but the truth. This time he smiles with his eyes.

“They kind of remind me of Vukuzakhe and Bongiwe. They used to be so in love, the envious kind of love. They had me believing this marriage thing really works. They were happy together. For me it was like my own personal cinema, I loved seeing them like that.”

His juvenile mood has changed, sadness lies in his eyes.

“Well, that was before... things are different now. My brother has changed, they both have.”

It's a good thing he's not crying, I'm terrified of a grown man's tears. How do you console these creatures? There must be classes where they teach these things.

“I know how it's like to have things change for

the worst, I've been there and it hurts like a bitch."

Oops! I didn't mean to use that language. Mathonga receives it positively, his quiet laughter blesses me.

"My mother died when I was very young. She decided one day, that life was not worth living and left."

"I'm sorry, Nala."

I'm not sorry that she's gone, I'm angry. Life would be different if she didn't leave me.

"You need to forgive her, Nala. No one can control death. It does as it pleases. If it were up to your mother, she would've chosen to live... for you."

He speaks as if he sees the rage steaming inside me.

“Dying is a messy and often painful process, I can tell you right now that your mother fought to live.”

“How do you know?” I snap, and place the food on the empty space beside me. I’ve lost my appetite.

“I just know, you’re only caging yourself by holding a grudge. Let her go, let her rest in peace.”

Mathonga doesn’t understand. If he knew what I go through in the hands of that monster Petros, he wouldn’t be telling me this.

The least my mother could’ve done was find her relatives, she couldn’t have been the only child of her parents. Whoever they are. But no, she left. She left a young girl with her two babies.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about Mathonga, life is not easy for all of us. While you don’t know a day of struggle, the rest of us fight to stay alive. We fight to keep our loved ones safe, it’s easier to say the things you’re saying to me when your life is heaven on earth.”

I think I’ve hurt him, his eyes are different. I can’t point out exactly what’s in them, but I know pain when I see it. I am pain.

“No one has it easy, Nala. It’s a lie that money buys happiness, don’t believe that nonsensical concept.”

He clears his throat, and fixates his gaze on mine.

“Maybe I didn’t articulate myself well, what I’m

trying to say is we all get recycled at some point. That's life. Unfortunately it doesn't come with a manual. But we are stronger and can face anything because of the people we love and that love us back. Things seem to be okay when we are surrounded by our loved ones. I know that there's a reason why things happen. Good or bad. There's a reason why we go through what we go through. It's hard to understand it, maybe we'll never know the reason. But one thing I'm sure of is that, this will pass. You'll be happy one day, you will look back and see how strong you came out of the storm. Keep your mother in your good thoughts, don't imprison yourself."

Yoh! That was a lot. What is he, a seer? I'm honestly speechless.

“When did you write this speech?” I query.

I’d rather not talk about my mother, brother Mathonga over here just went all pastor on me. He finds my charge funny, I’m glad he finds me amusing.

“Maybe you do that to me, ungidlisile.” The smile on his face is as bright as the sun. While I... well, I fight the gleam threatening to reach my lips.

“Spend the day with me.” He says, it’s crazy I know. We have work to get back to, sis’Bongiwe will eat me alive.

“You know that’s not possible.” I argue.

Someone has to be fully-fledged around here and seeing how carefree he is, I volunteer to be the adult.

“Anything is possible.” He utters, enthusiastically.

Damn it, that hopeful smile of his will make me an unruly person.

“That’s what the pastor said last Saturday.” He finishes.

“I have to go back to work, Mathonga. I don’t want to lose my job.”

Petros would surely burn me at the stake.

“You won’t, I promise. I’ve got you, don’t you know that by now?”

Sheesh. This man is working overtime to win my heart, I know he likes me, I see it in his eyes and the random gestures.

“Come on Nala, let’s make memories together.”

Dear God, I have a question. How do you say no to a man who looks at you like you’re worth every beautiful thing in this world?

Falling for Mathonga would be a terrible mistake, Petros won't spare him. In fact, he'll kill us both.

I weigh the pros and cons, letting myself live just for a day is not such a bad idea. I'll need to be careful lest that evil policeman sees me gallivanting with Mathonga, the man I'm assigned to kill.

"Okay let's go." I agree, eventually.

Let me stop talking about his smile, he's a smiler, let's leave it at that.

As we get to his car, he feels at his pockets by patting his slacks.

"Sorry, I thought I lost my car keys, bad habit."
He explains, while opening the door for me. Not the first time.

What do white people call it again? Ah yes, 'paint the town red.'

That's what we do through the course of the day. He drives us all the way to Durban.

Is it safe for me to trust this man, or it's too soon?

I'm dragged from place to place. He's like a child wanting to show me his favourite places, taste his favourite meals. I'm even offered alcohol as we sit at one of the restaurants. Dinner is refreshing, my heart feels at peace. My body feels light, there's a possibility I might be happy. I think I'm happy.

Darkness has taken over when we drive back to Izingolweni, he's a careful driver, but speeds like a maniac. Does that make sense?

My head is throbbing by the time Mathonga parks the car outside his father's premises. He

wanted us to spend the night in Durban and travel back in the morning. I did say he's like a child, he doesn't think of the consequences, the after effects of our stupidity.

"Do you want me to walk you to your room?" He asks as he pops open the passenger door for me.

"Nope, someone might see us. I don't want them thinking we were together the entire day. Someone will interpret it differently." I have to decline.

"But we did spend the day together, I'm not ashamed of that." Mathonga

I don't give him an answer. How do I even answer that?

"I guess this is good night." He utters, looking at me the way he's been doing throughout the day.

"Yeah, good night."

I don't wait for anything but my find way to the big house, I'm thirsty and need maybe two glasses of water. It's very late at night, the last time I checked my phone, 11pm was fighting for its spot. It must be around midnight now.

The kitchen light is off, I find the switch making sure to keep it down.

When I've quenched my thirst, leaving the kitchen becomes a task. I'm a bit tipsy, maybe I shouldn't have tried the alcohol. It tasted ugly anyway.

I settle down on one of the chairs, I'm loving how comfortable I am here. My eyes feel heavy, everything in the kitchen starts dancing or I'm hallucinating. I stop fighting my heavy eyes and let them shut closed, five minutes is all I need. Then I'll get up and go to bed.

My head falls lightly on the table, it takes me a second to fall into a dream, a nice one by the looks of it.

I'm in an expensive house. Everything around me looks lavish, including the white clothes on my body.

"Madam, there's a man here looking for you." A middle aged woman in a lime green pinifa waltzes into the lounge, my mind reminds me that I had asked her to make me something to eat. She's my maid, I guess.

"Who is it Doris?" The name slips past my lips as if I know her.

"Your uncle, he's asking for food and a place to stay."

That bloody fool Petros, I should've hired an assassin to get rid of him.

"Tell him to voetsek." I throw my hands as annoyance hugs my body.

“Yes madam.” Doris bows. I think I like her.

“Now bring my food.”

“Yes madam.” She nods and dashes away.

“Madam!” I hear her shout from the kitchen, Doris is becoming a problem. I’m her madam. But I have to use my pampered feet to stride to the kitchen.

She’s standing with the fridge open, a frown on her face.

“Doris, do you know who I am?”

She nods, I doubt she knows me. Let me remind her.

“Nala Shange, the world’s richest woman. You need to put some respect on my name, Doris.”

Wow! So that’s who I am? Interesting.

“Okay madam, I hear you. Kodwa you didn’t tell

me what to put in your sandwich.”

How long has Doris been working for me?

“Five cheese slices Doris, five cheese slices.”

Why is she laughing? I’m her boss, and I’m going to fire her ass. The laughter increases, annoying me to infinity and nope, not beyond. There is no coming back here.

Instantly, my eyes snap open. The childish laugh has dragged me out of my nice dream, I rub my eyes and find Ntabezikude standing across the kitchen. He's carrying a carton of Mageu.

He’s the one who’s been laughing at me, and woke me up from my peaceful sleep.

“Don’t you mean two slices of cheese?” He asks, idiot is having a blast. I’m so embarrassed. I

gather myself together and stand.

“English came by ship.” I tell him, no one is perfect at this language.

“Clearly.” He replies, showing me his Cheshire cat smile.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d stop laughing at me.” I chide, not carrying whose son he is. He tips his head to the side before taking a bow.

“Yes madam, before I go. What would you like with your two cheese slices, milk with tea or tea with milk?”

He bursts into loud laughter, it’s so loud I’m afraid someone will wake up and find me in here. I think he’ll stay, but he walks away, laughing his lungs out.

What is wrong with him?

MATHONGA-

Twenty One

MATHONGA-

My brother Ntaba can be a pain in the anal sometimes, it's taken him days to agree for me to meet our sister... Zamangwane, that's her name.

I have mixed feelings about this meeting, I don't know how she will receive me or how I will receive her.

Having taken a bath and changed into an easy-going outfit, I step out of the rondavel and the sun kisses my skin good morning. Sunny days are a blessing, they make life seem beautiful.

It's a Saturday today, the Sabbath is unescapable. But with Ntaba on my side, baba

won't fight me. That brother of mine knows how to get his way.

Sabbath school starts at nine, we ought to be there in less than thirty minutes. Hlabela is preaching today, I can't stress how much he loves church.

"Thonga!"

Hlabela's voice calls to me, he's standing outside his rondavel with the bible under his armpit, obviously ready for church. My brother takes this suit thing too serious, a whole three piece. Maroon compliments his cinnamon skin tone, I'll give him that.

"Bhuti." I send my greetings, wincing at how I'd have to explain why I'm not ready for church.

He strides to me, one hand in his pocket and face hard. For a second I'm taken by how powerful he looks in that suit, way different

from businessman Hlabela.

“Why are you not ready?”

Aish! Where is Ntaba when I need him? How do I tell him our father committed adultery, has a child outside his marriage, and she’s the reason I won’t be in the Lord’s house today?

“Ready?” I ask.

This is the right time to summon the devil, no lies are coming to me. ‘Keep the Sabbath day holy’ that’s what the holy bible says and here I am doing it different.

Hlabela chides me with a stern expression, just like baba would.

“Don’t be smart with me, Mathonga.”

Yoh! Vumile 2.0.

“I’m not going bhuti, I have somewhere else to be.” God must be smiling down at me for telling

the truth on his day. Proud moment papa God, proud moment.

“With Nala?” His eyes narrow in question, and I am flabbergasted.

“What?” I stutter. How does he know I’ve been spending time with her?

“A friend said he saw you at a restaurant in Durban yesterday, you were with a girl who’s not Amandla. The description fit Nala.”

“How do you know Nala’s sketch bhuti? Have you been...”

I slap my mouth shut as he points an accusatory finger at me, there are days I forget he’s my older brother.

“Watch what you say to me, Mathonga.”

I know I’ve angered him by the change of tone in his deep voice. I swallow a gulp because what else can I do? This man is serious

sometimes. I have to find him a wife.

“What happened to Amandla? Aren’t you two an item anymore?” He probes.

The way people are so random around here, scares me. Were we not talking about me not going to church? I don’t want to talk about Amandla with Hlabela, like I wouldn’t want to talk about her with Vukuzakhe. I regard them as high as Vumile, maybe the second highest.

“I wish I could stay and chat bhuti, but I’m running late.”

My feet move, thank God. He doesn’t say anything when I hurry towards the main house. Good man, heaven must be celebrating. The only thing he should be thinking about is John 3 vs 16 and leave dating to us normal people.

My eyes search for Nala as I enter through the kitchen, and immediately I see Ntaba stepping away from Khethiwe. He walks out, taking the passage that leads to the lounge. What just happened?

“Morning sisi.”

Khethiwe turns and sends a smile my way.

“She’s in her room, packing I think.” She announces as if she’s read my mind.

“Packing? Where is she going?”

“Back home.” Khethiwe.

I don’t get it, Nala had said she wants to live here. Why is she leaving?

“I feel sorry for Nala,” she leans against the kitchen island, eyes firm yet sad.

Here’s my morning radio, she is about to tell me things I don’t know. I’ll listen because... you guessed it, it’s about Nala.

“She had nothing when she came here, just the clothes on her body. When I told her she can go fetch her clothes from her house, she dismissed me, saying her old clothes should be burned. She also said she will never set foot in that house again. I had to give her some of my clothes. That’s what she’s been wearing since she came to live here.”

My ears are tuned to her voice, eager to know what’s happening in Nala’s life. However my brain travels far to places of confusion and suspicion.

“Did she say why she’ll never go back to her father’s house?”

Khethiwe shrugs her shoulders, “She wouldn’t tell me, I think she’s afraid of him. He’s probably one of those strict fathers who put their hands on their children.”

He probably is. I have to find him and know what's really going on. Nala won't tell me anything.

"Thonga, I think Nala doesn't want to go home. But her father wants her there, if you can please speak to her. Convince her not to leave."

Khethiwe sounds concerned, she's won Nala's heart. It's good she has someone to talk to.

"I'll see what I can do." I can't promise anything, really. Nala can be stubborn.

"Okay." She smiles, too brightly. Actually, she's glowing today.

"Are you okay?" Confusion licks her face at my question. "You seem different, and I thought today was your day off, it's a Saturday."

The workers know the Sabbath is kept holy in this house, no work is to be done. Mashamase was given special treatment that day. Love must be nice hey...

“I wanted to make something to eat.” She turns away and continues with her tasks.

Baba walks in just as I’m about to make an escape.

“Ngwane, have you seen your mother?”

This is awkward. He knows I don’t refer to Dalisile as mother. A huge frown plasters on his face when he sees me in jeans and a tank top.

“Why are you not ready for...”

This is the part where I run, I turn back facing the door I entered through and run out of the kitchen. I can hear him calling after me. Baba will have to forgive me. We can’t church every Saturday, we’ll die before the second coming.

Ntaba is standing outside his car, waiting for me I believe. His brows shoot up as he sees me

running his way.

“Hurry, get in the car.” The tone of my voice carries a warning, he’s not as fast as I am. In fact, he’s taking his time to jump in while I have buckled up and I’m ready to go. Time seems suspended as I impatiently watch the driver’s door open, he gets in and frowns at me.

“Why are you running?” Ntaba.

“Your father wants to know why I’m not going to church.” I explain, signalling with my hand that he drives.

“You should’ve told him that you’re not going to church.” Really? Is he serious?

“I’m not you Ntaba, Vumile is my weakness okay.”

He laughs, it’s not his usual full blown laughter. It’s reserved, come to think of it, he looks different. Kind of down.

“I see, Thonga lami. Qina ndoda, qina.” (Be strong.)

I have a weird brother.

“Okay, you can drive now.” I tell him, desperate to get away from these premises.

He doesn't say anything but turns the engine on. My ears are instantly abused by the loud sound of songs of struggle.

I give up.

As we drive away, I catch a glimpse of Nala walking out of her rondavel. Dammit, how did I forget about her?

“Stop the car.” I yell.

Mathonga, you indecisive bastard. Confusion is my best friend right now, I want to leave, but Nala needs me.

“Relax Butternut, she's not going anywhere.”

Ntaba voices. He does nothing to do my bidding.

“What?” I’m confused.

“The commissioner will be away for a little while, your girlfriend is not going anywhere. You’ll find her here when you get back.” His declaration confuses me further.

“What are you on about? What does the commissioner have to do with Nala?” He ignores my interrogation and chooses to whistle along to the depressing song that talks about Jan Van Riebeeck’s slyness.

There’s no going back now, I realise when he drives out the gate. Now I’m eager to find out what Ntaba knows about Nala.

VUKUZAKHE-

The electric gate closes behind him, he parks

the car in front of the garage door. His eyes flicker toward the entrance, Funokuhle is in there. He left him alone when he went for a meeting, confident about the safety in this gated community.

“Coffee?” He’s talking to Kenneth who shakes his head once to articulate himself.

“Just get me the file, so I can be on my way.” The coldness in his tone is excused, still Zakhe accepts the urge to leer over at him. He finds Kenneth stoically unbuckling his seatbelt and huffs at his overconfidence.

“You arrogant piece of shit, you cold bastard.”

Zakhe feels confident enough to say this, Kenneth chuckles, surprising the man on the driver’s seat.

“Forgive me for not leaping for joy at the mention of coffee.”

Kenneth's retort has Zakhe cackling and shaking his head in disbelief. The two men dash out of the car, and follow each other into the house.

"I'm here for the document you forgot, not a tea party, Zakhe."

He appreciates the reminder, not that he had forgotten about it.

The breakfast meeting he had with Kenneth ended about thirty minutes ago, it went better than he expected. The dark man agreed to merge companies, it is good news for Khanyile Holdings.

He can't wait to go back home and tell his brothers about the deal he signed. He's in a good mood, and certain that nothing can ruin it at this point.

His eyes sweep across the open floor plan in

search of the man he left here this morning, it's empty. Maybe he hid after seeing Kenneth, he should've told Funokuhle that he's bringing company.

Kenneth is offered a seat in the lounge, which he accepts.

After dropping his keys and phone on the coffee table, Vukuzakhe dashes to the bedroom to retrieve the file.

Funo is not here, something doesn't feel right. The house is awfully quiet. He rushes out of the bedroom to check the other rooms, realisation that he's gone hits him, before panic takes over.

Zakhe recalls that Kenneth is waiting for him in the lounge, he hurries back, and hands him the file.

"My ride is here, I'll be in touch." Kenneth tells him.

He walks the man outside the gate where he

lets his eyes roam around, searching for Funokuhle.

The moment Kenneth's car drives off, Zakhe rushes back into the house to grab his car keys. He's going to look for Funokuhle, he couldn't have gone far.

Zakhe didn't expect to see him standing at his doorsteps when he turned around.

"Funokuhle!"

His stomach does a backflip the second he wraps his arms around the young man. It's ridiculous, he's not a teenager. Zakhe curses it silently, willing it to stay in place, to stay out of his way. He pulls back when he feels how tense his minion is.

"What happened? Where did you go? You had

me worried sick.”

It's the sad look on Funo's face that has him asking these questions.

Funokuhle walks in, shoulders slumped and head dropped. His gnawed demeanour ascertains that something is seriously wrong.

Zakhe follows him, a million questions running around his head in muddled circles.

They are standing in the middle of the lounge, there's tension standing in-between them.

“My father is here... he... he came to get me.” He keeps his eyes away from Zakhe who is frowning at him. The big man is trying to wrap his head around what he just heard. He scratches the base of his neck, tilts his head as his brows go for a deeper pucker.

“Your father?” Funokuhle nods. “How did he find you? I don't understand.”

“Pule brought him here, I don’t know how they found me.” Funo’s voice sounds a bit off, he’s still struggling to look Zakhe in the eye.

“That bastard,” Zakhe hisses in anger. “Was he here, in my house?”

He doesn’t mean to sound rude.

“I didn’t let them in, my father stood outside the gate. Pule was the one who came to knock. I don’t know what he told my father, but he’s on his side. He knows him as my former teacher. I don’t know what they discussed before they came here. I’m also confused, the only thing I know is that I have to go. Thank you for helping me.”

He turns to leave, Zakhe panics and grabs his arm to pull him back to where he was standing.

“Where are you going?”

“I told you, my father is waiting for me.” Funo snaps, his outburst taking Zakhe completely by surprise.

“Let me take you home, we’ll drive back together.” He insists, and that will give them time to talk and sort this mess out.

“That won’t be possible, I’m sorry.” The young man takes another step, heading to the door, but he’s pulled back again by a frustrated giant.

“Funokuhle...” It’s his turn to snap, and vent. However, he doesn’t make it past his name.

“You’re a married man, your wife is pregnant and...” He stops. “I’m sorry if I have misled you or given you the wrong impression. I’m sorry I let that night go too far, we shouldn’t have slept together.”

His words send a chill across Zakhe's skin that settles deep within his core.

"You don't mean that." Zakhe argues. He steps closer, claiming his space in Funo's life. Just when his hands feel the warmth of Funo's hands, the boy yanks them back, leaving Zakhe in scratchy loneliness.

"Go back to your wife, forget about what you feel for me. Forget we ever met." Funokuhle.

"How do I do that? How do I do that when all I think about is you?" Zakhe is trying to sound as normal as possible, even if he's anything but.

"Then stop, stop thinking about me. I am not good for you, if we let this go on, we'll only hurt ourselves and the ones we love. Your wife... she... she doesn't need stress. It's not good for the baby."

Every word nails itself onto the walls of Zakhe's heart. He doesn't know what to do or what to

think. The only thing he's able to do is defend himself, defend what he feels.

Zakhe rubs his face roughly. When in the world did they get here?

Things were going okay, they spent the entire week together, getting to know each other. Hope was built during that time, hope of a better tomorrow, hope that he would be happy with this man one day.

"You're not a child Funokuhle, you're a man." Vukuzakhe says after a long moment of silent stares. "Old enough to make decisions, your own decisions. Your father doesn't own you."

"He's my father, the only father I have." He yells, taking two steps back, away from Zakhe's presence. "You're a Khanyile, and I'm a Sangweni. You of all people should know our families' history. Whatever you want with me

will never work. People will die.”

“Who said that?” Zakhe yells back. “I am not my forefathers, I will never wage war with you. Only with the ones who want to harm you.”

“It’s over.” That came too quick, stabbing into Zakhe’s heart. It releases something cold and bitter inside him.

“Funokuhle, let’s talk about this. Don’t make hasty decisions.” Zakhe pleads.

Funo shakes his head, it appears his mind has been made up. He turns around and starts walking away, a pair of arms wrap around him, preventing him from moving forward.

It’s Zakhe, standing behind him, face buried on the minion’s neck. He’s afraid of letting go lest Funo walks out the door. He’s faced loss before, his heart can’t go through that again.

“Please stay.” Zakhe pleads in silent whispers.

“Vukuzakhe?” A womanly voice shouts from the door, the two men swiftly raise their heads and instantly rip apart.

They had left the door open, this is why they didn't hear Bongiwe coming.

Zakhe's eyes widen as he sees his wife standing in the door way, eyes watery and lips trembling beneath her ragged breathing as if she had been running.

He opens his mouth to speak, nothing comes out but a cynical gasp. This is not how he wanted her to find out, he was going to tell her one day. Bongiwe releases a sob and takes off running back outside.

“Bongiwe.” He calls after her, feet eager to track her steps. Only one foot shifts under his weight, the other stubborn to remain in place.

This is when he remembers the young man he was begging not to leave seconds ago. It's the first time he's seeing disappointment in Funo's eyes. Caught between a rock and a hard place is where he is right now.

"Goodbye." Funo whispers, so faint that Zakhe almost misses the syllables. His eyes are dry as raisins and face cold as ice. The younger's feet are fast as he runs out of the house.

This is harder than bagging a deal with Kenneth. Does he run after his wife who might do something stupid like tell on him, or Funokuhle whom he might never see again.

While weighing his options, not sure which path to take, his phone buzzes on the table, dancing around in small bouncy circles. In his mind, he thinks it's his wife, so he eagerly picks it up.

*Vukuzakhe, I want you home before sunset. No

excuses.*

A message from Vumile reads. What has Bongiwe done?

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A/N: Your thoughts are greatly appreciated, don't grow weary in dropping a comment, sharing the chapters as well. #GrowAsWeGo

MATHONGA

Twenty-Two

BONGIWE-

"I'm sorry, there is no heartbeat." Her worst fears are confirmed.

She knew in her heart there would be, right when she started bleeding after running out of her husband's house. Flashes of him holding a man in his arms replaying in her head like a broken record.

She panicked when she felt something wet oozing into her panties, and sent a hand to inspect, her heart sunk to her stomach at the sight of blood on her trembling fingers.

She was right to panic because the bleeding was not brown, but bright red and terrifying.

Already sweating and in tears, she shouted for the driver to drive her to the nearest hospital in Northcliff, where a nurse assessed her, blood was taken for tests before attending a scan.

Minutes seemed to crawl by as she waited, she didn't have anyone with her to hold her hand or tell her everything was going to be okay.

Now here she is, with a broken heart. She's staring at the ceiling above her, unable to make eye contact with the nurse, willing her to say it was a mistake, there is a baby.

"We managed to get through to your husband, he's on his way." The nurse says, patting her shoulder. Maybe she shouldn't have, or it's the mention of her husband that has her bursting in painful sobs.

The nurse tries to console her, doing her best to keep her calm. But of course for anyone in her condition, one is simply inconsolable.

The door to her ward opens and in walks a lanky buff man, brows knitted and lips formed into a thin line. His eyes are wide and forehead pearled with sweat. She can tell he ran here with the way he's breathing raggedly.

“My baby.” Her scream pierces through the room, tears pool from her eyes, showing the extent of pain gritting her heart. One large step and he has her locked in his arms, she rests her head on his chest as she laments for her baby.

“Phephisa Mshengu, phephisa Shabalala.” (I’m sorry.)

He is at a loss for words, nothing comes to him but a lousy apology.

“Why me? Why us?” Endless questions surge through her, none of them with an answer. Zakhe has no solutions for her, he holds her tighter. The only way he can assure her that he’s here.

“I’m so... sorry sthandwa sami.”

“No, no you’re not...” She pushes him off of her. “You wanted this to happen, you wanted me to lose my baby.” She accuses him, barely able to speak through crying.

“You know that is not true Bongiwe.”

It's not. Yes he wasn't happy about her falling pregnant, when she knew he didn't want kids, and even had the audacity to accuse her of cheating. But he'd never wish death upon an innocent baby. Sure he didn't get time to bond with the pregnancy or get the hang of it, it hurts him too that she's lost the baby.

“Then why aren't you crying with me? Your face is so cold Vukuzakhe. We just lost our baby... our first baby.” Her bloodshot eyes are stained with pain and grief.

She can't ignore the chaos she feels inside. How did she come from the absolute height of joy only a few days earlier to now arrive in this bottomless pit of despair?

Zakhe cups her face, places a kiss on her forehead and brings her close to his chest.

“I'm hurting too Bongiwe, I know it's nothing

compared to what you're feeling. I need you to understand that I'm here for you, you're not alone in this."

The sincerity in his voice is assuring enough, Bongiwe clasps her arms around him and releases excruciating sobs.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He's different from his brothers, he's the reckless one in the family. The ugly duckling. You can easily pick him out. While everyone tries to walk around with halos crowning their heads, he presents himself the way he is. Raw and unfiltered.

Like all his brothers, he grew up needing attention from his parents. His only sin was that he was the middle child, stuck in the middle between four perfect boys who always

outshined him. No matter how hard he worked, it was never enough for his parents.

If it wasn't Dalisile giving Vukuzakhe too much attention and working overtime to hate Mathonga, it was Vumile loving Mathonga with everything he was and patting Hlabela on the shoulder for being so perfect, while trying to put a disruptive Ndleleni on the right path.

For years he held on to the hope that, one day they will notice him. Until one afternoon, he spotted his father gallivanting around with a woman who was not his mother.

He was 14 years old, and too tall for his age thanks to his father's genes. His long legs didn't rest that day, following his father and his mistress around until they jumped into a car and drove away.

He couldn't follow them, but he waited. He

waited for a day his father would slip and expose himself, he waited for a day his father would ask his mother for a divorce and tell them he's bringing another woman into the house.

He waited for two years with a heavy heart. That's when he learned how to be patient but it was all in vain. The day never came.

Eventually, his body lost its strength, his mind shattered and the rest of him followed suit.

His brothers have always been there for him, from day one. They loved him and never made him feel alone. But it was the love of his parents he needed. Their negligence pushed him away, out of the family and into the presence of a man who lived his life on the edge. A man who lived in the apartheid era and thought every white person was out to get him.

Ntabezikude saw through him, how delusional he was, he could've ran back to hide under his father's wings. But Vumile's wings were full unlike Alfred Madi's, who had enough space to accommodate a lonely, rejected boy.

Together they formed a group of young men who shared the same sentiments. Hate for white people.

They took from white people, killed if they had to and got away with it without a scratch.

Ntaba was in it for the adrenalin, it made him forget his troubles back home.

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Some call him a dual king. He's a lion and a lamb, he would slit your throat without blinking twice. His friends would tell you a tale about how he once killed a man, watched him die and bid him farewell with a kiss as he took his last

breath. The kisses are never guaranteed whether they come from a good place or a bad one. They can be as lethal as poison or sweet as honey.

Hate lingers in the darkest parts of his soul, without it he'd be nothing, feel nothing. It is the fuel that keeps his heart pumping and brain ticking. It has become a defence mechanism, where he shuts down everything that threatens to hurt him. This is why he runs around laughing and grinning like the Joker.

He's made it a point to know almost everything happening around him. People wonder how he's so knowledgeable and speaks like he's been to the future.

There is no secret, he's a man who observes beyond the eye, wanting to know what's hidden behind a human's brain. He knows too much,

the credit goes to Alfred Madi, who has connections in all the right places.

“Why are we at the hospital? Were you not taking me to see Zamangwane?” Mathonga.

Ntaba checks the rear view mirror and fixes the collar of his shirt, it's buttoned up to his neck.

“I want you to meet someone.”

He opens the glove compartment and retrieves a 22 calibre. Mathonga's eyes widen, it's not the first time he's seen his brother with a gun. But they are at the hospital. What in God's name is he going to do with a gun here?

“Ntaba, you know I'm still young. I don't want to go to jail.” He cringes at the thought of being locked up with men who have no souls or regard for human life.

Ntaba frowns, tilting his head as his little

brother has his mind working strenuously.

“Are you serious?” It’s a thoughtless question. Why would he not be serious? Mathonga is not as audacious as he is, there are days he forgets they are not cut from the same tree.

“Yes ndoda, I’m dead serious. Have you seen me? I’m too handsome to be locked up. Do you know what they do to men like me in jail?” Panic strangles Mathonga, dribbles of sweat have found a play area on his forehead. “It rhymes with grape.”

Ntaba would laugh but today he’s in a sour mood, he sneers at his brother, face resembling someone who’s high on lemons.

“You should’ve reminded me to bring your milk bottle, or we can pass by the cafeteria and get you a packet of Cheese Curls or a dummy. How about that, baby Thonga?”

Ntaba taunts, there is no tinge of humour found

in his hoarse voice which confuses Mathonga. He's not sure if this is a joke or his brother has lost his marbles.

"Ntaba, what's going on? I don't know this side of you." Mathonga makes a chaotic frown, his heart is going crazy in his chest.

"You're too comfortable Mathonga, this is why you miss things that happen around you. You need to look outside the lavish life you live, things are not as they seem."

He knows this because he does his homework, he knows people who know people and that constantly works in his favour.

Leaving Mathonga with his spherical eyes full of worry and confusion, Ntaba steps out of the car. He hides the gun on his waist as he spots a white police officer.

He's a Sargent, the uniform gives him away.

You don't mess with these ones, they take their jobs seriously unlike the minions who get peanuts every month. Those he can have them rolling like dices on the palm of his hand.

They lock eyes, just a blink... comfortable enough for two men to keep eye contact.

"Son." The white officer says, he's greeting actually. But Ntaba is not okay with it, he hates that he's called him son, although the man looks well in his father's age.

"Muntu omdala." The arrogance in him won't let him reply in English, so he uses his mother tongue. Deep Zulu and accent on point. The police officer blinks once, nailing him with a glower, it's because of the unsettling fake grin prolonged on Ntaba's face.

The police officer takes his leave when Mathonga joins them.

"Mgodoyi." Ntaba whispers to himself as his

eyes follow the neatly dressed Sargent, the look catches Mathonga's attention. He is not at ease, he knows how dark Ntaba's mind is. There is no ray of sunshine in that head of his.

At the reception, Ntaba's charm gets them inside. A thick short woman in a nurse's uniform leads them to the ward he asked for, and that's after he took her numbers and promised her a date of a lifetime.

"Bhuti, can I say something?" Mathonga looks like he's about to burst, something is on his chest and he needs to let it out.

"I'm a man whore?" Ntaba beats him to it, he doesn't say anything more but walks into the ward. He has a task at hand. The purpose of visiting the hospital.

There's a man sleeping on the bed, on his left

leg is a full leg cast. His eye is bandaged and the other looks too tender to twitch. Ntaba grins at how he widens the swollen eye at the sight of them and winces in pain.

“Mapholoba.” A cheerful Ntaba leans over and places a kiss on the man’s cheek.

“Mashiyamahle sengathi azoshumayela.”

He gets comfortable on the edge of the bed, as if he and this man are old friends.

“Who is this?” Mathonga is confused, it’s his first time seeing this man. More than wanting to know who he is, he wants to know what happened to him. A broken leg, and a swollen eye? It looks like karma paid him a nasty visit.

“Commissioner, meet my brother.” He gives the man a furtive look before turning back to Mathonga. “Izinyane lika Ngwane, the apple of my eye. IThonga lam.”

There's a thought-provoking edge to his voice. He's looking at Mathonga like he's the hill he'll die upon, like he'll take a bullet for him or kill a thousand men and only for him.

Mathonga flicks his eyes away from his brother's lingering gaze, Ntaba can be weird.

"Won't you greet my beloved brother, commissioner?" His attention is on the commissioner now, voice laced with undertones of something dark and eerie. The commissioner won't look at him, maybe he would've if he wasn't in so much pain.

"Ndoda, why are we here?" Mathonga probes.

His spirit is not agreeing with the commissioner's spirit, they seem to war against each other. From the time he walked into the ward, his body shivered and chills filled every inch of his melanin skin.

“I’m sorry ntwana, this is Petros Ngcobo. Police commissioner. I heard that he’s been hospitalised and like a good citizen thought we should come pay our last respects.” Ntaba quips and smirks when Petros starts hyperventilating.

Ntabezikude Khanyile, of course Petros has heard of him and how untouchable the man is.

A high pitched laughter erupts into the room followed

by a clapping of hands, it’s Ntaba acting like a maniac. Mathonga shakes his head in disbelief, his brother watches too much television.

What the heck was that?

“Oops! Did I say his last respects?” Ntaba sniggers, leaning in to place another kiss, on Petros’ forehead this time. “I’m sorry, I meant we came to see if you are okay. Is there

anything you need? Thonga can run and buy you some bananas, or you prefer grapes? Though I think peaches are better. You look like the grapes type, I mean they do match the size of your balls. Am I right commissioner?"

Petros blinks his red swollen eye, fear residing in it. He's unable to let out a single word, perhaps he lost his voice or fear is suffocating him.

"Thonga, won't you be so kind and run to the Spaza. My old friend here is hungry." Ntaba.

Mathonga grabs his brother's hand and pulls him aside.

"I'm not leaving you alone with him," his whisper doesn't go past them. "Are you crazy? You can't kill a policeman."

"I'm not going to do anything to him." Ntaba is chilled, this is a picnic for him.

"I'm not dumb Ndoda, you are low-key

threatening him. What if he throws you in jail?”
Mathonga.

“Then I’m taking him down with me, it’s where dirty cops belong anyway.” Ntaba peeps over at the patient, he winks as their eyes meet.

“Did you do that to him? He looks badly beaten. Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Relax ntwana and be patient.” Ntaba scratches his neatly trimmed beard before letting his face stretch into a smile. “Go buy grapes ndoda.”

Sounds like an order, Mathonga shakes his head as he strides out.

“You don’t look comfortable Patricia, let me fix the pillows for you.” Ntaba roughly grabs one of the pillows supporting Petros’ head, the commissioner lets out a heavy breath as his head falls on a thin pillow. His eyes wavering from Ntaba’s impassive face to the pillow in his

hands.

“Patricia is a nice name, don’t you think? I’m sure that’s what they’ll call you in jail. That’s if you don’t die from that broken leg.” He’s sauntering around the bed, there’s something dangerous about his calmness. It has the patient mumbling gibberish. It’s proven that he can’t speak.

“Let me let you in on myself.” He sits back on the edge of the bed, places the pillow on Petros’ belly. “I know things, lucky for you I don’t know enough to send you to the grave. Besides, death would be an easy way out for a bastard like you. I want to be your worst nightmare, Ngcobo. I want you to shit your pants at the mention of my name. When my faces flashes before your eyes, I want you to sleep with the lights on and

a rosary around your neck. I'm going to enjoy making life hell for you Ngcobo and the fun part about this is that you will do nothing about it."

There is something Ntaba knows about the commissioner, and he's going to make him confess it himself. He grabs the pillow and presses it on the commissioner's face, a smirk twitches at the corner of his lips as the thought of suffocating the man almost to death ripples through him like a mind blowing orgasm.

"Shit!" He hisses at the sound of the door opening.

Bad timing.

Ntaba moves the pillow from the patient's face and places it back under his head, going an extra mile to make sure he's comfortable.

“Who are you? What are you doing in my husband’s room?”

Perfect! The wife is here.

His brain works like a machine, he smiles at the frowning woman and bows his head in respect. When he raises it, his face is concealed with a blood curdling sneer, his eyes are empty as if his soul has been removed from his body.

“Mamazala.” His voice is afflicting, the chubby woman visibly shivers at the eerie sound.

“Who... who are...” The question falls away from her.

“Who am I, you ask?” Ntaba pauses and taps his chin thoughtfully, before a humorous shade forms in his cold eyes. “I don’t know mamazala. I’m still trying to find myself.”

The woman swallows the lump in her throat and tries to tame the fear clawing at her. She’s not sure why the young man terrifies her to death,

her globular eyes scurry to her impractical husband on the bed who looks just as terrified.

“Petros, who is this boy?” Only her husband can give her the answers she seeks, but he’s an invalid and the possibility of him shitting himself is higher than the stocks in the markets.

Ntaba steps aside and lets the woman weave her way to her husband, there are whispers from her. He can’t make out what is being said, it frustrates him. Being in the dark, not knowing what is happening around him frustrates him.

“Patty, this is my cue. Let me love and leave you. I’m sure mamazala wants to give you a good massage.” He winks at the horrified man. “I’ll see you around.”

He leaves the room with plans of visiting again.

MATHONGA-

Twenty-three

VUKUZAKHE-

It's a little after 1pm, the doctor discharged her. The walk to the parking lot is a silent affair, he hasn't asked her anything nor volunteered to speak. She's settled in a wheelchair, her bag on her lap and eyes cast forward.

Zakhe helps her up when they get to the car, he opens the passenger door and waits for her to get in, a frown forms on his face when she doesn't move.

"Are you gay?" She's looking at him with a condemning gaze. Her question was expected, he just didn't think it would be here, in public.

"Can we talk about this at home? Please," please is not a very common word used

between them. Over the years, they have taken each other for granted, they acted more like enemies than a married couple.

“I want to know now.” Feisty!

“I’m not.” He replies, without sounding the least happy about his answer.

“Then, what were you doing with him?” Bongiwe is persistent, which frustrates her husband. He shifts his eyes around for any eavesdroppers. He feels uncomfortable talking about this.

“I’m not doing this here, get in the car.” He says, his tone dismissive.

He grabs her arm and tries to gently help her into the car, Bongiwe squirms in his hold.

“Let me go, Ngwane.”

They get a few looks from civilians who are passing by, it has him loosening his grip. Judgemental looks crowning him an abuser.

“Don’t do this here, Bongiwe.”

He sees an argument coming, Bongiwe has no timing. If her clock says now, then now it is.

“Let’s go home, I will explain everything there.”

“What is there to explain, Vukuzakhe? You’re cheating on me with a man. I lost my baby because of you and that... that faggot.”

Her words feel like hands latching around his throat, making it hard for him to breathe.

“Keep him out of this.” Anger simmers within him, her thoughtless words have his pulse running. Her eyes widen at his scolding, this she did not expect.

“You still defend him after what he did?” She mumbles, her tears are such a show off.

Instead of wiping her tears away, Vukuzakhe leaves her standing there and marches to the driver’s side. He gives her one final look before getting into the car.

He turns on the engine and waits for his stubborn woman to get in. Bongiwe has a good mind not to, but this is not the village.

The door closes with a loud bang after she's settled in the seat, Zakhe gives her an odd stare as he drives off. It's peaceful for a while, thank the heavens. If they keep this up, they will make it home alive.

Silence is golden, but cell phones are not manufactured to know that. His phone is ringing, escaping this call is impossible. Vumile would bite his head off, it's lunchbreak at church and he's using this time to call him. Yes they get lunch lunchbreaks before the second service. Unluckily for him, the phone is connected to the Bluetooth speaker.

"Vukuzakhe." He sighs at the sound of his

father's voice. Dalisile and Nandi are not doing their jobs, the chief has too much time in his hands.

"Yebo baba."

"What is this I hear? You wife lost the baby?" It's not really a question. By the sound of it, Vumile is fully informed. Bongiwé is like a bat, you never see her coming. She hasn't left his side but the news of the miscarriage has made it to KZN.

A crown for her majesty!

Zakhe steals a glance to find her glaring at him. It's a good thing looks don't kill.

"Yebo baba, she did." Zakhe murmurs.

"Is she okay?" Vumile seems to worry more about Bongiwé than anyone else. Keeping her in the family must be that important.

"She is fine baba, we'll be home tomorrow.

Travelling a long distance is not ideal, she needs to recover.” His grip tightens on the steering wheel, he’s rapidly blinking. Bongiwe notices the emotional war her husband is battling and huffs at how dramatic he can be.

The call is ended simply because Vumile would not stop asking about his daughter in-law.

Bongiwe slumps back on the chair, and crosses her arms. Tears have dried on her face. She feels more angry than hurt, it’s the way Zakhe has not shown the same emotions as she has for their loss.

“I don’t know what’s happening between the two of us, Ngwane. We used to be close.”

Bongiwe starts, she knows her silence means his silence. Zakhe is a man who rarely expresses himself.

“I’m still here, Bongiwe. You’re the one who

drifted.” Zakhe.

“I drifted because you changed, and I feared losing you. You built walls around you, I couldn’t stand being in the dark. So, I wanted to destroy those walls and the only way I knew how was to fight. I was convinced you wanted out.” She would unleash in storms of anger and frustration if life was not drained out of her.

“You should have told me how you felt Bongiwe, but you constantly pushed me away with your violence and vile words.”

“That’s because you never listen to me. Don’t you think I tried? You are selfish Ngwane, you only see yourself. I am your wife, but I relentlessly have to fight to get your attention.” Not this again. “I needed you, Ngwane, and you were busy chasing men.”

He’s shaking his head, more than once. These

constant arguments are tiring. He feels like he is losing his mind, it's messing with his brain.

The traffic light turns red on Beyers Naude Dr, he slows down and stops. No one is saying anything, talking can be exhausting.

When the robot opens, Zakhe drives on, but he stops when an old red taxi parks in front of his car. It's a weekend, the roads are not busy. He'd drive past the taxi and pretend this never happened, but it's a one way. He's basically blocked.

"What the heck?" Like any driver, he becomes frustrated. There are three men in the taxi, not one has bothered to look his way and gesture an apology for stopping in front of them. Zakhe hoots but it's useless, they don't concede.

"What's going on?" Bongiwe.

One of the men dashes out of the taxi, he

kneels down, checking the back tyre. It frustrates Zakhe more.

“Stay here.” He instructs his wife and steps out of the car. The crouching man looks up when Zakhe nears him.

“Excuse me, please move your vehicle to the side. You’re blocking the way.” Zakhe.

The man stands, sneering at him.

Zakhe turns at the sound of hurried feet behind him, a body runs into him and he hits the ground with a thundering crash. His headache must be a Milky Way. It’s an unexpected attack, but he still tries to get up.

“Vukuzakhe!” Bongiwe’s voice erupts in hysterical screams, his worried gaze shifts to check on her. She’s standing outside the car, eyes wild with horror.

“Go back in the car, Bongwiwe.” He shouts, she doesn’t move an inch but starts screaming for help. Zakhe’s attackers are not bothered, this is Johannesburg after all.

It’s the cars driving past as if nothing is happening that baffle him.

“Khanyile.” A man scoffs, kicking him on the stomach as he attempts to get up. He recognises him as one of the Sangweni brothers, one of Funokuhle’s brothers. The incisions on his face attests that he is one of them, strangely Funokuhle doesn’t have them.

“You are making a mistake Sangweni,” he growls, struggling to get up. “Do you know who you are dealing with?”

The man snorts, unaffected. His foot comes up and wildly kicks Zakhe in the face. He accidentally bites his tongue and blood fills his mouth.

Sangweni's accomplices join him in kicking and punching a defenceless man on the floor, making it hard for Zakhe to fight back.

He can feel his muscles tensing and pain claims his body. He attempts to re-arrange his senses in order to fight back, but he's powerless against three men. All he can do is bring his forearms up to counter the blows and kicks.

Bongiwe's screams turn to spine chilling screams. Seeing no one is willing to help, she drops down on the road, and balls her eyes out. Zakhe is worried about her, that these creatures might attack her as well.

Sangweni dips a hand into the taxi and grabs a hammer. With the help of his men, he pulls an injured Zakhe to his feet, almost tearing his

collar.

“This is for fucking my brother and for stabbing me.” Sangweni snaps and with force swings the hammer at Zakhe’s head. Instant pain gushes through his body as the hammer collides with his skull.

The impact throws him to the ground. His vision blurs, his ears are ringing and he’s seeing flashes of black. Saliva mixed blood dribbles from his mouth, there is blood pouring from his temple.

Like soulless monsters who lack emotion and human traits, Zakhe’s attackers spit on his body and drive away in the taxi, leaving him barely alive and barely moving.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He abandoned his brother somewhere along the way back home, with an alleged reason of a meeting. Mathonga was told not to go home, but wander around. Plans of meeting his sister still put on hold.

It's a Saturday, the church goers are not back yet and the workers are in their rooms probably dancing to 'Akekho uDalisile.'

The first thing Ntaba did when he got home an hour ago was rush to his rondavel, take a shower and glaze his skin with lotion, making sure he smells the way he looks- expensive and manly.

He's on his birthday suit now, laying on the bed, and an impatient look on his face. He does not like to be kept waiting and it's so unlike her to keep him waiting.

It was a week ago when he made a move, Mathonga's words really got to him. It's nothing serious, he's just granting the girl her wish or as his brother had put it, making her dreams come true.

Really, that's his reason for tapping that.

It all started when they were alone in the house. Khethiwe was clumsy as usual, she dropped a mug when he walked into the kitchen, whistling to one of his infamous tasteless songs.

Ntaba helped her like he always does, the two conversed until she was a little comfortable around him. The man somehow found a way to lock his lips with hers, it felt like a dream to Khethiwe. She happily reciprocated, drowning in him like a fish in water.

When he asked her to meet him in his room

after everyone had gone to sleep, Khethiwe did not hesitate nor think twice about it.

Her heart led her to him, into his arms. What was meant to be a onetime thing has grown into an affair.

A slight knock at the door gets him excited, he jumps from the bed and stands at the foot of it with his hands on his hips. It's the only place he can put them.

If he crosses them it will make him look uptight. If he puts them on his back, it will make him look old. And if he lets them hang on his sides, it will just be weird because his hands won't be the only thing hanging loose.

He's not hard yet, but the second discreet knock makes his erection throb with enthusiasm.

“Enter.” Shit! He cusses, hoping he didn’t sound like an old creep. Who says enter in this day and age?

The door slowly opens, showing a cagey Khethiwe. Her eyes bulge when they connect with his nakedness, she thinks of closing them, but she can’t seem to stop looking at his condom-covered shaft.

Khethiwe bashfully giggles at how ready Ntaba is, his confidence turns her on.

This man is insane, she’s come to know this. That there are two Ntabas, the intimidating one who makes her tremble and trip and break his mother’s plates and mugs, and there’s this silly one who comes out during their sexual encounters.

“Close the door Khethi.” This is what he calls her now.

Khethiwe snaps out of it and quickly shuts the door closed. "Come closer, I won't bite unless you want me to."

They all say they don't bite till you end up with an expensive bite mark that cries when it's hungry and poops when it's full.

Khethiwe takes a couple of decisive steps in his direction, he greets her with a soft kiss that brings a smile to her face.

Maybe her mother should've named her Lucky. Khethiwe for what?!

"We have to hurry, Nala will start wondering where I am." This she tells him when he helps her out of her dress, Nala is the least of his concerns.

His focus is on her naked body, she's not wearing any panties today, that's less work for him. He buries his face on her busty cleavage

and breathes in her scent.

“You don’t rush sex, Khethi.” He tells her, sucking the top of her full breasts. “These things are not rushed.”

Her moans push him to go further, to continue sucking and kissing her body. His hand grasps around her neck, pulling her towards him. Their lips meet in a violent dance, it makes her forget her worries.

His fingers tug her loose braids, they slyly travel further to explore her naked back before gliding to grab her thick ass.

Their bodies are pressed together as they move in a gentle, desperate dance.

“Your body is so warm.” He whispers between rugged breaths before intensifying the kiss. He

grabs her hips and directs them to the bed, giggles move around when they fall onto the mattress.

Ntaba is on top, exploring her body and mouth, until she is moaning at full volume.

“Ready?” He is asking for consent, eyes lustful and sluggish.

Unfortunately, men like him don't come in twos.

Khethiwe agrees with just a nod, she gasps when he slowly enters her front bottom. Her fingers dig into his broad shoulders with each thrust, his movements are gentle yet frantic.

“Oh Ntaba!” She breathes his name, clasping herself around him.

He knows she's enjoying him, and the man's ego is boosted. He's moving in and out of her with pride, breathing heavily.

His hand wanders around her face, he pushes

two fingers into her mouth, her eyes widen. She's shocked.

"What are you doing?" The question is muffled as she speaks with her mouth full of his two fingers. The innocent looking lady retches, eyes watery.

"Fucking your mouth." He's serious, his eyes are dizzy with lust. Khethiwe cannot understand, this is new to her. She shakes her head and moves it away until his fingers slip out.

Ntaba stops thrusting, it's agonising for him, but he wants to check if she's okay.

"Stop gagging like that Khethi. What, are you trying to direct my fingers to your G-spot? You are going to choke." He says, brows snapping in query.

Khethiwe doesn't care, mouths don't have G-spots. She wants him to continue pleasuring

her. Her clit is begging to be tingled.

“You’re fingering my mouth, that’s weird. I have never heard of it.” She’s not interested in doing it, it must be done in an asylum because normal people don’t do that stuff.

Ntaba laughs, “There’s nothing wrong with it. It adds flavour to one’s sex life. Normal sex is boring, it’s like eating cabbage every day. Trust me, this is what everyone is doing.”

He tattoos kisses on her neck and chest, his hand fondling with one of her nipples.

“I prefer the normal boring sex, just use your eggplant and go deeper. It’s not like I’m going to cum with my mouth.”

The safer the better, learn from Khethiwe!

Ntaba replies by intensely kissing her, his lips feel right against hers.

“Don’t you trust me, Khethi?” When a man asks

this question during sex... RUN!

Khethiwe nods, a smile dancing on her swollen lips. "I trust you."

"Then follow my lead." He pushes the two fingers back into her mouth and tells her to suck while stirring them around, as if he's stirring a cup of tea.

She's trying but the food she ate for lunch is threatening to join them.

The only pleasure she's getting is from his shaft buried deep inside her vulva. Heaven on earth is how she would describe it.

She still can't understand why he's fingering her mouth though. Khethiwe gags to a point of almost vomiting, more tears burn her eyes. It's enough! She grabs his hand and pulls it away.

"Ntaba!" She's cranky, if she vomits she would

never be able to face him again. He slows down his thrusts, his brows pucker.

“Cha Khethiwe. I’m not helping you ukugabha.” She laughs at his facial expression. “Yini, ukhipha isichitho?” (Are you removing a curse?)

He's being silly, that's why she's giggling.

“But I’m choking, I don’t want to throw up.” She complains.

“It’s the same as having my eggplant in your mouth, you suck and roll your tongue.” Ntaba.

“But none of us will get pleasure from this, my mouth doesn’t have a g-spot. Only your banana can make me orgasm.”

Ntaba is defeated. This is not how he pictured it would be, he thought it would be simple like that video he saw on porn-hub.

“WeNtokazi, you’ll be the cause of my early death.” Ntaba shakes his head, allowing a smirk

to grace his face.

Who knew having sex would be so much work?

He's kissing her again, Khethiwe loves how his hands roam around her naked melanin skin.

This is a dream come true for her.

The g-spot is not in her mouth but her lady parts, and Ntaba's shaft has found it, he knows this because she tightens her legs around him, and her moans go from high to higher.

Orgasms can be vicious sometimes, like this one that just hit her. An erotic scream explodes into the room, not far behind it are Khethiwe's juices.

She screams his name as he goes deeper and faster, convulsing violently under the man who is chasing his own slice of cake.

"I'm almost there Khethi, let me cum inside

you.” He’s asking for permission, Khethiwe is too high on orgasms to answer.

Her head is thrown back into the pillow, eyes rolled to the back of her head, arms wrapped around him and fingers digging into his back.

“Please let me cum inside you,” he’s groaning like an overfed pig, and pumping faster.

One nod from Khethiwe and he explodes inside her. His head falls on the side of her neck.

Khethiwe shivers and whimpers when Ntaba pulls out and tumbles next to her. They don’t cuddle, lest she falls in love with him. These were his words.

As soon as he catches his breath, he lifts his head to look at her. A wide grin stretches his mouth.

“I thought you wore a condom.” She panics.

He better be wearing one, she can't fall pregnant, her mother would kill her. Her father would burn her and use her ashes as Aromat.

“I did. I am.” The big baby answers like a sulky kid. He is a dual king indeed.

“Then why did you ask for permission to release inside me?” Khethiwe.

“I just felt like saying it.” He lies back on the bed, using his hands as a pillow.

There's a content smile on his face, Khethiwe cannot believe this is the Ntaba she's always feared.

He tenses when she shifts closer, eliminating the space between them, and starts counting strands of hair on his armpits. She's going against the terms and conditions.

NO CUDDLING!!!

“Thank you Ntaba, your cucumber always

makes me happy.” It’s not a lie, she is the happiest woman in the world right now. Ntaba’s face crinkles.

“Really? Cucumber, banana, eggplant.” He mumbles. “Your love for food gives me not so good goose-bumps. You’re using my crotch to make a sex salad, Khethi.”

He leaves her laughing alone in bed as he goes to dispose of the condom.

MATHONGA

Twenty-Four

NTABEZIKUDE -

Cuddling was out of the question, now he’s waking up with her in his arms. He groans like a man in pain, his face crinkles as he regards her with a dark, mysterious gaze

“Khethiwe.”

His voice is croaky, it always is when he wakes up. Khethiwe does not move when he shakes her shoulder for the second time, he wants to get up, but she’s on top of him. It’s not in his nature to be aggressive towards a woman, otherwise he would’ve pushed her aside.

“Khethiwe, wake up.”

A little louder this time, her eyelids twitch before she slowly opens her tired eyes.

“What time is it?” It’s not dusk yet, so she’s safe. Ntaba’s eyes chase the fancy clock on his wall, his family should be home in two hours. 4pm is usually their arrival time.

“You still have time to get dressed and leave my room.” At his words, Khethiwe’s gaze wards off, the man is handsome but that does not mean his coldness can be excused. She shifts from his side as he grimaces at her. She clears her

throat and sits up.

She's looking for her dress, it flies to her before she can ask him to help find it.

When did he leave the bed? She's suddenly afraid to look straight at him, the man who had her screaming his name not so long ago and confidently whipping up a sex-salad.

"Uh..." Ntaba clears his throat, he's standing at the foot of the bed, an impassive stare on Khethiwe who is struggling to don her dress.

"You do know this is not serious, right? We're both benefiting from this, it doesn't have to have a label. They ruin everything." He feels a need to explain himself, why he's chasing her out of his room.

Maybe he's noted the sadness in her eyes, or shame rather. Khethiwe nods, afraid to maintain eye contact.

“I know.”

“Okay, good.” The bastard makes a mistake of sounding relieved, he goes as far as adding a smile. Awkward silence knocks, no one is willing to open for it, so it breaks in.

“Uh...” Ntaba kicks it back out with the sound of his voice, he has the nerve to consider her with a penetrating gawk. His eyes are roaming through her body, salivating. Khethiwe can feel his gaze on her, and denies him a second glance.

“Are you going to make the bed... before you leave?”

He doesn't have to ask, it is her job. She's a bloody servant and he's this wealthy fuck-boy who is not ready for a stable relationship while his peers, thirty-one-year olds are trying for baby number two.

Khethiwe shrugs, she's trying hard not to roll

her eyes at him.

"You're not upset, right? I mean we have a mutual understanding that we're only having fun." Ntaba.

"Of course." That's her answer as she scampers off the bed to don her body with the now creased dress, this is not her style.

She loathes dresses, but because this idiot she has fallen for is a sucker for a woman in a dress, she thought she would impress him and maybe look decent for once in her life.

"I'm not Cinderella looking for a ring, a white dress and a happily ever after." Khethiwe retorts, a spasm of pain is heard in her voice.

Ntaba is putting on his shoes when the door flings open and Mathonga flies in heaving and sweaty. His eyes are red-rimmed and wide with worry. He freezes as he sees Khethiwe standing

by his brother's bed.

Thank God she is fully dressed, Ntaba was ready to jump in front of her and hide what only he is allowed to see.

“Ndoda?” The question is aimed at a wide-eyed Mathonga, standing in the doorway. His bulging eyes running between a bored looking Ntaba and a bashful Khethiwe. “Wakhamisa, yini? Khuluma ndoda.” (Speak.)

Khethiwe's shocked by Ntaba's indifference, this is supposed to be a secret, but he's not bothered that Mothanga has walked in on them. A small smile visits her face, this is one step to owning Ntaba's heart.

“Bongiwe called, bhuti Zakhe was attacked by some men. Her words were all over the place, she was too hysterical to speak.”

A gasp... rampaged by Khethiwe, she's quick to

tears.

Ntaba's jaw ticks, as he releases an animalistic growl in his throat. Gloom clouds his eyes, his soft aura is replaced by a dark heavy aura... intimidating. The thought of his brother attacked infuriates him. Who would dare touch Vukuzakhe Khanyile?

The respect he has for Zakhe overshadows the respect he has for his father, now some fucker had the nerve to lay a hand on the man he esteems higher than the one who gave him life.

"Have you called ubaba?" He queries, tilting his head to drink in Mathonga's panicky features.

"He's on his way, along with Hlabela and Ndlela." Mathonga is feeling awkward, maybe they should step out.

Ntaba has never let a woman into his room, this is why Mathonga felt no need to knock before budging in.

Ntaba notices that he's uncomfortable and drags him outside with him, shutting the door behind.

There's no twinge of shame or worry in his face, nor is he going to try and explain himself. He's a grown man, he can lay with any woman he wants and not justify himself.

"Did Bongiwe tell you what happened?" Ntaba asks.

"No, she couldn't get a proper sentence out. I guess we'll find out when we get there. Godswill has booked us tickets to Johannesburg."

Ntaba frowns, appearing mystified. "Who's that?"

His question has Mathonga snorting at how ignorant his brother is, "Bhuti Zakhe's assistant. We're all travelling, except for Dalisile. I tried to get a hold of her, her phone is off."

Ntaba doesn't care.

"If Bongiwe is behind my brother's attack, I will not spare her." He knows Bongiwe is capable, he witnessed their fight the other day and how vicious she can be. Hell hath no fury...

"We shouldn't jump into conclusions, ndoda." Mathonga announces, again Ntaba does not care.

"Are you okay?" He's questioning the tears peeping through Mathonga's eyes. Mathonga clears his throat and drops his gaze.

"How did I not see this coming bhuti, I always see these things coming." Mathonga's question leaves a soft chuckle in Ntaba's mouth.

"Don't lie, you're not Mboro." Ntaba is trying to make things less awkward.

Mathonga shakes his head, "Okay, maybe not

always. But they were supposed to show me. Have they completely turned their backs on me?"

That old man, the one he saw in his dream was promising. He said there'll be a storm, but he also made him believe that he won't walk alone in the storm. They should've done their job and warned him about this.

"Blaming yourself will not help Vukuzakhe." Ntaba crosses his arms in his chest. "Stop being soft ndoda, how are you going to handle your wife's child-birth?"

Earth to Ntaba, you're supposed to be comforting the man not scaring him.

"What?" Mathonga is dazed, he gulps. "What does this have to do with Zakhe's condition.

"Nothing." He leaves it at that. "Wipe your tears and go pack your bags, I'm not going to travel with a cry baby. If it will make you feel better,

there's Danone in the fridge, grab that as well."

"Can you stop insulting me." Mathonga cracks and lands a punch on his brother's shoulder.

A groan and chuckle derive from Ntaba, "Can you stop crying like a woman?"

"Ndoda, I'm..."

"Ndoda." Ntaba mimics his brother. "That's what you are... indoda. You need to start acting like one, Zakhe will want you to be strong."

"Okay... I hear you." Mathonga nods, tenaciously rubbing his red-rimmed eyes.

"That's more like it, that's the authority I would like to hear." He comforts him with a pat to his back. "Now you are ready to be someone's husband."

It's silly how he thinks he knows everything and Mathonga is not in the mood to entertain him. The sound of the gate sliding open catches

their attention, the family is back.

NALA-

The servants are restless and anxious after learning about Vukuzakhe, I haven't been around him enough to worry about his life. But I feel for Mathonga, he looks the most affected. Maybe it's because he's the last born.

The chief and his sons are leaving for Johannesburg, there's heavy tension hovering about. The brothers look scary with those heated faces they are sporting.

Leaving Khethiwe in the kitchen, I rush outside to speak to Mathonga. I didn't think he would leave without saying goodbye. I'm relieved that the chief is in the car, and his brothers are

approaching the parking area. The sun will set soon, if I'm right, 2 hours from now.

"Mathonga wait." He stops and swivels to face me, a pained scowl on his surface. He's so transparent that I can see and feel his pain, save for the unshed tears in his eyes.

"I'm sorry about your brother." I tell him, he doesn't say anything. I think he doesn't know what to say. "He will be okay."

I don't sound convincing, but what the heck, I don't know how to comfort him. And I don't know why I hug him, but I do.

I think I will freeze and panic when his arms enfold around my embarrassingly small frame. It feels right, there's a sense of belonging as well. Like this is where I'm meant to be, swallowed by the warmth of his arms.

"We'll talk when I get back," he utters as he pulls

away. I allow his hands access to my cheeks, it feels intimate and sacred. "Please take care of yourself."

"And don't leave the premises." A profound rumble spiked with authority says in passing, it's Ntabezikude. He did not even spare me a glance. My inquisitive gaze follows his over 6 foot form to his car until he's situated inside. How tall are these people? This is why they all drive big cars, they'd probably strain their necks in small vehicles.

"Don't go anywhere, Nala." Mathonga's plea brings me back to him, back to the worried look in his eyes. "There are guards around here, you're all safe."

"I won't." This is my hiding place. Besides, Petros is hospitalised, he won't be looking for me.

His arms are around me again, for a short time. I'm cloaked by coldness and loneliness when he lets go. He traces Ntabezikude's steps to his car, they will be travelling together, so it looks. Hlabela and Ndleleni are seated in the same car. It's the chief who is driving alone.

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I don't wait for them to drive away, but go back to Khethiwe in the kitchen. She's not here, I'm lugged by the sound of familiar voices towards the lounge. I find her slouched on the sofa, feet spread out and a remote in hand. She's watching Isibaya, I don't think we're allowed to make ourselves at home.

"Khethiwe!" My voice startles her, but she makes no effort to jump up. "What if Ndlunkulu walks in?"

"Relax Nala, she won't be coming home soon."

There's a smile in her voice. "The first thing she will find when she turns on her phone are missed calls and messages from her husband and sons. Knowing her, she will use her broom to fly to Joburg."

Wow!

"Sit down and watch TV with me, the bosses are not home." Khethiwe conveys and grabs a glass of what looks like cranberry juice from the expensive looking coffee table. Her sip is loud and unaffected.

I don't understand how she can be so free. What if they decide to drive back? What if one of them forgot something?

Unlike Khethiwe, I'm not too comfortable to make myself at home, so I position myself on the edge of the one seater couch. Her manner tells me that she wants to roll her eyes, but

doesn't.

"Is this what you always do when the owners are not around?" I'm curious.

"The owners are always around, if it's not Dalisile, it's the brothers."

She turns the volume down, I'm glad because Sunday's voice was starting to annoy me. His ruthlessness reminds me of Petros.

"Mathonga is cool, he treats the staff like family. Hlabela and Ndleleni are too serious for my liking, they walk around like we're invisible. Vukuzakhe is always worried about this and that. Ntaba doesn't care about anyone, he lives in his own world."

I notice how the tone of her voice changes at the mention of Ntaba's name. I'm about to mind her business when my phone buzzes with a message. It's Mam'Julia, she wants me home,

to take care of her husband. I don't want to go. I won't go.

She sounded happy this morning when I told her that I'm employed, why has she suddenly changed her mind? I can't grasp how she can't see Petros for who he is, or maybe she chooses to be ignorant.

God says ask anything and it will be given to you. This is what I have been doing since Mam' Julia called me early this morning to tell me that my so called father was attacked by thugs and is in the hospital. I asked God to take his life, I'm not sure if my prayers have reached heaven yet. I doubt they have, otherwise I would've gotten the news that he's dead and rotting in the deepest pit in hell.

I haven't heard from the twins, that woman says they are visiting Petros' aunt in Eshowe. She's lying. That ignorant bitch.

I switch my phone off and place it on the couch beside me, only to get an inquisitive stare from Khethiwe.

“That’s either your ex or a guy you’re avoiding.” She’s forward.

“I don’t have exes.” It’s the truth, between raising the twins and being Petros’ prisoner, I never had the time to live. The old bastard would’ve killed me, anyway. I don’t like the look Khethiwe is giving me, men are not my favourite topic.

“A beautiful girl like you should have about ten or twelve exes.” She sits up, the smile on her face is expectant.

“I have none.”

“Impossible,” She giggles, placing her feet on the couch, Indian style. “How old are you?”

I want to throw the stupid question back at her.

“Old enough.”

“Old enough to have ten exes,” she’s laughing again.

“I have never had a boyfriend,” and I’m not ashamed, men are not the next best thing since sliced bread.

I’m a bit uncomfortable by how Khethiwe gasps, it can’t be that shocking.

“You’re a virgin?” My heart starts to crack at her question, too many emotions engulf me, more than I can handle. I can’t tell her where to get off, not with that friendly smile on her face. She means no harm, she’s unaware of my fretting situation.

“Oh my Shembe, Nala.” Her hand glides to her chest. “But I believe you, you do look like a

virgin. Innocent and very reticent.”

“I’m not shy if that’s what you are saying.” I’m not shy, maybe I’m too caged by Petros’ shackles to let loose and live.

“It is, it is what I’m saying. You’re reserved, you keep to yourself most of the time and you hardly keep eye contact when talking to people. Dalisile the most, which I don’t blame you. That woman makes my skin crawl, we’re just lucky she’s hardly around and pays little attention to the workers.” Khethiwe.

It must be a blessing that she’s changed the subject, I grab the opportunity. I’d rather gossip about the chief’s wife than talk about me.

“You call her by name?” It’s not the first time.

“When she’s not around,” she splutters. Her eyes flip and come back to their place.

“Mathonga calls her by name too.”

Yeah, that’s probably the relationship they have.

Khethiwe is just a servant. Wait a minute.

“Is it because you’re sleeping with the boss?”

My question has her blinking rapidly. The confidence she had seconds ago is gone.

“What are you talking about?” She avoids my gaze and hides her shifty eyes behind the glass of juice. Or is it wine? You never know with Khethiwe.

“Stop asking, I’m not going to tell you anything.”
Khethiwe.

“Come on, you gave me some of your clothes. Aren’t we best friends already or should I send a friend request first?”

I can be talkative too, as long as the spotlight is not on me.

“Emotional blackmail? Really, Nala? And that’s not how it works.” She argues, now flipping

through channels. She settles for channel 171, Ntabezikude's favourite channel. I will never understand his obsession with serial killers and women who kill their husband.

"I think I like Mathonga, he's kind and very considerate. He makes me feel at home, not once has he made me feel unwelcomed." I open up, to get her to speak. I never thought she would ever be shy with me. She's only reluctant around Ntabezikude. "So, now we're besties and since I've shared my secret, it's your turn."

My statement tickles her, her laughter fills the lounge. It's friendly and warm.

"You are so childish, Nala. I didn't expect this from a quiet girl like you." Khethiwe.

I'm not quiet, I just have a lot going on. My mind is forever absent.

“You’re a beautiful girl Khethiwe, I don’t blame Ntaba. He must be attracted by the long hair on your eyes.”

“The what, now?” She regards me with squinted eyes.

“The hair on the top and bottom of your eyes.”
Me.

Why does that look in her eyes make me feel stupid? I should’ve said this in Zulu. I’m trying to teach myself English.

“Eyelashes.” I believe Khethiwe is correcting me, it’s kind of her to do it without laughing at me.

“Yeah that, it makes you look like a real life Barbie.” I accept and sing her praises, she is beautiful. I envy her fleshy body, I wish I wasn’t suffering from malnutrition, maybe I wouldn’t be so insecure.

“I like Ntaba, he affects me.” Adoration writes itself on Khethiwe’s features, she completely

ignores my worship. "He touches me without actually touching me, my body and heart recognise him."

"Someone is whipped." It's my turn to laugh at her, she escapes her seat and squeezes herself on the one seater beside me. Her hips take up most of the space. Her arm wraps itself around my shoulder, she pulls me back with her till we're leaning comfortably on the couch.

"Trust me, Ntabezikude Khanyile is a good whipper." Khethiwe sings.

"That's disgusting." It is, she's basically painting unnecessary pictures.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but chains and whips excite me." She hums after this strange saying.

"Speak like a normal person, you are confusing me." I declare, a little shamed that I'm terrible with the English language.

“Okay, this is what I’m trying to say. I would let Ntaba do things to me, things I can’t even say out loud. Unspeakable things, disrespectful things. I want him not be able to look at me after, or utter a single word.” Her declaration makes my stomach flip, an uncomfortable feeling seeps through my body.

“I don’t understand,” I shake my head, confused.

“Argh Nala, you’re so slow.” She complains, leaning her head against mine. “I want him to cut my throat, snap my neck and hide my body.” She explains, which is useless because I’m still lost. I blame this channel her and Ntaba love to watch.

I shift from her grip, to focus on her face. She’s smiling like a love sick teenager.

“Come on, not literally.” Her squealing hurts my ears, making me flinch.

I don't say anything when she reaches for her phone and taps on Google search. Air is knocked out of my lungs as she flips the phone and shows me a naked woman in bondage, she's lying on her back on a mattress. Each wrist is tied to each ankle with a rope.

There's a leather gag on her mouth and a matching blind fold that deprives her of sight. The picture squeezes my lungs, making it impossible for me breathe. My heart beating violently against my chest makes my head spin, which in turn blurs my vision.

"This, my friend... is BDSM. It's..." I don't let her finish, instead stand and run out of the main house.

MATHONGA-

Twenty-five

KHETHIWE-

It's bad enough that the Khanyiles think I'm this reticent girl who trembles at the sight of their unruly son. Romeo with a black rose and a scythe in his hand. That's my Ntabezikude.

Lord knows how that man makes my insides tremble. In any case, I can't let Nala fall under the same classification, she's too shy it makes me look bad. I need to teach her a thing or two about being confident.

I followed her to her room, she refuses to open for me. It's getting dark outside, and rumour has it there are ghosts in these premises. I don't know how true they are, I've never seen any.

"Nala, talk to me please." I try for the umpteenth time. I'm losing my patience here. Is she crying? The sobs I hear can't be belonging to the

supposed ghosts.

“I don’t know what happened back there, why you ran off like that.” Is this how man feel when they run after us? It’s abuse, honestly. They should be getting paid for this.

One final knock before I give up and the door opens. The first thing I see is her tear drenched face.

“What’s wrong?”

She shrugs at my question, but lets me in still. I invite myself to sit on the bed, and ready myself to pacify her. I don’t have a PHD in consoling women, my parents were blessed with one girl. It’s always been me surrounded by two boys, eons older than me.

“I’m okay.” I don’t believe her. “You didn’t have to run after me, you know?”

“Are you kidding? I had to check on you.”

Honestly, I thought she was going to jump off a cliff or something.

How do you chase a fat elephant out of a room? The silence and tension is killing me.

I watch her as she plays with the hem of her shirt, standing in the middle of this spacious rondavel. I try to push back the urge to snoop, ask what the matter is. Maybe the picture of the naked woman didn't sit well with her.

I myself do not like to see my naked body, it's a recoiling sight. Not traumatising, but cringing. And to think men salivate over a woman's body?

“Did that picture trigger something? A painful past maybe?” I shouldn't be asking this. How will I counsel her if she opens up? I'm not Dr. Phil. Her eyes snap to me, wide and dubious.

“Why would you think that?” Her question is instant.

“I’m not thinking anything, I’m only asking because...”

“It didn’t trigger anything, let it be, please.” This time her voice is hesitant, yet carries authority that tells me this subject is not up for discussion.

“You’re defensive, Nala. Something is...”

“Will you stop?” Did she just shout at me? “I don’t want to talk about that picture, neither do I want to talk about my past.”

“Okay, okay.” I raise my hands in defence, as I stand to meet her height. “You don’t have to fight me...”

“I’m not fighting you,” she continues to bite my head off.

Nala turns away, showing me her side profile. I feel like an idiot for meddling.

Great, now I have to apologise.

“I think we should go out tomorrow, we can buy some clothes at Mr. Price.” If this doesn’t serve as an apology, then I’ll hang myself with tissue paper. “The clothes I gave you are not doing justice to your small frame.”

They are too big for her, she walks around looking like a coat hanger. A sigh is released, she stirs to look my way. Thank Shembe she’s not crying.

“I haven’t received my salary yet, maybe we can go at the end of the month.” Nala.

That’s a plan, considering I have to send money home before my mother comes for me. Buuut...

“It’s okay, you can pay me when you get paid.”

There’s always a FOR SALE aisle at Mr. Price, simple t-shirts go for R50. I’ll be lucky if we find those.

The small smile on her face makes this trip worth it.

“Okay.” She nods like a kid. I still want to know her age, she looks too young to be working as a servant. She never talks about her family, which I find strange. They must be the reason for her sad face, family can be toxic.

“Hey, it’s a Saturday night. Let’s go out and get drunk.” It’s the perfect time to do so.

“We can’t, we have to watch over the house.”
Did she just say watch over the house?

“No we don’t, there are guards plus the other servants. If it happens that there’s a break-in, what will we do? We are just two defenceless young girls.” I can be very persuasive.

“I know but...” She looks unsure.

Gosh Nala!!!

“Anything after 'but' is nonsense,” I interpose.

“Mathonga said not to leave the premises.”

Nala has not met a village Zulu man, those ones are control freaks.

“We’ll be gone for an hour, Mathonga is on his way to Johannesburg. He’ll never know that you disobeyed him.”

Yawn! Men are such slave drivers. The only man allowed to control me is Ntaba, I would kneel for that god. I grab Nala’s hand and drag her outside with me.

“Where are we going?” She’s freaking out.

“My room, I’m going to make you look amazing. Men will drool over you.”

She pulls her hand from mine, and stops, a few seconds pass before she speaks.

“I don’t want men drooling over me,” she clarifies with a headshake, her heavy sigh fills the space between us.

“Okay, women then. You know you’re hot when you attract both genders.” This should make her feel better.

Without her permission, I grab her hand again and lug her toward my room.

THE KHANYILES-

It took the family 1 hour to get to Johannesburg, Dalisile is still unreachable. Bongiwe was given a sedative, according to the nurse they spoke to, she was panic-stricken and could not keep still. She too is lying in a hospital bed.

They haven’t spoken to a doctor and that alone has left these Zulu men frustrated and grouchy. Not knowing what is happening is torturous, the wait is insufferable.

The doctors are with Vukuzakhe in the theatre

room. Mathonga is slumped on the cold floor, knees pressed to his chest and face buried in his sweaty hands. Ntaba thinks he's crying. He grimaces at his little brother, not because he's annoyed by his tears but the sight of him in pain stirs something in him, something that has him craving for revenge.

Hlabela is seated in a silver bench, an open bible on his lap, the last time he spoke he had read from the book of Psalm, 35 to be precise. Ndleleni has not uttered a word since their arrival, neither has Vumile. They are here and there, pacing back and forth, and if they feel tired they settle on one of the silver benches.

“What if he di...”

“Thonga lami...” Ntaba interjects Mathonga's first words, the look he gives him forces him to divert his gaze. This young one doesn't think

sometimes, he utters whatever his brain summons up. “Don’t say it, Vukuzakhe is strong. He can fight this, he will fight.”

Wrath boils within him, Ntaba sounds and looks the calmest, but he’s anything but.

“Ntabezikude, calm yourself.” His father must’ve heard his emotions roaring through the silence. Ntaba flicks his eyes to his direction and forces a fake smile.

“Sis’Bongiwe.” Mathonga jolts to his feet, his surge has everyone turning to him and... here comes Bongiwe in a hospital gown. She looks haggard and frail. There’s a nurse with her, serving as Bongiwe’s crutch. She’s handed over to the brother who gets to them first, Mathonga.

“Are you okay?” Mathonga asks, her response is an indistinct head nod.

“What happened to my brother?” Ntaba inquires,

pushing past Mathonga.

Bongiwe looks up at him, tears stream down her face, seemingly unstoppable. Vumile is about to tell Ntaba to leave her alone when she hides her face on his torso and wraps her arms around his middle. Odd!

She's never hugged her brothers-in-law. The rest exchange stropy looks, they understand her pain but they don't do that around here. Touch their brother's wife.

Ntaba looks uncomfortable, he clears his throat, places his hands on her shoulders, and gradually pushes her away from him. It's not his job to calm his brother's wife. Bongwiwe stumbles back a smidgeon, she protectively hugs her frame, looking down for a moment before looking up at Ntaba again.

"Who attacked my brother?" His voice is getting

louder, Vumile scolds him with a glare.

“Now is not the time, Ntabezikude.” Vumile objects, always ready to defend his daughter in-law.

Ntaba’s nose flares, he clamps his eyes only to open them in a flash, something flickers in his dark gaze as he shifts it to his father.

“When is the right time baba? Someone tried to kill my brother and I want to know who.”

The thing about Ntaba is that he does not beat around the bush. He’s a fighter, a gladiator, an untameable lion and his family knows that.

“I understand your anger ndodana, but you can’t let it control you. Bongiwe has been through so much today, she lost her baby and now her husband is fighting for his life in a hospital bed. Give her a break.” Vumile.

“What about my brother baba? Hasn’t he been through enough? Don’t I owe it to him to find his

attackers and bring them to their knees?” Ntaba shouts.

What he actually means is ‘find his attackers and slit their throats.

“Zakhe might die, and you’re telling me this... this...”

Ntaba growls as he air punches. The man suddenly appears the most angered and it’s justified. Hlabela steps closer, he presses a hand on Ntaba’s shoulder.

“Calm down ndoda, we’re all on the same side here.”

“But I agree with Ntaba, Sis'Bongi has to tell us who attacked our brother.” Ndleleni is just as angry, Vumile is not okay with him agreeing with Ntaba. These two combined can’t be good.

“It... it was...” Bongiwe chokes a sob. “It was the herd boy and his brothers.” Her words are slurred.

This can't be true, Ntaba shakes his head in disbelief.

"Koti?" He murmurs, ticking with annoyance. His form carrying the tension of a prosecutor. "You're lying."

The look he gives Bongiwe is cold, she grows pale and shrinks away from him. Who wouldn't with how he just growled at her?

"Why would I lie?" The words tumble out confidently. "I was there, I saw him and his brother. He led them to us, and did nothing to stop his brother from attacking my husband."

"You're lying Bongiwe," Ntaba takes a step, towering above her with anger boiling through his veins. His hands tighten around her arms, it's the first time he lays a hand on a woman.

"This is you Bongiwe, you planned this."

"No!" A scream of shock escapes her mouth, watery eyes bulging out of their sockets.

“You want my brother dead, so you sent people to kill him.” Ntaba.

“No, no. I love him, I love my husband.” Bongiwe yells, trying to free herself from Ntaba’s tight grip. She’s saved by her father-in-law who pulls her away from him.

“I’m going to say this once and I will not repeat myself.” Vumile says, with his usual calm voice. “Leave her alone.”

“Excuse me.”

They didn’t see the doctor coming, everyone flocks around the short coloured man with a bald head.

“How is my brother?” Ndleleni is the one to ask first.

“He suffered a blunt force head trauma, luckily

it did not cause nerve damage to the brain. However, his condition is critical. For now we have to wait for him to wake up, then we'll take it from there." Doctor.

"What does that mean?" Mathonga.

"He might not be the same when he wakes up. He'll most probably suffer from migraines, seizures, repeated vomiting and body weakness, long losses of consciousness. The trauma can also lead to confusion and unusual behaviour. But that's not a hundred percent guaranteed. Like I said, we have to wait for him to wake up."

The doctor's explanation confuses these Zulu men, all they want to know is whether their brother is going to live or not.

"Can we see him?" Mathonga again.

"We're transferring him to the ICU, a nurse will let you know when you can see him. In the meantime, pray." And with this, he leaves them

to their confusion.

“There’s a chapel on the first floor, we should go and pray there.” Hlabela’s suggestion is frowned upon, mostly by Ntabezikude and Ndleleni.

“I will wait here.” Ntaba says, leans against the wall while scrutinising Bongiwe under his dark gaze.

“Everyone is going to the chapel, this is no time to be selfish or ignorant. Your brother needs all the prayers he can get.”

Vumile leads the way after this command, Bongiwe says she’s going to the bathroom and saunters the opposite direction. Hlabela is the first to follow his father, Mathonga is not far behind. Ndleleni and Ntaba drag their feet, but they reach their destination.

There are wooden benches, facing a candle lit

altar.

“Kneel.” It’s an authoritative instruction from Vumile, no one can argue with his authority. He kneels first, his sons follow. A sigh of frustration escapes Ntaba, he doesn’t see a point in this. His father notices how he’s actually seated flat on his bum, knees up and arms stretched out on the wooden tiles, while everyone is on their knees.

“Ntabezikude, pray.”

Something must be wrong with Vumile or he’s under a lot of stress and it has him losing his mind. The brothers share unbelieving looks, maybe they heard wrong.

“Don’t you mean Hlabela, baba?” Mathonga slowly corrects, surely he made a mistake. Ntaba can’t even pronounce ‘God.’

“Yeah baba, I don’t know how to pray. Ndleleni,

you pray ndoda.” Ntaba disputes, he’s stressed and anxious. Where will he even begin?

Ndleleni sneers at his brother, “I don’t want to lie... I sleep at church. I don’t even know what’s happening half of the time.”

“I’m not an old fool, I know what I said.” The stubbornness of Vumile takes over.

“I... I don’t know how to pray baba.” Ntaba is not lying, he’s bunked church if not missed it. Who is God anyway? He doesn’t know.

“Just say anything, God won’t judge you. He accepts us for who we are.” Vumile is getting impatient.

“Okay, mfethu lalela.” Ntaba starts, he’s actually snapping the words out, a frown on his features.

“They say you died at the age of 33, so technically you’re older than me. I will try to be as respectful as possible. People say you’re

white and I refuse to bow down to a white man, so for my own sanity, let's say you're an older version of me. Heck I don't even know how to do this prayer thing. You see when my family went to church, I preferred to hang out with Satan. You remember him, right? He's not that bad actually, you two should set a date and fix your differences. This fight has been going on for too long. Over 2000 years, that's the longest fight till date. A record Jesu wabantu."

Someone nudges him, he opens one eye to see his father glaring at him. A little to the left is Mathonga fighting giggles and Ndleleni actually laughing. Hlabela must be thinking of a way to remove the demon tormenting his brother.

"Don't be stupid wena, what are you saying to God? This is not a game Ntabezikude." Vumile scolds, condemning his son with an icy glare.

“You said anything baba, God won’t judge me.”
He appears confused. What do these people want from him? He should be out there, avenging his brother not playing church.

“Don’t be an idiot, pray like a normal person.”
Vumile grunts.

This is what Ntaba gets for not kneeling. What a way to punish him. He clears his throat and closes his eyes.

“Bhuti omdala, rumour has it that you heal people. My brother needs healing. Maybe you can wave your magic hand. You know that magic thing you did to that man... umaLazaro”

Ntaba sounds impatient, his mouth barely opens and eyes are tightly shut. His appearance resembling a petulant child who hates being scolded.

“Vukuzakhe is too young to die mfethu, he still

has to marry koti and adopt cats and dogs. Plus he owes me and he's such a decent guy his ghost will probably want to pay me back. If possible, we can do an exchange. That's how it works, right? Take Sis'Bongiwe and bring back my brother. 50/50 baba. It's a great transaction."

He hears a tongue click, and when he opens his eyes, sees his father walking away.

"Baba, where are you going? I was getting to the healing part." Ntaba shouts after him.

As the door slams behind, laughter erupts in the room. Mathonga is rolling on the floor, laughter resembling the sound of a hyped up monkey.

Ndleleni is on a bench, stifling his laughter, hand on his stomach and eyes filled with tears. At least Hlabela is decent to grace a smile.

"You're hopeless ndoda." Hlabela says and follows his father out.

“Sis'Bongiwe is a good exchange bhuti. I’m sure they need cleaners in heaven, she can mop the golden streets.” Mathonga says, through a loud horse laugh. He’s back on the floor, sounding like a donkey on steroids.

Ntaba looks defeated, they said pray and he prayed.

“I’m going to see my brother, msunu yenu.” Ntaba announces, clicks his tongue and leaves with a frown covering his face.

MATHONGA-

Twenty-six

Sponsored by anonymous.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He walks out of the bedroom wearing black Adidas track pants, a matching hoodie and a

red EFF beret. He's whistling to an umzabalazo song, one would think his spirits are high, that he's not bothered by his brother's misfortune. But he's a seething animal inside, a raging lion ready to devour.

He left his brothers and sister-in-law at the hospital, they will follow shortly. Mathonga and Bongiwé will join him and Vumile at the house in Northcliff. Hlabela preferred to book into a hotel and Ndleleni is flying back home as per Ntaba's request.

There's a voice coming from the kitchen, he follows it and as expected, finds his father seated on a barstool, engaged in a telephone conversation. They lock eyes for a millisecond, Vumile's are shifty. The old man clears his throat before killing the call. A wide grin graces Ntaba's face, he pats his father on the shoulder on his way to the fridge. He can feel his heavy gaze on him as he opens it and grab a carton of

Mageu.

“Muntu omdala, you’ve been looking at me since I left your wife’s womb. Don’t tell me you haven’t had enough.” This he says before quenching his thirst with the cold beverage.

“Don’t act smart with me, Ntabezikude.” Vumile snaps. “What do you know about Vukuzakhe and Sangweni’s youngest boy?”

Ntaba turns to his father, a smile is familiar with his mouth, so it easily finds its way there.

“Koti?” He raises his brows in question, his eyes though hold an answer.

Vumile doesn’t reply, he is impatiently waiting, brows cracked skyward.

Ntaba shrugs, “Modern day Romeo and Juliet, only their story won’t be a tragedy. I’ll make sure of it.”

“What are you saying?” Vumile is confused, although he kind of has an idea what Ntaba is talking about.

“Just that,” he finishes off his drink and tosses the container in a trash can. “If anything happens to my brother and his Koti, I will have to take out the people involved. I won’t spare even an ant?”

His voice is cold, neither is there life in his eyes. At this point, it’s hard for Vumile to recognise his son. He knows he is rowdy, but to resemble the devil? Wonders are here to stay.

“Who is this Koti?” Vumile asks. He shakes his head in defeat as his son smiles at him like an innocent little boy. He’s used to his many moods, how he’d transform like a chameleon in seconds.

“My brother’s heart.” If only life were as simple as this answer.

“Ntabezikude!” Vumile yaps, slamming a hand on the kitchen island. “What is this nonsense you’re promoting? Vukuzakhe is married to Bongawe.”

“I know,” Another shrug from Ntaba as he leans against the fridge. “No one said he’s divorcing his wife and if he does, it will be his decision.”

“Is this what you boys do behind my back? This is bullshit, it’s unholy. How does a man lust after another man? It’s disgusting.” Vumile is yelling, waving his hand as a criticism. It seems to anger Ntabezikude, a rare thing to happen.

“What about you baba? Mr. Holier than thou. What, are you applying for Lucifer’s position in heaven?” Unlike Vumile, he keeps calm, but does not cloak the irritation in his voice. “This God you’re chasing sees right through you, that you are nothing but a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

“What are you talking about?” Vumile growls,

he's not sure he wants to hear this.

“Don't you think it's time to bring them home?”

He fixes Vumile with a dark gaze, dark as this very night, somewhere between the Joburg lights, the hidden stars and the pitch black sky.

“With all due respect baba, you are too old to be living a double life. Nandi deserves better, it's her misfortune she fell for a man like you.”

“Ntabezikude?” Shock suffocates Vumile that he reels back but maintains his balance.

Nandi ceased to be a secret the day he brought her to the Khanyile ranch. He didn't disclose their relationship, but hoped his children would fill in the blanks. There was nothing wrong with them thinking she's his mistress, every man has a side dish. A burger with mixed vegies or chips on the side, restaurants do it too. Solomon had 300 concubines, no one called him out on it.

“Ndodana...” his heart is ramming against his ribcage, it wants out but he’ll die if it escapes.

“Let me explain, I...” He can’t explain how he let it go so far.

“I don’t want your explanation baba,” Ntaba articulates. “Bring Nandi and Zamangwane home, I’m giving you three days baba. If you don’t, I will fetch them myself.”

His eyes widen, Ntaba can’t do this to him.

“Not with Dalisile there, she’ll kill them.” Vumile responds nervously.

“Don’t you think you are giving your wife too much credit? Dalisile is a toothless bulldog.”

Ntaba disputes. “Maybe you should put her on a leash since you’re afraid of her.”

Vumile’s mouth opens, but nothing emits. He wants to spill the beans, explain why he’s done things the way he has for so many years.

However, he's unable to speak

"Out of respect for you, I kept this secret to myself. I thought you'd wake up one day and well... as the white people say 'smell the damn coffee.' But no more, Nandi and Zamangwane are coming home." Ntaba finishes, watching Vumile blink his shock away. He still looks taken off guard.

"Vukuzakhe is going to be whom he wants to be, and you are not going to judge him for it. If he wants to marry koti, then he will. Heck if he wants to stay married to Bongiwane and take koti as his second wife then I will support my brother."

He just said second wife... Ntaba said second wife...

His phone buzzes, interrupting the squabble. He reveals it from his pocket. There's a message

from a number saved under Peaches. He ignores it and opens the one saved under Alfred. There's an address, a name and a five sentence paragraph. It must be good news because he smiles brightly.

"What is it?" Vumile asks, frowning at his son.

"A date," he gets closer and kisses his father on the cheek. "Don't wait up."

He snatches a kitchen knife from the knife stand and leaves the house. This is the part they diagnose him with multiple personality disorder, Vumile is left shaken.

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He has just arrived in Braamfontein, this is the address sent by Alfred. Clifton Heights, room

number 301. He enters the building, thinks of taking the stairs, but the elevator will get him there faster. It's hot tonight, that's probably why the door is wide open. He grips the security gate and slightly pushes it.

Alfred Madi did say the gate was broken and the owner has not bothered getting it fixed. He also said he's sending one of his men over to lend a helping hand, Ntaba appreciates it, but he prefers working alone.

He hears voices as he plods down the hallway, a family of four is comfortably seated on their couches engrossed on the television screen.

Ntaba leans against the doorpost, crosses his arms over his chest, and shakes his head before yawning.

"Can we switch to the crime channel, Sibiya?"

The sound of his voice has the tenants turning

their heads to him, a man jolts to his feet, his anger is visible. But Ntaba is not fazed.

“The Perfect Murder is about to start, no offence to... that.” He points at the active TV screen.

“Who are you? And what are you doing in my house?” The man barks, approaching Ntaba with an ugly frown displayed on his face.

Ntaba tilts his head, “Would you run if I said the angel of death?” His voice is soft, yet unnerving. There’s something about the way he’s leering at the chubby man with a beer-belly, something that sends unsettling chills down the Sibiya's spine. His feet halt, wavering and decide to back-pedal.

“I’m going to...”

“Call the cops?” Ntaba disturbs, raising his brows in question. “Don’t be mean, Sibiya.”

A quick smile twinkles past his lips, he lifts the

hem of his hoodie, revealing a Bereta M9 pistol secured between his side and the elastic waist band. He gestures that the man sits back down which he does without question.

“My children have nothing to do with this.” Sibiya is basically pleading, fear dances in his eyes as he shifts them from his wife to his two sons who look not more than six years old.

Working in the black market means your life is at risk every counted second, it means you have enemies looking for you from all corners of the earth and Sibiya dreads the day they will find him, he dreads this very moment.

Now, which enemy is this one?

“I’m not disputing that Sibiya, I’m well aware of it. But at the end of the day they are your children. That means they will grow up to be as fucked up as you are.” Ntaba ambles closer, he

bows his head in greeting when his eyes clash with the woman who is now carrying two little boys on her lap.

She replies with a glare, it's mixed with fear. There's an empty sit next to her, Ntaba perches himself there, leans back and crosses one leg over the other.

"Please..." Sibiya's voice trembles. "Don't harm them."

A smile, as he motions with his hand for Sibiya to take a sit, the man sits down in slow motion, eyes never leaving Ntaba.

"I won't, children are the most innocent beings, they shouldn't even be in this dark crazy world where people like you and me exist. I mean we both have blood in our hands, that's one thing we have in common. Right, Sibiya?" Ntaba.

"I'm not like you." Sibiya barks, he's still not sure who this man is. Why he is here, or what he did

wrong. He's not perfect, he's made a lot of mistakes and his latest was getting involved in a hate crime that had nothing to do with him. It was all about helping a friend in need, he goes a long way back with the Sangwenis.

"You are, we're exactly the same. I know you'd do anything to protect your family, like me. Only that I would never kill mine like you killed your in-law."

What's pissing Sibiya off is that Ntaba is so calm and looks like a lamb, yet his words are carried with so much venom and viciousness.

"Bongani?" That's clearly his wife, her glare is now on Sibiya who is trembling like a leaf in his one seater couch.

"Oops, I thought she knew." Ntaba scoots to the edge of the seat and rubs his hands together in eagerness. "Wow, D'Bongz? So you didn't tell

your wife that her sister's death was not an accident? You didn't tell her that you were fucking her to oblivion for years and when she threatened to reveal your dirty little secret, you pushed her down that balcony?" He feigns shock, pointing to the balcony behind the black two-seater leather couch

"Bongani, you said she committed suicide. There was a letter, and..." The wife's tears show up, her voice is kept low maybe because she respects her husband.

Ntaba sits back as the couple argue back and forth. His gaze falls on one of the boys. Ntaba winks and gently rubs the boy's head with a genuine gleam on his face.

"Are you two getting a divorce?" He stops the commotion with this question as he stands to his feet. "I think till death do us part should

remain that, like you promised before God and your family. Only death should do you part. Leave the divorcing to white people.”

Ntaba’s suggestion is ignored by the wife.

“I’m leaving and I will never come back. Do you hear me, wena Bongani?” She shouts this time, and stands up. Her sons mirror her movements.

Panicking Sibiya stands too, but Ntaba slowly shakes his head and gestures he sits back down. Sibiya is reluctant, however does Ntaba’s bidding when he’s furtively shown the gun again.

“My friend will accompany you, we don’t want you doing funny things now, do we?” He’s talking to Sibiya’s wife and at his words, a short buff man spotting an ill-disposed face walks in just in time.

Sibiya goes crazy, he starts shouting, pleading for the life of his wife and children.

“Shut up Sibiya.” Ntaba hisses, he crouches so

he's the little boy's height. "Here fanyana, you'll buy GoSlows for you and your brother." He hands him a R10 note and kisses them both on the cheek.

Sibiya's eyes widen, he almost stands but remembers the gun.

"Who... who are you?" Sibiya's voice trembles, he knows this signature. The man who is notorious for the kisses he goes around planting on people's cheeks. People who never live long enough tell the story.

Ntaba ignores him, pats the boy with the money on the shoulder and stands to watch them walk out.

"I need to get our stuff." The wife says, she's failing to curb her tears

Ntaba denies her request with a subtle headshake, he nods at the short man who ushers the family out. At the sound of the door

slaming shut, Ntaba smiles at the terrified man.

“Please don’t kill my family.” Sibiya begs, uncomfortably squirming on the seat as if it has caught fire.

“Vala umlomo wenja.” (Shut up.)

He says softly and patiently, while revealing a knife from the pocket of his slacks. Sibiya starts screaming. Ntaba exudes a hefty sigh and rolls his eyes at Sibiya’s dramatics.

“What do you want from me?” Ntaba doesn’t say anything but fans the knife with his breath and uses the sleeves of his hoodie to polish it.

“I want Sangweni’s accomplices, the names of everyone involved in Vukuzakhe Khanyile’s attack. Write them down and who knows, you’ll get to see your family again.” He tells him as he continues to polish the knife.

Sibiya is paralysed by the sight of the dagger, or is it the thought of dying. It must be the cold hearted man standing tall in his house.

Vukuzakhe Khanyile does ring a bell, it's the man they had planned to kill today. He was supposed to die, that was Mfundo's plan. But the stupid idiot cheated death, this is what Mfundo told him earlier.

"Nyakaza msunu." (Move.) Ntaba snaps.

His patience is being tested and Sibiya sees it, and it scares him more than the impending murder weapon. That's why he grabs the newspaper from the table, there's a pen near the television. Six names are written down, the conspirators and the attackers. His hands are trembling when he hands the piece of paper to Ntaba who smiles like he just hit a jackpot.

He knew Funokuhle's name was not going to be there.

“I love a man who works well under pressure, we make a great team, D’Bongz.” Ntaba says, ramming the paper into his pocket.

“C... can I go now?” Sibiya is desperate to stay alive, for his wife and kids but mostly for himself.

Death seems fun when you wish it on other people until it’s coming for you.

“You said you won’t kill me,” Sibiya.

“I know, right?” Ntaba laughs, head thrown back like a kid. “Life is a war Sibiya, I also said I will stop killing people. But look at me, I’m about to slit your throat.”

He taps his fingers on the blade, shakes his head maybe in disapproval of what he’s about to do.

Sibiya screams for help, he stands, attempting

an escape. But Ntaba's foot slams against his stomach, the impact throws him back on the couch coughing like a dying man. He screams louder this time, shedding a bucket of tears. Annoyance scrapes through Ntaba's skin, he takes a deep sigh. His eyes are slowly studying the knife until a creepy smile leisurely crawls to his lips.

"Don't mind me, D'Bongz. I just thought of ways I could make use of this knife and they are all gruesome."

"Please..." Sibiya cries, tears trickling down his face.

"I can't let you go, there's a slight problem," Ntaba announces, hovering above him. "Look up here."

Sibiya slowly raises his head, Ntaba feeds on the fear in his eyes.

“My brother is still injured, he’s in the hospital with bandages on his head. Do you know I haven’t looked into his eyes because he hasn’t opened them? I haven’t heard his voice because he hasn’t woken up? He’s my brother Sibiya, you touched my brother. Do you fucking know who I am? Awungazi mgodoyi, or you wouldn’t have dared.”

The ever-so calm Ntaba says.

“Who... who are you?” Sibiya questions, voice shuddering.

“Ntabezikude Khanyile, ibhubesi likaNgwane. Tell the underground gang I said suck my dick.”

Ntaba shows a Cheshire cat grin before slashing the knife across Sibiya’s throat, he moves back when blood sprays on him. It’s a good thing he wore black.

He pulls the coffee table closer to Sibiya’s couch, sits so that they are face to face, eyeball

to eyeball and watches while the man struggles with life and death.

“Don’t fight it Sibiya, life is beautiful on the other side.”

A smirks ticks on one side of his mouth, his eyes have come back to life as he admires Bongani Sibiya choking on his own blood.

Dammit, it's taking forever for Sibiya to die. But he's not complaining.

He’s looking at the grisly sight as if it’s his most perfect piece of art, the blood gushing out of his neck, the gaging sounds deriving from his mouth and his will to live. It’s like nothing he’s ever seen.

“Beautiful.” Ntaba grins the moment Sibiya takes his last breath. He places a kiss on Sibiya's cheek, wipes the bloodied knife on his shirt, places it back in his pocket, and leaves the apartment whistling to Ayasaba Amagwala.

(Song of struggle.)

MATHONGA-

Twenty-seven

HLABELA-

His father handed him the “Perfect son” badge at a young age, there was no way he could take it off, not with how his father would sing his praises. Disappointing him is his biggest fear, it haunts him in his dreams and torments him in the light of day. He’s not perfect, this he knows for a fact.

Things haven’t been easy for him as well, people look at him and assume he sleeps on a bed of roses at night and wakes up in the morning to crown his head with a halo.

They have assumed that he and God have a

mutual understanding, if only they knew that he too has skeletons in his closet. Even Jesus was brought to a mountain and tempted by the devil, the deference between them is that Hlabela gave in to temptations like any flawed human would.

As the second born, at only 33 years old, he has achieved quite a lot in life.

Business is going good, his bank accounts are piled with Mandela's smiling face. His dream is to move out of the ranch, start a life with a woman he loves and maybe have children.

It's so hard when his father looks at him like he's the most flawless man in the world. How does he tell him that he wants his own place? How does he tell him that he has found a woman to love, that she is a thirty six year-old Indian woman?

Kushi Zinta, a widow with two children, originally from Rajasthan, a state in northern India. Her permanent residence is in Emalahleni, Mpumalanga, some of her weekends are spent in Durban with him.

They met at a charity event in Sandton, her self-reliance is what caught his attention. Getting her numbers was not easy, but Hlabela's charms deserve a big fat cheque, his looks are that dedicated assistant that deserves a raise.

She was in a white saree when he first saw her, on their first date as well and a couple of times after that. It took him two months to ask her why she loved white and that's when she narrated her story.

She's a widow, and as far as her family and in-laws know, she is in a white saree and confined in her home, mourning a husband who died 6

years ago.

She is compelled to adorn a white saree for the rest of her life, since the day of her husband's death, a dehumanising practise is what Kushi told Hlabela.

He walks out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, his eyes smile as he catches a glimpse of the woman seated on the bed.

Her lips stretch, showcasing a set of white teeth. Her skin resembles a glowing stone of brown, she's a few shades lighter than him. Her black shoulder-length hair compliments her dark skin tone.

Hlabela's eyes take in her outfit, a neon green, bodycon-stretch mini skirt, the matching top only hides her breasts. With a body of a maiden

in her early twenties, she can get away with wearing anything. Who said only black don't crack?

He wants to ask her to wear a blazer on top, at least look decent, but Kushi won't take it well.

The woman just came out of her shell thanks to him, this is the only time she can wear different colour clothing. His words will send her right back faster than he can say I'm sorry.

Maybe they should cancel their breakfast date and order room service.

“Aap kya kar rahe hain.” (Are you done?)

Hlabela chuckles, “You know I don't understand a single word of Hindi?”

He kisses her briefly and sits on the bed beside her, she accepts his kiss with a smile on her face.

“I know.” She tells him and lays her head on his shoulder, her arms enfold around his waist.

“I missed you Bella,” her thick Indian accent has made it absolutely difficult for her to pronounce his name, Bella was the best her tongue could offer.

At first he wasn't on the train with it, imagine a Zuluman who goes by the name Bella. A woman's name at that, it hasn't grown into his thick African skull, it never will.

This woman he chose for himself is stubborn, she's different from the women he's dated before.

The ones who'd do anything to please him. Kushi is nothing like those women, she says what she wants, wears what she wants and does what she wants and her Bella gave her this confidence.

“We were together last week.” Sunday special

lovers is what they are, Kushi's situation does not allow her to gallivant around like a free woman. As a widow, she is confined to a life of abstinence. According to her culture, once a woman is widowed, she is forbidden from remarrying or taking a lover for fear of passing on 'bad luck' to the next man she gets associated with.

"A week too long to stay away from the man I love, I want to be with you every day." She wears her heart on her sleeves.

"One day, Kushi. We just need to be patient, I know I'm asking for a lot, but I need you to trust me, okay. Things will change, you'll see." He too has not told his father about her because well...

Kushi lets go and faces him.

"Sometimes it doesn't feel like it, what we're doing is prohibited. My family will kill me when they find out I have gone against tradition.

Maybe they won't be able to touch me when we're married." Six months into the relationship and Kushi is ready to be Mrs. Khanyile. Hlabela knows it's not only because she loves him, but also a way to escape her family's clutches.

He cradles her cheeks, his eyes bursting with love. "I will never let anyone hurt you."

He assures her and she knows it.

"I know, you make me feel safe. I wish my children were with me, I know you'd love them like you love me. I miss them so much, two years is too long to be kept away from them."

Hlabela does not give her a reply but enwraps his arms around her.

"My little Pocahontas." Hlabela declares, planting a kiss at the top of her head.

Upon hearing this, she jolts out of his arms, her eyeballs move to the back of her head. "I hate Pocahontas."

“Sarafina, then?” This one has her laughing heartily “You’re my fighter, Kushi, a warrior. We’re going to overcome this.”

He’s looking at her like life means nothing without her, their lips meet in a passionate kiss. Without breaking the kiss, Kushi pulls her elastic skirt up and straddles him.

She leans into him until he’s lying on his back. Her hands are demanding as they roam over his tight torso, maybe he should’ve worn something, he thinks when he feels her grab the towel wrapped around his waist. He stops her by holding her wrist and parts from the kiss. His gaze has darkened, showing nothing but lust.

“I promised I won’t touch you till I make you my wife.” He reminds her, Kushi huffs and jumps to the side of the bed. She pulls her skirt down,

trying not to show how sexually frustrated she is. Six years without sex is not a trip to Dubai.

“Should I be worried that my boyfriend is old fashioned?” She teases, watching him sit up.

“Me? Old fashioned? Why do you say that?”

“It took months before our first kiss, and you won’t touch me till I’m Mrs. Hlabela Khanyile?”

Hlabela winces at how she chops his name

“That’s because I didn’t want to push you away, you were so mean to me when we first met and very snobbish.” Hlabela justifies.

“That’s not tr...” Her argument dies when he steals a quick kiss.

“I adore you Kushi.”

“I adore you Bella.”

His eyes narrow, but there’s a smirk pulling at his lips. “Can we talk about you calling me Bella? My brothers will mock me even in my death

bed.”

Her smile melts his heart, “You refuse that I call you baby, so Bella it is.”

“I’m a man Kushi, the name is all wrong. I might as well do a German cut, wear baggy jeans and a chain around my neck and start calling you dude.”

“I would love you even more, my beautiful Bella.” Her comeback leaves no room for argument, he’s defeated.

“Weeeh! What have I gotten myself into?” He teases, it brings her into a world of giggles. His arms are around her as he captures her lips once more.

MATHONGA-

*CHIEF VUMILE KHANYILE’S SON FIGHTING

FOR HIS LIFE IN A LOCAL HOSPITAL*

It's all over the news, there are reporters outside the hospital. No one is allowed in, it was Ndleleni who made sure of that. Sometimes he reminds me of Zakhe, his resilience, and defensive mannerism. Hlabela is not far behind, although he is the second born. Ndleleni, as troublesome as he is, takes life seriously.

I have to hide my face under a hoodie in order to enter the hospital without being seen, or these reporters will grill me with questions.

I don't get them, baba is just a chief, not the president of South Africa, but he's made a big deal in this country.

Perks of having too much money...

Baba and his connections have allowed his daughter-in-law to stay by her husband's side for three days. Three days and Bongiwe refuses

to go home and rest. Normal visiting hours do not apply to the Khanyiles, this is how we keep coming and going as we please.

She's seated in a chair, holding his hand. This is the same position I find her in each time I walk in here. A couple of times baba or my brothers were present with me, I guess today it's just me. I have to convince her to go home and rest.

"Breakfast." I hold up a brown paper bag containing sandwiches. She looks at me and tries for a smile but her mouth fails her.

"Thanks." I can barely catch her voice.

A moment of silence drifts by, "I brought you clothes as well, it's a dress. I'm not sure if it's your style."

This time I hold up a sports bag, containing toiletries and clothes.

"You bought me a dress?" She seems surprised by the fact.

“Baba said I should, you’ve been wearing the same clothes for days now.”

Her laugh is dead.

“Baba is such a typical rural man, did he perhaps ask you to get me a scarf as well?”

Right on. She needs it to hide that steel-wool hair, a comb would surely snap if she attempts combing it.

“At least it matches the dress.” I defend the old man and shrug, embarrassed at how baba can be so predictable.

“Thank you, I’ll go clean up in the nurse’s room. There’s a kind nurse who allows me at least ten minutes in there. The others don’t like it, I think they are mean.”

This is irrelevant, very redundant but it’s a good thing that she’s talking. She’s been lost in a cloud lately.

“Go ahead, I’ll be here when you get back.” I offer, handing Bongiwe the items. She places them down beside her chair, she takes my brother’s hand and fixates her gaze on him.

“Do you think he will wake up?” She asks.

We have all been asking ourselves this question, my father included.

“The doctor said he will.” I don’t sound convincing, three days later and my brother has not moved a muscle. I’m so frustrated.

“What if the doctors missed something? What if he is not okay?” She predicts, flickers of emotion going through her face.

“Maybe we should get a second opinion.”

“But a team of specialists have been attending to him and none of them are able to tell us why he hasn’t woken up, they keep telling us to

wait.” Bongiwe complains. She’s tearing up again... help!

“I just need him to wake up so I can tell him I’m sorry for not loving him right.” Bongiwe.

Do I hug her till she stops crying? What if she doesn’t stop? How do I pull away without coming across as rude? My father never hugged me when I cried as a child, I was told to be a man. I hear mothers comfort their children with hugs, that the feeling of hiding on their chest is amazing.

“I know you guys think I don’t love him, you think I’m here for the fame and fortune.”

Bongiwe drags me out of my thinking, her droopy eyes are on me.

“What fame?” I send a smile her way, her giggle is short lived.

“You all hate me, Mathonga. You’re so loud

about it that it's hard to ignore.”

“We don't hate you sis'Bongiwe.” I'm not lying. Maybe we'd choose our brother over her, maybe we chose him over her countless times and she has interpreted it as hate.

She averts her eyes from me and trains them on my brother, the conversation doesn't go any further than my reply.

To kill the tension in the room, I reach out to touch Vukuzakhe's hand and a ringing echoes in my ears, followed by a splitting headache pounding against my skull, deafening the surrounding sounds. My vision blurs, and many voices materialize, they mingle with the loud ringing that won't leave my ears.

It sounds like men, angry men. I'm unable to make out what they are saying. I pull my hand away only to stumble towards the back, till my

spinal slams harshly against the wall. My hands are pressed to my temple as I let out a loud groan.

“Mathonga,” through the out-of-focus vision, I see Bongiwe rushing to me. Something doesn’t feel right, I want to run out of the room but moving my legs has become impossible.

“Mathonga talk to me.” She implores.

I train my eyes at her, there’s worry on her face. I want to tell her to call my father, and tell him I can’t move. So I open my mouth to speak but nothing comes out.

“Ngwane kaNgwadi.” A whisper into the wind, I can’t make out if the voice belongs to a male or female. “Ngwane kaNgwadi.”

It’s louder the second time. My heart is racing against time. What is happening to me?

“Mathonga talk to me, you’re scaring me,”
Bongiwe’s voice tells me I’m not dreaming. I see her, standing beside me with her hands on my arms as she tries to tap me back to reality.

Out of the blue, wind gushes into the room, tailed by the sound of boots stepping on gravel. It can’t be, there is no gravel around here. We’re in a hospital room, the floors are tiled.

“What is it, Mathonga?” Bongiwe’s voice sounds far, yet she’s here next to me.

It takes one blink, and my blood runs cold, as I catch a sight of a wrinkly old man, dressed in a formal white shirt and black slacks. He’s standing in the middle of the room, staring at me with a creepy-toothless smile. I don’t know this one, he looks different from the one I saw in my dream.

“Do you see that?” I ask Bongiwe, but the words

are stuck in my head, they don't move past my tongue. However, I pray to God she can see him, or I'm going crazy. I know when my ancestors are near, this presence is different. It's eerie.

Before I can grasp anything, the old woman from my dream appears not far behind him. Like in the dream, she's glaring with a threatening gaze.

"Ntunjwa kaLanga." The clan name slips right out of my tongue as if pushed by a strong force. I'm on my knees the next second, kneeling before them with reverence.

"What are you doing boy?" The old woman asks through gritted teeth, she's not my favourite. This is the spiritual realm, I have no say here. It's their territory.

"I don't understand," I answer. I don't know what she means, nor do I know what she's talking about. Their glares go from angry to enraged,

and like they are in sync, their heads turn to Vukuzakhe.

They are shooting daggers at him, I can feel the negative energy pouring out of them. Why are they looking at him like that? I don't want them looking at my brother.

"Ngwane." Bongiwe screams, I don't realise why until I hear the machines going off.

My heart jumps to my throat, it feels like forever as I avert my gaze towards my brother. He's convulsing on the bed, flat-lining. It's them, I know it's them. They want to take Vukuzakhe, this is why I fall on my knees, ignoring Bongiwe who runs out screaming 'doctor.'

"Not my brother, please. Don't take my brother." I grovel, not caring that I look and sound desperate. The headache is still there, only the ringing has died out. It irks me that these

fossils don't spare me a glance, but it infuriates me mostly. They have no right, no right whatsoever. Vukuzakhe has nothing to do with this.

"I will do anything, tell me what you want and I will do it." These ancestors are stubborn, they are holding their eyes at Vukuzakhe and refuse to look my way.

They want to take him from us, just to punish me. I cannot allow that.

I wait, through their silence that grows and festers until it squeezes around my belly. They probably feel the anger I have toward them, it must be why they are not stopping.

"You're killing him, please stop."

As I scream this plea, someone rushes in. It's Dalisile, she freezes at the door and looks at me like she's seen a ghost. Her face grows pale when she trails her eyes above my head.

She can see them, I know because her eyes are wide as saucers. If fear had a face, it would resemble hers. She staggers back until she's out of the room, I don't have time to go after her, it's not like I can move anyway.

“Sothole. Ntunjwa kaLanga. Mthiyane. Ndwandwe. Zikode. Mabhuqa. Ngwane.” The old man is the first one to turn to me at the sound of the clan names deriving from my mouth. The stubborn old woman does the same as I continue.

“I plead with you my elders, calm down. Yehlisani umoya. I am your child, who will I turn to if you forsake me?”

I'm about to soften them up when a male doctor and two nurses rush into the room. They seem to not take notice of me nor the oldies.

How was Dalisile able to see them?

“We are parched and hungry, Ngwane kaNgwadi.” Says the elderly man, he turns around and starts walking away. I want this old woman to leave as well, she seems to be the most stubborn one.

“Phahla.” She says, turns and walks away the same way the old man did. Everything goes back to normal, making the past events seem like a terrible nightmare. The doctor and nurses are standing around Zakhe’s bed, looking dumbfounded.

I’m still trying to digest everything and make sense of it when someone harshly grabs my hand, the whole enchilada is happening too fast. It takes a few blinks for me to realise that I have been dragged outside my brother’s room by the woman who mothered me.

“What were you doing in there?” She barks,

repeatedly slamming her fists on my chest, and because I'm still locked in confusion, I keep my mouth shut. "I'm talking to you, stupid boy."

I have never seen her this angry.

"No... nothing." My voice fails me by making me sound like a weakling. Don't show her you're afraid Mathonga, she's a demon this one.

"Get out, get out of here." A hard slap lands across my face, shock visits me and I get a second slap right after. She caught me off guard, I honestly didn't see it coming.

"Mah, stop. Mathonga has done nothing wrong." I don't know where Bongiwe came from, she's trying to pull Dalisile back who has her hands fisted on my jersey.

"I saw what happened in there, I know what he is, what he does when no one is around."

Dalisile shouts, condemning me with a deadly stare.

“I didn’t do anything.” I protest, escaping her hands.

“Was it not you, I found burning impepho a while back? Today I find you talking to god-knows who and my son in the brink of death.”

She doesn’t say anything about seeing the elders, but I know she did.

“That’s not what happened mo...” I bite my tongue. What the hell was I about to call her?

“Get the hell out of here, I don’t want you anywhere near my son.” Dalisile yells, taking a chance to push me again.

“Why do you hate me so much? What did I ever do to you?” Tears are near, but I won’t let them fall. She doesn’t deserve my tears. Then again she’s my mother, I wish it didn’t hurt that she loathes me. I wish her eyes didn’t paint a perfect picture of how much she despises me.

“That’s simple, I hate that you’re breathing. I

wish you were never born.” The animosity radiating in her eyes is transferred to her voice, cold as snow and bitter as lemon. “It should be you in that hospital bed, not my baby. Now get the hell out of here.”

Is she seriously blaming me for what happened to Zakhe?

“Mathonga is not at fault, ma. He wasn’t there when...” Bongiwe.

“Thula wena!” Dalisile barks at her.

“How long are you going to treat me like this, Dalisile? What do I have to do for you to see me as your son?”

“You are not my son.” She’s right, I have never been her son. Just an unlucky being who got the wrong woman to carry him.

“You are an evil woman Dalisile, mark my words, you will burn in hell.” I report, slightly paralysed by her malicious words.

“I was born in hell.” Her tone holds a note of hatred, it churns in my stomach and I feel a bile rise as a result. She will never stop yelling unless I leave and that’s what I do.

MATHONGA-

Twenty-eight

FUNOKUHLE-

Every so often I wonder if there was a time I had not cared much about what my family thinks of me, not just them but Pule. The refined views I’ve heard through silent whispers, or the exacting ones I’ve conceived within my own mind. If only there was a way to soothe the brutal raging of their hearts.

If there was a way to wipe out my father’s hatred imprinted on my back, the throbbing

stripes that tore at my flesh and continue to do so.

My old man did not waste time in tying me up the day we got home from Johannesburg, my pleading and desperate attempt to get him to see reason were of no use.

Tied like a dog to a washing poll just outside his rondavel, my father stripped me naked and whipped me like I was an intruder, a thief who had come to take his life and everything he owned.

“Everything I do, I do it because I love you and I don’t want you to perish.” These were the words he said as he left me hanging on a pole, fighting for every breath in my lungs.

My brothers nor their wives did not bother to intervene. For hours I lay in my own blood, the scorching sun finishing what my father had started.

Only hours later did he come back to untie me, my limbs had given up on me, leaving me weak and vulnerable. But he forced me to walk to my room and clean up, I remember crawling and him shouting “Be a man Ntandoyethu, you’re embarrassing me.”

The roar alone was enough to force me to my dizzy feet.

I didn’t think he would leave me in peace after that, but he did. He wouldn’t look at me nor say a word to me. Part of me wants to believe that he was ashamed, but that’s Ongezwa Sangweni, shame hides from him.

The physical pain inflicted by my father does not compare to the pain in my heart, being away from the man who swiftly crept into my heart and every part of me, like a destructive hurricane; hurts.

I don't like the way I left Vukuzakhe, my mind is not at peace. I broke his heart, and destroyed any hope he had of us ever being together. I didn't want to do it, but my father left me no choice.

Pule was part of it as well, I'm still oblivious as to how he got in my father's good books. I haven't heard from him since the day I left Johannesburg, in a way I'm glad I don't have a phone, he can't contact me without one.

Unless the bastard has the balls to enter my father's premises and ask for me. I wouldn't put it past him.

The door to my room opens, and my heart jumps to my chest. Why is he here? I scoot from the bed and stand like a soldier ready to take orders. This is what he expects from me.

"Get dressed, I'm going to introduce you to

Zwane. You'll be working for him as a taxi driver." My father says, he's standing at the door.

"Baba I..." I want to tell him that I don't have a driver's licence, but he cuts me with a raise of the hand.

"Don't talk back," disgust paints his face. I recoil as his eyes sweep up and down my body. Suddenly I regret wearing these jeans, he must be thinking they are too tight.

"Why are you standing like that?" He asks.

Because you battered me like I was a sacrificial lamb. I don't voice my useless thoughts but try to stand straight. Nothing changes, he's still grimacing and ogling at me like I'm covered in shit.

"Stop crying all the time, men don't cry. I don't know what I ever did to your mother for her to leave me with you. I loved her and gave her

everything and this is the thanks I get.”

He turns to leave, but I can't let him. This is my chance to tell him this.

“I'm moving out.” My voice carries, he stops and instantly turns. The look of disgust has not withered.

“Where are you going to go? You have nothing, how will you start from scratch with nothing?” He's staring at me with pure revulsion.

“I'll see when I get there.”

“And where is there?” The cackle that leaves his mouth lacks humour. “The Khanyile homestead? That boy is married, he has a wife. You must be stupid if you think he will leave his wife for you.” His words are vile, they chop my heart to pieces.

He's leaving again, why am I not standing up to him? I'm a man like him, only that he's... he's my father and he'd squash me like a cockroach.

“Just so you know,” He’s talking again without turning to face me. “That Khanyile boy is in the hospital fighting for his life. If he dies, his death will be on your conscious. Serves you right for opening your legs for men.” He walks out after his cold delivery. My stomach drops as all the blood drains from my veins.

MATHONGA-

After the argument with Dalisile, I took my return ticket, grabbed my belongings and headed to the airport. It’s 1:57pm, the plane landed a few minutes ago. Ntabezikude is with me, he says he has things to take care of in Durban. He lies a lot; my brother.

His decision to tag along was made after I told him what Dalisile did, “her days are numbered,”

is what he said. I haven't asked what he meant, it will be a waste of time. He thinks he's James Bond this one, doing things in secret.

We found his car where he last parked it, he's driving us to Emlazi, where my father's brother, uncle Bopha and his wife live comfortably.

What happened in Zakhe's hospital room had me thinking, and I need to share my thoughts with uncle Bopha and Dumile. I can only hope they will be open minded.

*

*

Ntaba parks the car in front of a fence, sheltering three rondavels. Outside is a woman swiping soil, which makes no sense to me. The soil is not going anywhere.

"If settling for less had a body." I hear Ntaba murmur beside me, I know he is not checking out his uncle's wife?

“You’re drooling sfebe, she’s your aunt.” I chide, that pint-size smile of his is mischievous.

I haven’t unbuckled my seatbelt yet and Ntabezikude has his sluttish arms wrapped around Bopha wife.

For years, uncle Bopha wanted nothing to do with marriage. He was part of the smash and go committee. We thought he would die without ever making someone’s daughter his wife, and today here he is, married to a twenty six year old woman, Thethelela Mhlanga.

I want to feel sorry for Thethelela, being married to an old man must be boring. He’s approaching fifty, if he hasn’t approached it. I’m not good with keeping people’s birthdates.

Honestly though, my uncle is old. It shows on his potbelly, his greying hair and the wrinkles lined on his skin.

“What’s going on, sisi? You’re ageing

backwards.” I compliment her when Ntaba finally releases her. Seriously, who looks good in a pinafore, a head wrap and dusty feet? As she cracks into multiple giggles, I fail to spot any wrinkles on her face. I thought Bopha’s wrinkles were contagious.

“Don’t let your uncle hear that, it makes him feel old.” Thethelela.

“But he is old mama,” this is what Ntaba calls her, he’s the only one by the way. “Are you sure you were not forced into this marriage?” Only Ntaba can be brave enough to ask such, he’s touching her hand. Thethelela shrugs his whorish hand away, I would suggest she trashes that smile, it’s confusing my brother.

“How is Bongiwe?” She dives into a different topic. “Poor thing lost her baby, you know I thought she was barren. Three years is too long

not to have a baby after marriage. She called me yesterday wanting help with cleansing the miscarriage, Zakhe has to do it as well. How is he? I've been praying for his recovery and..."

Sheesh! Not even Google can process this much information. It's not wrinkles she got from my uncle, but his ancient personality. Speaking of Bopha, he strides out of the house, a smile spread across his face.

"Sthandwa sami, you haven't given my sons anything to drink yet, but you've become Emlazi's Daily Sun."

It's weird watching him exchanging lips with his wife. I need to format the memory in my head.

"Bab'omncane, we don't work for pornhub. No need for auditions." Ntaba says after clearing his throat, he's lucky Bopha is not as uptight as our father hence the chuckle.

"Madoda, follow me."

He leads us under a big tree where there's a wooden bench and a black chair. Ntaba and I squeeze ourselves on the bench.

"Where is uncle Dumile?" I had asked that he be present in this meeting.

"He's married," Bopha laughs, I catch the inside joke. Aunt Sne has probably dragged him to a church meeting.

"How is Vukuzakhe? I couldn't make it to Joburg, work is keeping me busy." Bopha.

"Critical but..."

"We're still waiting to hear from the doctors, bab'omncane." I cut Ntaba's answer. I know the idiocy in him was not about to say critical but stable. He shrugs when I show him my biggest frown and starts biting his fingers, he looks bored to sin. What would he rather be doing, really?

"Who would do such a terrible thing to my

brother's son?" I'm not here for this, but I expected these question.

"The Sangwenis bab'omncane." Only now does Ntaba look interested. "I'm going to pluck out their balls and make them eat them."

"I'm in, when do we kill them?" Someone says from behind us, I turn and fight the sigh twirling inside my chest at the sight of Khothama, he's Bopha's first born. Same age as Thethelela, don't ask and I won't lie.

"Yeyi wena Khothama!" Bopha cracks, the look he gives Khothama makes him retreat. It's the Khanyile effect, they exude an authority that forces you to respect them without actually telling you to. Baba and their other brother Dumile are the same, I've seen it in my brothers as well.

Khothama turns on his heel and disappears behind one of the houses.

“I need your help, bab’omncane.” I start.

“What is it?”

“I want to do umsebenzi.”

“Mathonga?” He mumbles as if this should be a secret.

“I know what you’re going to say, but the ancestors want me to do it. And I believe Zakhe will wake up after that. The ancestors are seething, bab’omncane. We will see their wrath if we continue to ignore them.” My convincing skills have to work.

“What do you want from me?” Bopha.

“Talk to ubaba, maybe convince him.”

“You know there’s no convincing Vumile to do anything he doesn’t want. He won’t listen to me.”

“Then that leaves me with no choice but to go

ahead and do the ceremony. But I can't do it without you and uncle Dumile."

"I'll talk to your uncles, Vumile does not have the last say in this matter. You are a man now Mathonga, you choose your own paths."

He's right, my father will have to get over it.

"Thank you bab'omncane, if possible can the ceremony be done this weekend?" Ntaba throws in his cents.

I don't mind this weekend, the sooner the better.

"Let me hear what your uncles say and I will get back to you." Bopha sounds promising, I like how he's open minded unlike baba. That man makes me lose hairs on my scalp each time he says no, I'll be hairless before I turn thirty.

Glasses of Coke and Marie biscuits are placed on the ground before us, Bopha thanks his young wife with yet another lingering kiss. Sigh! I'm officially traumatised.

We sit through a story of how they met, he recites it like we've never heard it before. People of advanced years should mingle with their mates, the torture we are subjected to, is not for the faint hearted.

We're on our feet, ready to leave when Ntaba shouts.

"Fuck, what is that?"

He jolts back and uses me as a shield. His eyes are bulging out of their sockets, I think Khothama has brought these dogs out here on purpose. He is aware of Ntaba's phobia.

My brother declared enmity with dogs after his dog bit him, he was around twelve years old. It wasn't just a bite, Danger's teeth were deep into Ntaba's thigh. It turned out it had rabbis, that's where the rage came from, but my brother disowned the poor animal. The following week,

we found Danger's lifeless body behind Ntaba's rondavel. I don't even want to think what happened to it.

"This is Ringo," Khothama is pointing at the huge black dog with his head. "And this is Cynthia, I named her after my ex-girlfriend. That bitch."

Okay, we are not getting involved. Cynthia is a few inches taller than Ringo. Khothama doesn't bath her, you can tell that her fur was once a perfect white. Now she looks like she needs Jik and Handy-Andy.

"Are dogs meant to be this big?" I wouldn't be shocked if he says he inherited them from an Afrikaaner farmer.

"These are not dogs," Ntaba scoffs, looking traumatised. If they were not on a leash, he would have ran. "I don't know what they are but they are not dogs."

“Do you want me to call an ambulance bhuti?”
He shuts me up with a black stare, I guess not. I should have them on standby though.

Khothama is not bothered, he seems to love these animals.

“I’m happy to see you guys, it’s been long.” It has. “You two are invited to my wedding.” Khothama finishes.

I didn’t know he’s seeing someone, let alone planning on marrying them.

“Who is the unlucky girl? I have to warn her before it’s too late.” Ntaba teases, I wish I could say he’s forgotten about the dogs. His eyes keep running to them.

“That lady over there. Her name is Zilile.” Our cousin points towards a heavily pregnant lady, hanging clothes by the washing line.

“I paid for her, she’s yet to be my wife.” He paid for her?

“Does she know she was on the market?” He snickers at my question.

“Funny. She’s beautiful isn’t she?” He continues.

“As long as you’re happy ndoda,” Ntaba declares, tapping him on the shoulder. I doubt he cares about what Khothama is saying, his focus is on the two dogs trying to escape the leashes.

“Uyanya, she’s the most beautiful girl in this village.” Of course he’d defend his woman.

“Let’s take a walk, I want to talk business, madoda.”

He’s very business minded, not so long ago he was selling Adidas shoes with two stripes at a price of R600 a pair. Fools bought them. His marketing skills are good though, he’d convince a dog to marry a cat and make mixed breed pups.

We step under the scorching heat, into the street. Ntaba makes sure to stay beside me, far from the dogs. These dogs don't care about him, they are minding their own...

"What are you selling this time?" I conduct the conversation.

"Nothing, I want us to talk about how were going to kill the Sangwenis."

"Leave Mathonga out of this." Ntaba fires... That was fast. When did he drown himself in anger? I want to roll my eyes at his tightened jaw, and how he's wounding Khothama with a scary gaze, but I choose to save my energy.

"What do you mean leave me out of it?" I'm not a child.

"You're not getting involved Mathonga, end of discussion." Shit! I hate it when he wears his big brother hat.

I don't want to question Ntaba, it's pointless. He will never listen to me. Vukuzakhe is my brother too, I want to be part of whatever they are planning.

"Mbaliza." Khothama sings.

I had gone away for a minute and snap out of it in time to see my cousin tap a random little girl's shoulder in passing, the child looks confused and a little afraid. I don't think she knows him.

"Who is that?" I ask.

"My daughter. That woman Gugu didn't understand the assignment. She fell pregnant and gave birth to my lookalike." Khothama.

I didn't take a second look at the child to confirm if they do lookalike.

"Isn't Gugu your neighbour who's married to Musa the hitman?" To answer Ntaba's question, Khothama nods presenting a naughty smile.

Waiting for Ntaba to scold our cousin was a waste of my two seconds, the men laugh and bump shoulders. They are promoting prostitution.

“You slept with a married woman?” I ask, it’s not shocking but... he slept with a married woman.

“We’re all going to hell ndoda, we might as well continue sinning.” Khothama.

I’m surrounded by bastards.

Ntaba is walking too close, because Cynthia starts smelling him, big mistake Cynthia. Ntaba jumps back and that gets the dog too excited, it pulls with force and sets itself free from the leash. It doesn’t do anything but approach without any threat, an innocent growl, yet my giant brother is sprinting. Usain Bolt should be jealous.

Of course it is instinct for a dog to chase after

someone.

“Cynthia stop, get back here.” Khothama should be shouting ‘Ntaba stop’

Cynthia is not the one ruining my reputation. Ntaba wouldn’t be running if he knew how stupid he looks, I am so embarrassed.

This is a punishment, it must be that old woman who invades my dreams.

“Fusegi Cynthia, fusegi.” Of course Ntaba would shout fusegi, it’s the only language South African dogs understand. But it sounds so wrong coming from his mouth with his deep voice.

“Ndoda don’t run, she won’t do anything if you stop. She won’t bite, Ntabezikude.” That’s Khothama, running after them with Ringo controlling his speed, I hope the leash is tight. We wouldn't want two dogs chasing my brother.

"She doesn't bite Ntaba," Khothama yells.

I don't know, but at this moment, Cynthia looks like she bites.

My brother is fast but Cynthia is faster. She's barking, probably begging him to stop, Cynthia is scoring points with me by being on my side, I'd like to believe.

"Ntaba stop, you look ridiculous." I'm sweltering and heaving, all for what? A grown ass man who thinks dogs are lions that eat people.

"Fusegi, mgodoyi." Ntaba's rasping voice echoes when Cynthia brushes against him and... his giant body tumbles to the ground.

"Ntaba." I shout, picking up my pace. I think he will get up when Cynthia starts licking his face, but he's not moving.

Ntabezikude better be taking a break from all that running, if he fainted I will disown him.

MATHONGA-

Twenty-nine

MATHONGA-

Do fools know they are fools? I doubt it, this one seated on the passenger seat is looking out the window, whistling. It's as if nothing happened, as if he didn't fall like Goliath and tarnished my reputation.

He won't speak of it, Khothama tried to get answers from him, answers as to why he fainted and my cousin failed the assignment. To say he was disappointed would be an understatement.

"Are you sure you don't need the hospital?" It's been too quiet in this car, I miss his voice. Not. Like a mistletoe, I will hang this over his head

for as long as he lives. He will feel my wrath until he meets his ancestors, a punishment for being afraid of innocent Cynthia who, like every girl wanted a piece of him.

“What do I need a hospital for?” Listen to him. He has no right to be frowning at me like that, I have the mind to stop the car and leave him here for being stupid.

“You fainted ndoda.”

“I had a muscle spasm and happened to hit the ground too hard.” Yea right! This one needs prayers, umhlabele and a mean punch from the woman who carried him. I want to laugh, but I’m driving his car.

“Khethiwe would love to hear about this, how did I forget to take a video?” Shit... I’m so slow it’s disconcerting.

“Mathonga Ngwane kaNgwadi, if I hear any third

party repeat today's events, I will slaughter you and feed you to that bitch Cynthia." Ntaba.

"Cynthia the dog or Cynthia the ex?" My chuckle is muffled, I'm not doing a good job actually. My chest is on fire, I need to release. "I prefer the dog because..."

"Stop the car," his command forces me to burst out in laughter. I can't breathe.

"Thonga stop the car," he grunts.

What is he doing grabbing the steering wheel?

"We're going to crash, Ntaba. Stop." What is he? Five? "Besides, your feet are still dizzy, you can't drive."

"This is my car, pull over and get the fuck out."

"But how will I get home?" I ask with clenched teeth, it's so hard to stop myself from laughing and it's getting me into trouble.

"I don't know, fucking fly, crawl or roll." He's a

big childish baby.

“Okay, Okay. I’m sorry Ntaba yami.” Sheesh, he’s a sensitive one. Who would’ve thought?

The bull has been tamed, he’s back to whistling and looking out the window. My eyes dart to his fingers rhythmically tapping on his knees, I thought he was upset.

I can’t, I haven’t had enough. Why didn’t I take a video?

“Does Khethiwe know she’s got competition? I mean Cynthia baby is a looker, did you ever think your soul mate was a dog?” I can’t afford to look his way, I’m pushing the wrong buttons here.

Wait... the loud-childish horse-laugh, head inclined to the side, hand pressed to his stomach and mouth wide open. What is he? A monkey?

Argh! Turns out I pressed the right button. I’m

not having a good time anymore, I should be laughing at him while he's sulking like an annoying spoiled brat.

"That stupid dog will know me one day." Ntaba says, still laughing, I thought we were angry that side. How can I fail such an easy assignment?

"I hope you're not going to butcher her like you did Danger, Khothama will chop you to pieces and burry you with your Cynthia." I tell him.

A quiet laughter leaves my mouth, but his laughter overpowers mine. I'm confused, what kind of a human is this? I'm practising my rights to bully him as his younger brother but the fool is not allowing me. I'm defeated.

"Being a ghost must be nice, it would be an experience of a lifetime." He says.

That doesn't make sense, to think he's well educated. I wouldn't be shocked if he bought

his school results.

I slow down to grab my ringing phone from the dashboard, it's Amandla. I didn't tell her I was leaving for Joburg and have not spoken to her in days. I will have to come up with a good excuse before talking to her. My lying skills do not deserve anything good in this world.

"Why don't you tell her the truth?" Ntaba asks.

This one is done being a nuisance, that's why he's digging his nose into my business.

"The longer you delay, the harder it will be to break things off."

"I love her," I admit honestly.

I can't just rip Amandla out of my heart without any solid reason. I don't know what I really feel for Nala is compacted neither do I know if she will ever consider me.

“What about Nile?”

“Nala,” I correct Ntaba, he has a bad reputation of being ignorant. Khethiwe was Ntokazi for centuries, but now she dances in his bed sheets, he must remember her name.

“You’re too young to complicate your life with two women, Thonga. You can’t have the best of both worlds.”

“Sis’Angie, is that you?” He’s stepping in too deep, confusion is not a friend of mine and it’s here right now. I don’t know what he’s trying to say.

“Yey, I’m trying to help you ndoda. Think about it, your life is already a mess. In one hand uhlushwa amathongo, there’s Dalisile on the other. Adding the burden of dating two women would be a mistake. Usemncane Mathonga, make the right choices. You’re going through the most as it is, women are not ice cream,

having too much of them will kill you.” He says and I am... I don’t know, emotional maybe. But I refuse to let it show.

“I know bhuti,” I steal a glimpse before giving the road my undivided attention. “I just don’t want to hurt Amandla, she invested so much into our relationship.”

“What, her virginity?” Blunt aren’t we?

A feeble shrug from me answers his question, it’s accompanied by a sigh from him.

“The sex was consensual right?” Why would he ask me this? Of course it was, I would never take advantage of a woman. “Mandi didn’t...”

“It’s Amandla.”

I’ll pretend Dalisile dropped him when he was a baby. That head of his needs to be checked. How do you forget people’s names?

“Yes, Mandi didn’t owe you her virginity. That’s the mistake women make, giving a man your virginity does not mean he is bound to you for life. It doesn’t automatically make you two soul mates. All I see is a bad version of Romeo and Juliet, you’re more like Ugugu noAndile. Forcing a love that’s not destined to be.”

He’s taken the off-ramp and losing me, what do these characters have anything to do with my life?

“UGugu noAndile were no different from Romeo and Juliet, it was a remake.” Each word deriving from my mouth is wrapped up in confusion, Ntaba cares not about my explanation. He shrugs his shoulders, like I’m speaking Chinese.

“Both those girls don’t deserve to be played, throw the fishing rode away and use your hand to catch the right fish. When you catch two, choose one that looks edible and let the other go. Greed is not a man’s best friend, it leads to

destruction. It will ruin your life and theirs.”

Ntaba; he does make sense sometimes, I didn't think this brain of his works well although some of the things he said didn't find me.

“Who do I thank for this wisdom? Khethiwe for quenching your thirst or Cynthia for chasing your Goliath ass?”

He cracks into a brief chuckle.

“Shut up or Saturday we'll be doing a ceremony for you.” He grunts, the smile in his voice is obvious.

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10pm is impatiently waiting for its turn with greedy eyes as we enter the Khanyile homestead. My mind is on Nala, like Amandla, I haven't spoken to her since the day I left.

What I feel for Nala terrifies me, mostly because I don't know if it has direction, if it will go anywhere.

What if it's a temporary thing? Love and infatuation disguise themselves with the same mask. You might think you've fallen for a certain somebody, only to find that you're infatuated by the person.

Though I think I would know if I were infatuated, my heart is at peace when I'm around Nala. I enjoy her presence more than anything and when she speaks, I want to sit and let her talk to infinity.

I tell my brother I'm going to see Nala as we go our separate ways. Ntaba knows everything that happens around here, keeping secrets from him is a waste of time. I'm happy he doesn't wear the "judge" gown when it comes to his brothers.

The lights are still on, but she's not responding to my knock.

"Nala," I try for the umpteenth time. The door cracks open revealing a weary Nala, holding on to the door for anchor. Her eyes are encircled by dark marks. "What's wrong?"

Leaving the door open, she turns back inside and slowly lowers herself on the bed. My heart twists with pain at the sight of her emaciated body under the loose-fitting, long-sleeveless nightgown. My God, she is all skin and bones. Shouldn't she be gaining weight now? Unless she purposely starves herself.

"You're back?" Her voice barely conveys her words, it sounds pressed down to her throat.

"Yeah, a few hours ago."

She would've been my first stop but what I had to do was more important.

“What’s wrong Nala?”

This is not the state I left her in. She twitches uncomfortably as she places a pillow against the headboard and balances her weight on it. My eyes are encamped on her when she side-eyes me, anyone can tell that she’s in agony.

“Don’t look so sad Mathonga, I’m not dying.” Her lips expand into a weak simper, there’s nothing amusing about this.

I sit on the edge of the bed to check her temperature, she’s burning.

“Khethiwe and I went out the other day, we drank and I guess it didn’t agree with me. I woke up with a splitting headache the next day, and spent it with my head buried in the toilet bowl. I went to the clinic yesterday, they gave me pain killers. It’s nothing to worry about.”

I beg to differ. I shouldn’t have left her alone, it’s no use entertaining these strings of guilt. It will

not change the situation.

“What did you drink?” The abrupt question has her sneering at me. I hope I didn’t sound monitoring.

“I don’t remember, it doesn’t matter.” She replies with a weak wave of the hand.

“Let me take you to the hospital.” Her eyes widen at my offer, it’s brief.

“I told you I had gone to the clinic, I’ll be fine, I promise.” The sternness in her voice is surprising. I don’t know who to hold this against, her for leaving when I said not to or Khethiwe for being so careless knowing what’s at stake. There’s a war going on, our enemies might use anyone we know to send a message.

“Why didn’t you call me, then? I was going to drop everything to be here with you.” She tears her gaze from me, sighing in exhaustion.

“Your brother needed you more, I didn’t want to trouble you.” She expresses.

I’m not sure she meant what she just said, my brother needed me more? That means...

“You needed me?”

I don’t want to let out the smile bullying me, lest it offends her. You never know how these smiles arrive; in a wave of overconfidence, swimming in mockery or they simply make you look like a sociopath.

“Everyone needs someone Thonga,” she does that thing women love doing, roll her eyes. “Like yesterday, I needed Khethiwe when I was going to the clinic.”

What a way to burst my bubble. However, there is something about the way she’s trying so hard to keep her eyes from me. She knows I will see her heart in them.

“Next time I promise to be here for you, you

don't have to go through it alone." It is a solemn promise from me, Nala deserves better than this. I think it's time I take Ntaba's advice, time to be truthful to myself and these women.

"Why do you care about me so much?" She queries.

My heart pauses and jumps as the question hits my ears, I do care about her a lot. I want her safe and protected, I want her happy and at peace.

There's a staring contest that lasts for mere minutes, mere minutes of her observing me with curiosity and me, well my heart refuses to take a breather. It's doing a 'twalatsa' and an exaggerated 'tsipa-tsipi.'

"Don't you get it?" I ask. "You have crept into my heart, Nala. I want to be the first person you think about when you wake up and the..."

“Last person I think about when I go to bed at night?” She completes my declaration with a smile in her voice, her face contradicting with what I’m hearing.

“Yes, I want to be ithongo lakho.” (Your guardian.)

This time she laughs, life awakening in her dead eyes.

“You mean iThonga lami.” Her quiet laughter continues to bless me.

“I can be both, your guardian and the man of your life. If you let me, I can be anything you want me to be.”

“I’m broken glass Thonga.”

“Then let me mend you, I was good with clay work at school.” I did not say that, did I? The smile on her face is a sight for sore eyes, my eyes.

“I don’t deserve to be loved, I’m not a good person. I’ve done things in my life, things that will make you hate me. Things I’m ashamed of.” Pity is evident in the tone of her voice. This is not what I want for her, to live in regret of the things she’s done in the past. Whatever they are.

“No one is perfect Nala, we all have our own share of mistakes. I’d be a hypocrite if I were to point yours out.”

I take a chance and intertwine my fingers with hers, she tightens the grip and grants my wish of glancing into my eyes.

“Am I naïve to trust you, Thonga?” She looks visibly sorrowful, I hope she doesn’t panic from the touch of my hand on her cheek. The second my hand gently lends on her cheek, she laces her vacant hand on mine.

“You’re not, I will never break your trust. I promise, Nala.” Her eyelids flicker open and

close, a drop of tear slips out. She quickly wipes it before I attempt to. Her mouth accepts a smile as she chokes a muffled giggle.

“Thonga lami,” Her voice is a whisper as she makes a desperate face. “Please don’t finish what’s already broken, I will perish if you do.”

“I won’t,” I’m not certain if this gives me the right to wrap my arms around her, but I do, she holds me back just as tight. “I won’t break you Nala.”

I will treat her like an egg, like the precious cargo she is.

She tells me she wants to sleep and declines my offer of staying over.

“This is your father’s premises, we’re not going to disrespect him.” She says.

“We’re not going to be doing anything.” I’ve got

my armour on, ready to defend myself and practise my right to comfort this woman who has found a way into my heart. “Okay, take a rest. If you’re not feeling better in the morning, I’ll take you to the doctor.”

I plant a soft kiss on her cheek after helping her lie down in bed.

“I’m happy you’re back, Mathonga.” She states, this is enough for my heart to jump into conclusions and do a cartwheel.

Goodnight pleasantries are exchanged between us, before I tiptoe my way to the main house.

In the kitchen, I find Ntaba and Khethiwe engrossed in what seems like an intimate exchange.

I can only shake my head at how he’s always thinking about sex, it’s so obvious with how he’s standing close to her.

The poor girl is pressed against the fridge, looking up at him. He owes her a neck massage after that encounter, Ntaba has closed whatever space was between them. How has Khethiwe not collapsed from that seductive look he's giving her? I remember her being weak around him.

"I'm here for a glass of water, don't mind me." I inform them when they give me questioning looks, the sink is far from the fridge. That's why they think I can't hear them.

"I swear Khethi, the moment I saw you, my soldier saluted. Now he needs to go to war."

God of my ancestors, I hope he's not taking about what I think he's taking about. I have to steal a glance, they really are not minding me. Now I want to see how this pans out.

Khethiwe looks just as confused, I should

rescue her from my insane brother. That one can't live without sex.

I turn to face the sink when she sends her shy gaze my way, Ntaba needs to rub off some of his confidence on her.

"Nta... Ntaba." I can hear her breathless whisper from here, how her voice trembles as she calls his name, as if she worships the ground he walks on.

"Take me to war, Captain K. I want to play shoot and run." Bad choice of words Ntaba, I hope spongebob and Patrick know they have a brother, they need to come get him. Idiot.

"What?" The hurt in Khethiwe's voice. This I must see. She's created an invisible bearer between them, church distance. Hlabela would reward her with a star.

"No, not like that." Ntaba debates.

It is like that though, he shoots and runs. But

girls always drool over him, he's like a toxic drug they can't stay away from.

"I meant, shoot and hide..." He's stuttering, Khethiwe deserves an award. The great Ntabezikude is stuttering. I don't know if I should laugh at how dumb he looks or Khethiwe's shocked expression.

"Okay, forget guns. We'll pretend we're in the 60's, I have a sword and you have a shield."

What the heck? This is where I scream "shut up."

He's putting himself six feet under, basically throwing his stupid ass into the fiery furnace and there's no Jesus to save him there. I hope he comes out looking like a burnt sausage.

"What do you say, Khethi? Let's go play bend and stab, you'll do the bending and I'll..."

Ntaba you are a dead man, friends with benefits or not. Khethiwe's fire blazing eyes run from his face to his... uh... soldier and... eww it's saluting. I need to sanctify my eyes.

I'm expecting a hard clap from Khethiwe. Smack him back to stupid-ville.

"Tell your soldier I'm not in the mood." She delivers, rejects him rather and walks off. I'm a happy little brother, it's Christmas this side. I'm left holding on to the sink, unable to control my laugh.

Soldiers die in Iraq and my brother has been gunned.

"Soldier down, I repeat soldier down." I mock his stupid ass.

He turns to face me with a piercing gaze. I don't care, he can kill me with a look. I will go to the next life and recite this story to the elders.

"What's wrong with Khethi? I think she's angry

with me.” Wow, he thinks?

“She’s in love with an idiot, that’s what’s wrong with her. I agree with Khethiwe, your gun is empty and your sword is blunt. Hamba uyolala ndoda.”

He’s drowning in confusion, I’m not going to rescue him. I don’t do well with confusion, but I am loving how it has swallowed my brother. I watch him as he crosses his arms over his chest, what is he thinking about?

“Did I say something wrong?” He asks with crumpled eyebrows.

Of course he did. In fact, he said everything wrong.

“Yes, Mr. Bend and stab.” I land a soft smack at the back of his big head, the fool felt nothing.

“Whether she’s your side dish or the hill you will die upon, you don’t talk to women like you’re taking a dump.”

He's shaking his head, I think he doesn't understand what I'm saying.

"Women confuse me," he says.

Yet he loves them, confusing and fierce as they are.

"You and your soldier had it coming ndoda, tshela isosha lakho to stand down. The war has been cancelled, Sergeant."

His upper lip curls as he throws a stern look my way, that won't stop me from laughing at him.

He scratches his head, confusion still latched on his face and turns to leave. His shoulders are slumped, head and arms loosely hanging. I did say he will burn, look at that sausage walking away.

MATHONGA-

Thirty

NDLELENI-

Siblings are a blessing from God, the ancestors, a higher being, the stars or whatever deity you believe in. They are the people who will never leave you no matter how dark your days turn.

You learn to love them from the moment they come into your life and when your brain is fully developed, you come to realise that you would simply die without them, that life would be absolutely meaningless.

He was born a year after his brother Vimbela, his mother popped out babies like they were in fashion. There were four children before him, four children who had occupied their parents' hearts.

A parent's love is boundless, right? There's always enough room to fit a nation.

Not in Ndleleni's case, Vukuzakhe had filled more space than he should have in his mother's heart, leaving the others to squash themselves in and share a seat.

His father was there for the first few years of his life, he filled where Dalisile couldn't and that was okay with Ndleleni until he noticed his mother's big belly. Somehow he knew what it meant, he'd heard his brothers talk about a baby coming.

There was joy in the family, joy he couldn't participate in whole heartedly.

He too should have celebrated with everyone, right?

He wanted to and for a while he did. He clapped with them when the baby would kick, although he didn't know what that meant, it just felt like

the right thing to do since everyone was doing it.

The goal was to fit in, and not look like the outcast he was.

She looked like a giant from his four year-old view, a big oval belly, round cheeks. He was scared of her, especially when she started walking like a penguin.

Some days it gave him nightmares, he would wake up sweating with tears threatening to expose his cowardice, but he couldn't let them out nor tell anyone about the bad dreams.

His older brothers also spoke about how a man never cries and should show strength, no matter what the situation life has you in, and he wanted to be that, so he wouldn't feel like a burden.

Ndleleni was the youngest after all and his brothers babied him. He hated that, maybe

that's why his mother didn't care to give him a moment of her time, make him feel like he mattered at least.

He longed for her attention, a kiss on the forehead, or a pat on the shoulder.

When he'd fall and bruise his knee, Vukuzakhe or Hlabela were there to pick him up and nurse his wounds. When he lost his first tooth, they were there and went to an extent of putting money under his pillow while he slept at night, "with regards the tooth fairy." Their exaggerated notes would say.

His parents were too busy for him, too busy for all his firsts. His first word, his first walk, his first haircut and his first day at school.

Everything else seemed more important than raising him.

Sakhile was already in the picture, a bubbly

bundle of joy with bulging eyes and a captivating smile. Aren't all babies?

Ndleleni was not sure how he felt about Sakhile, if he loved him as much as everyone did. He couldn't understand what the fuss over him was about. Even his brothers had cut the attention they'd give him in half and handed the other half to Sakhile.

They were still there, all of them. But it wasn't enough, he needed all or nothing.

Soon Dalisile detached herself from the golden boy Sakhile, her full attention went back to her first born and Sakhile was too young to have noticed, maybe too slow. Babies cry when they are not getting the attention they are accustomed to, they'd scream with demand until you give in.

However, Sakhile never cared to demand what he was given from birth. It annoyed Ndleleni, how his little brother seemed perfect.

He was nothing like him, an attention-seeking, weak brat who needed someone's love to survive life on earth.

He was six years old, going on seven when his mother detached from all of them but Vukuzakhe, he noticed how she'd become that big woman again. Swollen face, plump body but this time it was accompanied by anger. She would shout and throw things around the house.

Mostly, she kept herself locked up in her room and barely spoke to them.

Some days they would hear loud voices coming from their parents' bedroom, it was clear they were arguing.

In the midst of all that bickering, a baby was going to join them. It scared Ndleleni that he'd be completely cut off by his parents.

That they would place him on a shelf and pretend he was never born. If they were obsessed with Sakhile, then they were going to be loco over the new family member.

There was nothing he could do, he was a child after all, a child who would do absolutely anything to get the love of his parents, a child who was easily manipulated by words of affection.

"I'll buy you that toy car you've always wanted if you do this or that." His mother would say.

"I'll take you to an amusement park if you pass the term." Vumile would say.

That night when Mathonga was born, Ndleleni was going to ask his father if he could go stay with his uncle Dumile. His uncle's wife loved him like he was the only one in the world and Dumile always brushed his head and gave him random compliments, he felted wanted. He had the speech thought through and imagined his father agreeing to his request.

"Baba," his innocent voice reached Vumile who gave him a single glance from his chair in the throne room. His focus was more on Dalisile and the baby.

"Ca... Can I talk to you?" The frown on Vumile's face made it hard for him to construct his words, syllables trembled their way out of his mouth.

"Not now, Ndleleni. Go to your brothers." That's it, he was waved off with a hand. Vumile was never to be disobeyed or questioned, so little Ndleleni went away with a broken heart and

anger seeping through his tiny veins.

Hours later, Mathonga was born, the next day there was a fire, then a funeral thereafter.

Twenty four years later, Ndleleni continues to struggle with insecurity and fitting in. It's hard when he's seen as the bad son by his father. Having unrequited love from his parents made him lose hope in anything that is love, his brothers are an exception. He would kill for them, everyone one of them. Including the ones who died.

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He's in Port Edward at Lunganakho Country Lodge when he receives a text from Ntaba.

Bring them home, the time is up.

He closes his laptop, leaves it on the bed and walks out of the room. As he knocks in the coop next door, a woman he met for the first time in his father's house opens.

"Get your things, we're leaving." He tells her and walks back to his room without waiting for an answer.

VUMILE-

Everything he's ever done, was for his boys. He couldn't be everything they needed but he tried his best. At least he believes he tried. Why can't they understand that he's not perfect, that he wants what's best for them.

Ntabezikude is not taking his calls, he's not sure how far he is with his threat. The boy challenges him in the most dangerous way, something he would never admit to himself nor

to anyone. He needs to get to Izingolweni, before that unruly lad ruins everything he's worked so hard to build.

Going back home means leaving Vukuzakhe with Dalisile, a woman he doesn't trust with the lives of his sons. She's a disaster waiting to happen, and Vumile has known this for years. This is why he kept her close and continues to do so. You don't just get rid of Dalisile and expect her to leave without any complaints. She would bring hell on earth for him and everyone he holds dear.

Nandi is not taking his calls, he's sent her messages asking if she's okay and to call him back, but nothing. He would call Zamangwane if she had not blocked his number. He's left with no choice but to go back home.

Dalisile is around, it's nothing to celebrate. Her

eyes keep following his every move, had it been years ago he would have teased her for eyeing him.

“Say whatever it is you want to say.” He speaks slowly, throwing some of his clothes into a sports bag. That’s how he misses the eye roll she rewards him with.

Last night they hardly got any sleep, they were at each other’s throats till the early hours of the morning. Vumile demanded to know why his youngest son was attacked at the hospital and Dalisile’s explanation did not make any sense as usual.

“I found a team of doctors on line, they can help Vukuzakhe.”

“Then call them and get them here.”

Argh, he's become so modern. Had it been ages back he would have called for inyanga.

"They are based in America, we'd have to take Vukuzakhe there."

What a wife he's chosen for himself, he must've done something bad in his past life to deserve a woman like Dalisile.

"No." A nonchalant response, it piques Dalisile.

"What do you mean, no? You've seen his condition, Vukuzakhe is..."

"Vukuzakhe is well taken care of, I am not shipping my son to a foreign country where he'll be poked and examined like some wild animal."

"You're too smart to be saying that, Vumile. Plus, those useless doctors you brought know nothing, none of them are able to diagnose his condition. I'm taking him to America." Her voice has become unnecessarily loud. She's too governing for his liking, who does she think she

is, disputing with him? His word stands and that will never change.

Vumile drops everything, and turns his raging eyes to her.

“I’m not going through this with you again, my son stays and I will not repeat myself.” He can’t contain his rage, he’d try if he cared about her feelings. She’s so disrespectful and stubborn, it makes him sick. Heck she makes him sick.

Something unpleasant floats in the air, as Dalisile jolts to her feet, it comes with wrath and bitterness.

“He will die if we don’t get him help.” Vumile catches the desperation in her tone, but this is how she’s always been when it comes to Vukuzakhe. A desperate mother who thinks there’s a Pinky-Pinky in every corner out to get her son.

Vumile carries his bag and heads to the door.

“This is your plan, isn’t it?” Dalisile shouts behind him, her voice booming with anger, putting his feet out of action. “You want to kill my son, you want him dead so that boy can take over everything.”

She’s testing his patience, he’d never choose between his sons, he loves them the same. Even on Judgement day, God will compliment him for this, maybe add a crown of gold to seal it off.

“Take that back.” He’s looking at her with loath in his eyes, at the same time trying to keep the conversation in line, he’s tired of fighting and throwing bitter words around.

“No,” another unnecessary shout from her. She has her long, painted nails pointed at him, a whole chief.

“I see through you Vumile, you’re so blinded by

your love for that boy that you are willing to sacrifice Vukuzakhe's life, just so that bastard gets everything you own."

What is she on about? There's confusion in his eyes, he quickly conceals it with something she can't point out.

"You're not making sense, Dalisile. Shut up before you say something you will regret."

Who must shut up? Not Dalisile, the world might go mute and she'll be the last man standing.

"One day Vumile, one day you will look for that boy and not find him. I swear on my sons' graves."

There's a visible tick on his jawline, a jolt in his heart leaving it beating fast. The bag tumbles to the floor. Anger ripples through his veins, his eyes narrow and before he knows it, he has his wife pressed against the wall. His hand is tight around her neck, slowly squeezing with no

mercy. She's gagging and writhing, eyes pleading for liberation, an escape.

"What did you say to me?"

She mentioned his dead sons, and threatened the one he loves more than his life; that's what she did.

"Listen to me mfazi, if anything happens to Mathonga, I will forget that you're my wife. I will kill you myself, do you hear me?" The tone is kept low, but the words are delivered with brutality.

"I'm not afraid of you or your empty threats. I know you Vumile, you will never hurt me." Ah! She can speak?

She is confident about this, he had twenty four years to smother her in her sleep, bury her under the mango tree behind the main house and tell people his wife disappeared. They would've believed him because well, she's

Dalisile, she lives life like she has no fucks to give.

“You think a snake would come out of its hole without being provoked?” He asks.

His hand loosens around her neck, he continues to hover over her. His chest is heaving and eyes shooting sharp daggers. Dalisile’s coughs sound replicated and dramatic, she’s rubbing her neck to ease the discomfort.

“If you hate me so much, why don’t you just divorce me?” Dalisile.

Be careful what you wish for...

“Divorce?” Vumile breathes, disdain dancing around his breath. “You took my sons from me... you took Vimbela and Sakhile from me, and you think I will let you go just like that?”

No he’s not going to cry because he’s Vumile Khanyile. He cries in the shower or against the pillow when no one is around. Never in front of

an audience.

“I haven’t started with you yet, Dalisile.”

This she has never heard before and why is he going back to the past? Didn’t they bury the hatchet?

“I had nothing to do with their deaths, I told you before.” Her voice is shaky, her eyes are ready to leave their sockets and her words mean nothing to him.

There’s a look of disgust masking Vumile’s hardened face, he serves her with a tongue click and marches to the door. He bends over to take the bag and as his body straightens back to his height, he freezes.

A lot of things are running through his mind, he says the first one in line that shocks both him and his wife.

“I’m taking a second wife.” With that said, he walks out without turning back to see how she receives the news. Before he shuts the front door, a derailing scream chases him, it’s Dalisile. She’s losing her mind, nothing in his bones compels him to stay. Instead he continues with his journey.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-one

NDLELENI-

Ntabezikude is not home, he wouldn’t say where he was when he called him. Work is keeping him busy, the last thing he wants is to babysit two grown people who mean nothing to him.

He would care for them if family was not his brothers. In his eyes, Nandi is his mother's second best and the teenage girl is another unfortunate child who happened to be fathered by Vumile Khanyile.

How that man keeps shooting his sperms without missing baffles him, it should be prohibited for men like him to father children. The old hag thinks he's the king of the world, doing things as he pleases when he's just a chief of a village.

It's funny as fuck.

He has decided to work from home, since he can't leave them alone like Ntabezikude had commanded. If he didn't love his brother to death like he does, he wouldn't have gone to the house his father built for his mistress and daughter to fetch them.

"They are innocent in all of this, your anger is

directed to the wrong people.” This is what Ntaba told him when he had asked that he goes back to KwaZulu-Natal and book them into a hotel, to keep Vumile from getting to them.

“They are nothing to me, I owe them nothing, ndoda. Why must we burden ourselves with those people?” Ndlela had asked him, his annoyance unclothed and gaudy.

That only upset Ntaba, something he rarely witnessed. With his brows furrows and eyes piercing Ndlela’s big head, Ntaba slammed a palm on his brother’s chest. It wasn’t meant to inflict any pain on him, but more like a big brother putting his young brother in his place.

“I am not going to ask you again, Ndlela. Say if you don’t want and I will do it myself.” Ntaba’s words got to him.

He would do anything for his brothers. Even if

he asked him to kill, Ndlela would do it. It's not like he's never done it before, it's not like he's never killed for his loved ones.

He's on a Zoom meeting with one of the Khanyile Holdings shareholders when Zamangwane walks into the lounge, he shoots a dead look at her and pulls his focus back to the laptop.

"My assistant will email you the details first thing in the morning." He's unaware how his teeth are grinding together as if he's caught a big bone between them, there's a mosquito in the middle of the room and it's annoying him.

He wraps up the meeting and bids the shareholder farewell, his attention is not given to the young girl staring at him. He is greedy with it.

A frown leisurely grows on his features when he

scratches the left side of his neck. The itch seems to move to the other side, he scratches it as well.

His whole body starts itching, he puts the laptop on the couch and stands to his feet to unbutton the white button-up shirt hugging his body.

Another throat clearance from the unwanted guest catches his full attention. She's carrying a small cage, and it hits him. This one brought rats into his car, his whole body itched the entire ride home from Port Edward. It was fifty seven minutes of agony.

"Didn't I tell you to throw those rats away?" He snaps, but she doesn't look affected.

"They are not rats, bhuti, but hamsters." 2000s think they know it all, walking around looking like Oxford English dictionaries and Google

wrapped in one. “The brown one’s name is Zoro, he’s very smart and I named the white one Zaza after myself. She’s my favourite.”

Gosh, they better be siblings.

He’s shaking his head at how ridiculous she sounds, black people don’t keep hamsters.

“It’s rats and I don’t want them here.” He’s allergic to “rats”, and despises them. If a tiny thing can subject him to agony, it shouldn’t exist. What the fuck?

“I’m sorry bhuti, I’ll put them away.” That bhuti word again, Ndleleni doesn’t know this child, yet she is juggling the word around like it’s no big deal.

“Don’t call me that,” he keeps his voice low. Angry eyes pinned on her, his brows furrow when she covers her mouth and giggles resound.

This sound; he has heard it before, in his

dreams where he'd find Vimbela playing with Sakhile. His eyes are abruptly red, a dam threatening to erupt behind them.

His puckered brow grows while staring down at the teenage girl in black giggling. Ndlela swiftly turns away from her, unable to keep his eyes on her. They remind him of a painful past. A place he doesn't want to go back to.

"Are you okay bhuti?" It's Zamangwane, her voice sounds warm and sweet to his ears, resembling a child's vocal sound.

He wants to be alone, but he doesn't tell her. The tears in his eyes are going to embarrass him, he wipes them away and uses this chance to scratch his itching body.

The damn rats, he'll have to "accidentally" step on them when she's not looking.

"I'm fine," he lies. Pain is shooting down the

deepest parts of his core. He needs a drink, anything to make him forget. There's a table just next to the sliding door that leads to the garden, he pours himself a glass of whiskey and downs the liquor like it's a shot.

The entirety of his face crumbles at the strong taste, he recovers just as he pours another one. He's brave enough to look at his half-sister now, she is a Khanyile to the bone.

He would've questioned her features had he met her as a stranger in a random place, that bastard Vumile's genes are strong.

"Where is your mother? Didn't Khethiwe tell you that I'm working? You're not supposed to be..."

"I'm bored," she interjects with an irresolute smile on her face. The cage with "rats" has been placed on the coffee table. He will never eat anything from that table again.

"So?" It's obvious he's not interested in

entertaining her.

“Can we do something fun?” She frisks to him with a childlike smile dancing on her face, Ndlela’s scary frown doesn’t stop her excitement. Didn’t Ntaba say this child is seventeen, not five?

“I told you I’m busy.” Ndlela steps back, she’s the rat-carrier. His skin is burning thanks to her Sir Zoro and lady Zaza. “And you don’t know me, go play with your mother.”

“Of course I know you, you are bhut’ Ndleleni, my brother. Bhut’ Ntaba told me everything about you and Bhuti Hlabela, bhuti Mathonga and bhuti’ Zakhe. He’s always talking about you, I have pictures of all of you on my phone. Do you want to see?”

She talks too much, he’s not interested. If she wants a place in his life, then tough luck, there’s a ‘closed’ sign.

Loud whistling can be heard from here, his exhale is resigned. His Hitler brother is finally home; Ntaba. He has barely penetrated the threshold and Zamangwane is flying to him.

“Bhuti,” she throws herself in his arms. The giant whisks her up and suffocates her in his large arms. Her giggles, the ones that had Ndlela tearing up evade the commodious family room.

“Popeye, unjani.” Ntaba showers her with kisses after placing her back on her feet. Zamangwane is on a mission to wipe away every kiss lingering on her face, she looks flushed. A place to hide would suffice.

“I’m not a Popeye, bhuti.” Her dispute is timid, it has Ndlela furrowing his brows. How was this child forward with him, but can’t look Ntaba straight in the eye?

Ndleleni is known as the most intimidating between the brothers, they all have their days, but his arrogance has a life, an address and a poker-faced butler who slams doors on people's faces. Ndleleni wears his anger on his face, his words and sometimes in his actions.

"My son, you're home." A female voice calls from the direction of the kitchen, they turn to a smiling Nandi. Her arms are wide open ready to welcome Ntaba, he eases into them like a child.

The glower on Ndleleni's facial features can be bought from a black market with a hefty price, it's probably more costly than Michael Jackson's famous glove.

How in the world does Ntaba know these people? Has he been seeing them more often than he explained? By the looks of it, it appears

that is the case.

“How are you, mama wami?” Ntaba’s greeting is cloaked in reverence, she cups his cheeks as he bends his knees to steal a kiss on her forehead.

“I’m fine my boy, you look taller every time I see you.” She is patting his cheeks. “You’re gaining weight, someone is treating you good, keep her and treat her well.”

She probably has a whole wedding planned in her head, from theme to wedding cake.

“Kanti lutho ma.” Ntaba retorts, a smile on his face. Ndleleni rolls his eyes, this is unbelievable. This brother of his can keep secrets and he does it so well.

Does Vumile know all this? That his woman and third born are best friends? Ah! Mention the devil and he materialises from nowhere, his eyes find Nandi first.

MATHONGA-

My hands are clammy, my heart is hammering viciously inside my chest. I don't make eye contact when Amandla ambles back into the living room with a glass of water.

"Relax babe, my grandmother won't be home till late." She told me this over the phone before I got here. I want to shift when she perches herself beside me and her leg flies over my thigh.

"I miss you, Mathonga. Where have you been?"

With no reply emerging, I clear my throat to ease the anxiety of having to break her heart. She's not making things easy for me by being this close. When I shift uncomfortably, she draws her arms around my shoulders to draw me close to her.

"This feels good, I miss being in your arms." Her

declaration makes me feel like a halfwit.

How can I be such a coward? I should be putting both of us out of our misery.

“Why aren’t you talking baby? You’re extra quiet today.” She asks.

I look away when her eyes search mine, I don’t want her to see it. I want to tell her myself.

“We need to talk.” I introduce.

My chest constricts, it suddenly feels hot in here. All the things I want to say are stuck in my throat, I have to swallow to prevent myself from shedding tears.

“Did I do something wrong?” Her wide eyes are looking back at me, suspiciously.

“We need to break up.” I don’t want to dwell much into this. There’s a minute of silence before she removes her leg from my thigh and shifts back.

“Why?” She asks, blankly.

“It’s not working Amandla...”

“That’s not an answer, did I do something wrong?”

“No, it’s not you, it’s...”

“No, no Mathonga. That doesn’t make sense, tell me what I did wrong and I will fix it.” She’s getting in my personal space, yelling right in my face, her hands curled on my hoodie. “I love you, you’re all I have.”

I stand to free myself from her grip, but she won’t let go. She stands with me, her face is wet with tears.

Usually I would wipe them away, bring her to my chest and tell her everything will be okay. Not today, I don’t belong to her anymore, neither does she belong to me.

“I’m sorry,” I groan beneath my breath and keep

my eyes above her head. The pain in her wet eyes torments me in the most gruesome way.

“Don’t tell me that,” she’s screaming while slamming tight fists on my chest. “Tell me you’re joking, tell me that you love me like I love you.”

I do love her, God knows I do and only God knows why I have chosen someone else over this woman I have been loving since I was a teenager.

There’s no use in fighting a losing battle, I have made up my mind. I can’t play two women, it will be unfair to them and to me as well. I don’t want to be my father, as much as I love him and look up to him. The choices he has made in life are nothing to be proud of.

“Why are you quiet? Say something dammit.”

I'm jolted out of an unexpected trail.

"You deserve a clean break, Amandla, I don't want to linger in your heart. I want you to move on, you deserve the best, you deserve better than me." She's shaking her head, which tells me that she won't accept this and she never will. "I'm not your future."

"But you are mine," she bites her lip and lowers herself back on the couch, her body sinking in defeat.

"After all these years, Mathonga. After everything we've been through together and this is what you do to me?" I can't stand her tears, but I can't comfort her.

"You are asking me to live without you, that's the same as killing me, Mathonga." Her eyes find me again as she looks up, this is the first time seeing her drenched in so much pain and it's my fault.

“I’m selfish Amandla, I admit. You can do better than me, please let us go our separate ways. Don’t fight it, it will only make things difficult for the both of us.”

I sound like a jerk, maybe I am. I notice how her hands are trembling as she slowly stands back up, I let her cup my cheeks with her warm small hands. There’s an urge to lean in, an urge to draw her in my arms and let her feel how sorry I am.

“But you’re not telling me anything. Did you meet someone else? Who is she? Does she know I was here first? I want to meet her, how can a woman do this to another woman? How can you be with someone who has no regard for other people’s feelings?”

Telling her the truth would destroy her, finish what I started.

Guilt ripples through me, it tightens on my chest. I move from her space and furiously rub my face.

“You might not believe me, Amandla, but this is hard for me too. I am hurting too.”

“It doesn’t seem like it, your eyes are dead Mathonga. You’re tearing me to pieces, and you are not remorseful about it. Why are you so heartless?”

I don’t answer her, we’re going around in circles and it’s taking us nowhere.

“Please take care of yourself, you’re a good woman. You will love again.”

She’ll get a headache from crying and shaking her head like that. Her eyes bulge when my feet move, she enwraps her arms around me and breaks down in tears. I would hold her back, if I could. Cry with her, but choosing to be stone cold is the way to go. A gasp gushes from her

chest when I manage to remove her arms from around me.

She falls back on the couch, sobbing painfully.

I turn without giving her another glance, my feet are heavy along with my heart as I walk out of her house, her life and whatever there was between us. The last memory I have of her are her heart breaking cries.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-two

HLABELA-

This is why he stays away from children, why he doesn't have one himself at the age of 33.

There's something about them that makes his heart chase the Gautrain with the intention to win.

At church, he denied the position of being a Saturday school teacher for the young ones, he's more comfortable working with the youth. If you're 12 years old going up, then you're okay being around him.

Today must be a curse itself, Kushi wants him to meet her children. Her mother in-law finally had mercy on her and brought the kids to visit. What does he say to them? How does he look at them and not think of his brothers he lost to a raging fire?

It's almost time, Kushi will be here in less than ten minutes. Part of him wants to call her and cancel, make an excuse or something. He has a brother in the hospital, everyone went back to KwaZulu-Natal leaving him behind.

He's the only man around, and that means he has to look after Bongiwe and well, Dalisile,

that's if he can stand her presence.

Loving God and being his disciple does not mean you will love like Jesus loves, life is not heaven on earth, no one is perfect.

"Shit!" Oops! The devil is always close, tempting the righteous. Kushi's phone just sent him to voicemail, how does he deal with this now?

Maybe leave the hotel, he will explain later why she found him gone. He needs to get out of here or he will faint, his hands are trembling as he grabs his car keys and wallet from the bed. He'll go and spend time with his brother, that's better than subjecting himself to... argh!

His heart jolts and sits on his throat when he opens the door and sees Kushi and two kids on both her sides, each holding her hands.

"Bella." Her smile is wide.

There's nothing to smile about, he's about to have a heart attack, his eyes are on the little boy

and girl who are staring back at him.

Breathe Hlabela, breathe... okay; Our Father who art... Nope, prayer is not his solution. Those things take time anyway, something about a day being a thousand years in heaven and a thousand years being a day. Brain cracking, yeah!

“Thlabhela.” Not even a butcher knife would chop his name like this.

He blinks when a bead of sweat blinds his eye. Gods of salty waters, you are great.

“Uh, hi” It’s all good, he can still speak. He wants to tell them to come in... Okaaaay, shifting aside is not a bad idea. Kushi narrows her eyes at him as she strides in with her babies. It’s not that he’s suffering from pedophobia, it’s... she wouldn’t understand.

He drags his palms across his face, how will he

explain without sounding like he needs therapy?
It takes him forever to finally shut the door,
before turning to meet his potential family.

“Are you okay?” Kushi asks, she looks like she’s
losing her patience.

“Yes,” his voice is strained, stuck deep in his
throat.

His eyes dash to the kids again, the little girl in
denim shorts and sandals looks like a younger
version of Kushi. The boy is taller than the girl,
he must look like his father.

“This is Neha,” her hand lovingly caresses the
girl’s hair. “And this is Shanker.” She’s referring
to the boy and tells them to greet uncle Bella.
The only thing he gets are bashful waves,
Hlabela manages a smile.

They, should be looking at him like he’s here to
rob them not the other way around, he is a
stranger after all.

“Nice to...” His voice fails him, he clears his throat as his eyes meet with Kushi’s. She is confused and upset, probably wondering why he is acting like this. His face is wet with sweat, he uses his crispy white shirt to wipe it off and rolls up the sleeves after. Kushi notices his trembling hands and furrows her brows in worry and bafflement.

Who opened the windows of hell? Why is it so hot in here? He loosens a few buttons from his shirt, this is when he should be speaking to them and organising ice-cream dates.

“I’m sor...” He doesn’t finish his apology, a groan resounds from his throat as he flies through the bathroom door.

Oscar Pistorius, come see how it’s done.

His whole face is in the toilet bowl, emptying this morning’s breakfast. It sounds like a vomit

war in here, he tries to keep it down lest he scares the kids that's if they aren't already.

FUNOKUHLE-

Izingolweni is now added to my off limits list, when I left my father's house in the middle of the night while everyone was sleeping, I knew I was leaving myself behind. I was leaving Ntandoyethu behind, a son, my mother's daughter and a brother.

I didn't have time to pack my clothes, all I have are the clothes on my body.

I'm on my own now, with no money or a place to lay my head. I don't know what time it is, the sun was in the middle a while ago which feels like centuries ago. If the African way of telling time serves me right, 12pm has come and gone.

I'm in Port Shepstone, thanks to the old man who gave me a lift early this morning. I need to get to Johannesburg as soon as possible. Taxi ranks are also off limits, I can roam around bus stops though. I doubt my father knows any bus drivers, I'm parched, hungry and tired when I arrive at a bus station.

Wait! There are no buses here, I was told I would find one that leaves for Johannesburg this evening. My pockets are empty, my plan was to come up with a believable lie that would convince the driver to let me ride for free. It involved a rich uncle who lives in Northcliff.

This place looks busy, there are so many people wandering about. The sun will set soon, I don't want to see myself sleeping under a bridge.

"Excuse me." The man looks at me and must

decide that he doesn't like me because he scowls.

"Which row do I get buses to Johannesburg?"

"Where are your manners? Don't you know how to greet?"

There's a roughness in his voice, like he spends hours yelling. He looks like he walked out of the 50s with that brown leather jacket and hipster pants, I'm not into fashion and have no eye for it. But I should be allowed to judge this one, and those shoes. A man with ugly shoes cannot be attractive, it doesn't matter if he looks like Maps Maponyane. Shoes speak.

The bushy hair on his head screams "cut me." He smells like Easy Waves and by the looks of it, he uses more than necessary. I like the moustache though.

"Buses are on strike today," his course voice

calls me back to earth, he has an eyebrow snapped. There's a scar right on his left eye, I must be brave to have approached him. He's the type of man you should run the opposite direction when you see him.

"What?" He furrows his brows, I'm annoying him with my staring. I swear his voice becomes deeper each time he speaks. His eyes are running through my body, I don't know what he's seeing neither can I read his face.

I drop my eyes, but make sure I don't look timid. Apparently, my sexuality can be spotted from a distance.

Ongezwa Sangweni can be a funny bastard. I will miss him, the old him before I turned 15.

"I'm headed to Johannesburg in an hour, my truck is not as comfortable as the bus. But it gets me places." He says as he fishes for something in the pocket of his jacket, it's a

cigarette. He pins it between the layers of his lips and lights it while he scans the bustling station with squinted eyes.

“I don’t have money on me, I can wash your truck in exchange.” This is the only form of payment I can think of.

“Don’t worry about it.” He waves his hand, sloppily.

I can only pray that my mother watches over me when I travel with this stranger.

THE KHANYILES-

Well, elephants don’t belong in the house. They are too big to share a room with humans. Not only is there an elephant in this room, there’s thick tension that even a two edged sword can’t slice.

Vumile is not surprised by his woman seated on the two seater, he knows you don't call Ntaba bluff. He always wins in the game of truth and dare.

Not once has Nandi cast her eyes at the man she loves, she feels his gaze on her though, lingering and scrutinising. She is wondering if he will ever question her secret relationship with Ntaba, it is precious to her.

She loves his kids like her own. Nonetheless, this is the biggest betrayal, all he wanted was for her to trust him, to wait like he had asked.

His son comes to fetch her and she forgets the promises they made to each other. He's prepared for an interrogation, ask her why she is here, why she didn't wait for him.

But that would be inappropriate in front of his sons, so he has no choice but to act calm.

“I want to introduce Mashamase properly, and I will when all my sons are here. Your mother too.” Vumile breaks the silence, the elephant is still there but the tension seems to disperse a little.

“No need baba,” Ntaba steps in, he’s seated next to a worn out Ndleleni whose neck looks swollen with a bad rash, it’s slowly spreading to his face.

He hasn’t seen how he looks neither has the people he’s seated with. The scratching is getting out of control, those blunt nails are doing a number on him.

“Introductions are required, it’s also required that you marry my mother here. Give her, her rightful place in your life. You can’t be milking the cow for free baba, umdala.”

Sometimes Ntaba forgets he’s talking to his father and not his age mates, Vumile casts him

an evil eye. He wants to snap at his disrespect, but chiding Ntaba is like throwing water on a duck's back, a total waste of time.

"I know, Ntabezikude. I am older, I know customs. I am well aware what is expected of me." Vumile, sounding defensive.

That scratch he is doing on his beard is how they know there is a fire stirring in his bones and it needs to be put out.

"I don't see any of this working, how are you going to pacify umah? She will never accept this." Ndleleni has a big mouth, duck-tape is needed.

"If I may speak." Nandi.

Aren't we polite?

Being best friends with Dalisile wouldn't be a bad idea, she can teach her respect. All eyes fall on the only female in the room.

“Baba kaZakhe,” eh!

Ndleleni sneers, turning his gaze to Ntaba. Tough, he finds him smiling at Nandi. Is he the only one who is shocked by what’s happening here?

“I respect you, you know that. It was not my intention to disrespect you by coming to your house without your knowledge.” Her eyes find Ntaba, he’s focused on her. She smiles and looks back at the man who dwells in her heart.

“You have beautiful sons, I have never hidden this fact from you. I pray for them more than anything, I didn’t raise them, yes I know that. But you always came to me when you needed advice regarding them. You’d tell me stories about them, how they are doing in school and slowly they gained a place in my heart. When I met Ntabezikude, I was dumbstruck by the

respect he has for people. He didn't hide who he was."

She pauses to laugh to herself, no one spares a smile.

"Even if he did hide his identity, it would've been silly of him. He looks just like you. He started coming around a lot, I would have told you, but I was sworn to secrecy. My loyalty does not lie with you alone, but our sons as well. They are no different from Zamangwane, they are the children of the man I love. I love them like I carried them in my womb. If you don't want me around, I will leave. But Zamangwane is at peace here, she's excited about finally meeting her brothers. Don't take that away from her, don't let her resent you any further. You will lose her completely."

Ndleleni has been on an eye roll marathon, with splutters and a flaring nose. There is no emotion on Ntaba's face, his expression is that of a cold bastard's, but his heart twinkles with pride.

Vumile is at a loss for words, his eyes have been on Nandi since she started talking.

Silence creeps in and lingers for a while, Nandi is the one to break it when she announces her departure. She stands with her head cast down and vanishes into the kitchen.

"Is she going to cook again like she did that Saturday?" Why hasn't Ndleleni's mouth been gagged yet? A dish cloth would do too.

He clears his throat when Ntaba considers him with a glare ordered from the devil's tuck-shop.

"Not her ndoda," Ntaba rebukes. "Don't even think of disrespecting that woman."

Why are his threats spine-chilling? There's no sign of anger in his face nor is it visible in his voice, but he brings his brother to submission. Ndleleni wants to click his tongue, but Ntaba can be unpredictable.

“Did bab'omncane Bopha call you?”

Okay, it looks like they are done talking about Nandi. Ntaba is asking his father who creases his brows in response.

“Mathonga wants to do a ceremony, you should take this opportunity and appease your ancestors because you will need to introduce Nandi and Zamo at some point.” The disrespect of calling an African parent by name, yet he protects her like she's his world.

“Asihlabeli amadlozi lekhaya, nothing of the sort will happen.” Vumile.

“How are you so ignorant baba? Don't you know

you don't turn your back on your ancestors?"

Ntaba snaps a brow, he wants to punch the stubbornness out of his father.

"God is a jealous God," Vumile spits back, shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He hates these topics, they remind him of things he doesn't want to think about.

"So? Has jealousy ever killed anyone?" This question should make sense, but because it's coming from Ntaba, it makes zero sense.

"Fear God Ntabezikude." Vumile growls, a useless waste of anger shown. His remark has Ntaba standing to his feet, he's killed his father a million times with just a look.

"Stop forcing him down my throat, then. I will not change my beliefs just to accommodate you. Mathonga might die if this is not done, you need to start thinking of your family, baba. I'm not saying turn your back on your God, but think

of us too.” Ntaba.

“You’re a child, there are things you don’t know.”

Does Vumile know who he birthed?

The man standing directly above his father shakes his head, a simper finds its way to his lips.

“Tell Dalisile to put on a dress, a head wrap and brew umqombothi. sohlabela amadlozi, KwaKhanyile.” (We’re going to appease the ancestors.)

Ntaba does not watch his mouth around here, finally Vumile stands, sizing him up.

“Over my dead body.” Vumile.

There’s emptiness in Ntaba’s eyes, darkness hovers over him, making him appear chancy.

“I’m sure the underground gang can arrange that.” Ntaba sneers at him, a kiss is planted on Vumile’s cheek before he can process what is

before him. It can't be the son he loves, he's different, bad different.

“Iyobonana baba wesizwe.” (Father of the nation.)

He doesn't look at his brother Ndleleni who has been quiet throughout, but shifts his weight on one leg to leave. He almost falls when he trips on something at the foot of the coffee table.

It's the hamsters' cage and it's open. Ndleleni swiftly puts his feet on the couch as the hamsters scatter to different directions, he will die if any of them brushes against him.

“Since when do we have rats?” A confused Ntaba asks. “Khethi, bring Doom.”

He shouts, as he moves one of the couches where the hamster disappeared to, it probably feels the cold because it scuttles under the next couch.

“Not Doom, a broom slima.” Ndleleni corrects him with a shake of the head. Yeah a broom, all that arguing with Vumile messed with his head and scrambled his brains.

“A broom Khethi, hurry.” Ntaba shouts his correction.

“Make sure you’re ready to tell your sister what happened to her rats.” Ndleleni.

Ntaba is not sure he heard right, he gives his brother an inquisitive stare.

“Those are hamsters, they belong to Zamangwane. They were for a school project and she decided to keep them.” Vumile explains, sitting back down. His sons are looking at him like he’s grown a pair of horns, it has everything to do with him letting his daughter keep “rats.”

“Ndoda,” Ntaba tosses a look at Ndleleni. “I said fetch Nandi, not Nandi and the Zoo.”

He's disgusted, a rat is a rat. Whether you name it or not, this is why he shouts for Khethiwe again. There's noise in the room, Vumile can't sit through it, his shoulders are heavy and there is a splitting headache arranging his funeral. He dashes out, he's going to look for Nandi.

Lock the tollgates from Johannesburg, Dalisile might slip out.

Khethiwe comes running with a broom, Ntaba snatches it, and like a predator, searches for his prey. Now he has to start pushing the sofas, the hamsters are out of sight.

Mathonga walks in to noise that give him a headache, he looks like a criminal with those red eyes and a hoodie pulled over his face. He's been crying, it's as clear as a glass wall.

Ntaba and Khethiwe are loud, pointing and aiming at something on the floor. Mathonga wants to complain, but sees one of the

hamsters emerging from under a couch and disappears under the next.

“Since when do we have rats?” That’s his question coming from a scratchy throat. No one answers him. Ndleleni is busy scratching his itching body, Ntaba has a broom in hand waiting to attack and Khethiwe, well she’s there.

“I’m going to call pest control.” Mathonga’s voice is hollow and strangled, he pulls out his phone and finds a corner.

A moment of silence for Zoro and Zaza.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-three

NALA-

This is new to me, having a man rest his head on my chest with his arms wrapped around me.

He's heavier than I'd like, but I can't complain. He's going through something, I knew when he walked into my room with red eyes and a puffy nose.

He hasn't said anything about the sadness behind his eyes, the only thing he's told me is that he has a sister who is not his mother's child and she brought hamsters. Apparently Ndleleni is allergic, Ntabezikude wanted to kill them, he wasn't making sense, but he found it funny.

I spent the day in bed today, to avoid passing out. Mathonga would make a big deal out of it, he makes a big deal out of everything.

"Thank you, MaShange." Oh! He's still alive? I was about to check, I can imagine the breaking news; *Khanyile boy dies from cuddles.*

"Do you need anything?" I query.

His face is hidden in my chest, what am I saying?

His entire body is on me, squashing me down the mattress. I can't feel my back and my ass.

"I need you." He says, raising his head to look at me. His chin is on my chest.

Men cry till their eyes swell up? This is news. The intent stare should be making me uncomfortable, it's not. What is it with this man that makes me feel comfortable around him? I should be running away from anything that has a penis between its legs.

Mathonga feels like that calm rain, there's no storm raging inside me when I'm with him. I have agreed to belong to him, that's why he is looking at me like his world begins and ends with me.

"I'm here, Thonga." I'm here and I want to know why he's been brought to tears.

"Can I kiss you?" Lord! That's what couples do, they kiss and hug and... no, I can do this.

Mathonga is not... him. Maybe I'm stupid to trust him, but I do.

"Just a peck," he adds, probably seeing the hesitation drenched in my face. Half a nod through and his lips are pressed on mine, his eyes are closed. I want to close mine, savour this moment, but my past denies me.

He's shuffling on top of me, his hand sliding under my nightgown, between my thighs. I can't believe he is aroused already. My heart freezes. Relax Nala, he is not... him.

His lips are moving against mine, slowly and carefully. His warm tongue asking for access, hesitantly, I take a bold risk and let him in. I hope I don't end up chewing rice I did not eat. These French kisses are not for everyone.

His hand starts trailing up my thigh, he's moaning inside my mouth.

My body freezes instantly as flashes of Petros harass my mind. I shift my head to the side and break the kiss, luckily he stops. He's confused, men always look confused when you deny them something they deeply want.

"You're moving too fast." The honest truth is always the way to go, I would tell him how I much I loathe sex, that it is the worst thing God has ever created. He should have come up with a different way to be fruitful and multiply.

Mathonga shifts to the side of the bed, leaving me squashed against the wall. He's upset, or is it because he was crying? I'm yet to learn so much about this gender.

"Are you upset?" I ask, and I'm not sure what I will say if he says he is.

"Why would I be?"

He crosses one leg over the other, pulls his

hoodie to his eyes and folds his arms across his chest. I would be upset by his attitude if he wasn't making my heart do funny things.

"I didn't mean I don't ever want to do it with you, Thonga. I just... it's too soon. I'm not those girls who..."

"I never said you were."

He's sitting up, ogling at me with narrowed, red-rimmed eyes. I didn't think he'd be defensive.

"Maybe you should go take a cold shower, you're frustrated for no reason."

"I'm not sexually frustrated Nala," he's whining like a child. My eyes can't be deceiving me, this man is pouting.

"I never said you are sexually frustrated," I implied it.

This conversation is taking all the strength in me. Is it even a conversation or a fight? We've

been a couple for a day and already world war Z has emerged.

The bed moves with him when he scrambles down, I shift to where he was sitting and stretch my legs to cover all areas. He won't be sitting back here, until he takes that shower. We're staring at each other, I don't know about him, but I want this squabble to end.

"I'm sorry, Nala." He pushes my legs aside and takes his spot back, his big head lies on my chest and I have no choice but to caress the big baby.

"I just broke up with my ex-girlfriend, she didn't..."

Whaaat?

He's on the floor, face scrunched and nose crinkled up to his conical eyes. I didn't mean to push him that hard, it was an unexpected push, or he wouldn't have fallen.

“You had a girlfriend, Mathonga?”

“First of all; ouch!” He complains.

Banging his big head against the wall should’ve come to mind first, I never get anything I want.

“Secondly, yes.” He sounds apologetic, but I don’t care. He just broke up with his girlfriend for me... wait...

“Is it because of me that you broke up with her?”

His lips curl up as he positions himself back on my bed, if I were not standing, I would have pushed him again.

“I really like you, Nala.” Like? He broke someone’s heart over “Like”

“How long have you been together?”

“Years, we met in high school. But...”

Oh my God! What was this man thinking?

“Mathonga, what have you done? We don’t know each other that well for you to break someone’s heart, it’s not that deep Mathonga. We would’ve gotten over what we feel for each other, you didn’t have to take such drastic methods.”

I’ve never wanted to be a home wrecker, the world has enough of them. Why is he looking at me like that?

I cross my arms and step back, he’s standing over me with his intimidating giant-self.

If I wrote a letter to God, I’d tell him to reverse time and make women taller and stronger than men. Sometimes I’m glad I don’t have a father, I doubt he would’ve protected me. The world is cruel, hearts of men have grown cold. No one pities anyone, it’s each man for himself.

My heart jumps to my throat, a ragged breath leaves me when my spine softly hits the door.

He's caging me against the door, there's anger in his eyes and... I'm a mess of shudders. His breath ghosts my face, and I think I smell what he had for supper.

"Ma... Mathonga." My mind can't be thinking the worst, my heart trusts him. That's how I have let him in, and I don't let anyone in.

"You think what I feel for you is not that deep, Nala?" I tense at the hurt resounding in his voice, and lose my senses when I see what rests in his eyes; vulnerability, dejection.

Why are my words affecting him this much?

"You think this is a joke; that my heart is a fly by night?"

"I... I didn't say that." I disagree, nervously.

"You think I'm cruel enough to purposely break another girl's heart because of feelings that are

not that deep?”

Okay, Mathonga. I have heard you. Why am I not telling him this?

“My heart is not a playground Nala, I know what I feel for you. I’m not stupid.”

I’m able to breathe normally when he steps back, he won’t take his eyes off me though. The stare is penetrating, invading my inner most being. I might as well be pinned against the wall and I would breathe easily if he didn’t have his hands rammed into his pockets, it’s intimidating and borders on arrogance.

“Maybe I am stupid,” he huffs, coldly. “Maybe I’m stupid for being at peace when I’m with you, maybe I’m stupid for feeling that you matter the most. Maybe I’m stupid for feeling like my heart will stop when I lose sight of you. Life is only beautiful whenever I’m around you, and it’s just so stupid of me to feel that way.”

How was I supposed to know it was that deep?

He clicks his tongue, shoves me aside and leaves.

The door slams, paying for my sins.

I didn't think he would be offended, I was trying to make him see reason that I am not worth it. But a pathetic loser who sleeps with old men.

A lone tear slowly descends across my cheek, it lingers there, fragile until it drops to the ground. The realisation that I'm pushing him away and punishing him for being a man hits me.

Petros is a monster, he is nothing compared to Mathonga.

Speak of the devil, my phone alerts me with a text from Mam' Julia.

Your father lost his job, they found drugs in his office cabinet. He's being investigated.

Whose father? I don't have a father.

KHETHIWE-

Ntaba is too occupied to give me any attention, at least that's what I would like to believe. He won't talk to me since I rejected him. I understand that he can be stupid at times, I just wish he thinks before he speaks.

His silliness does not stop me from missing him, his chiselled face, his commanding stance. I'm standing outside his rondavel with a plate of a warm meal.

He opens the door with a frown on his face, our eyes lock for a second before he leaves it open and goes to sit on the bed.

I don't know if this is an invitation to come in. I feel like Moses before he split the Red Sea, my

hands are trembling and I'm itching in all the hairy places. Just to taste the waters, I take two steps in.

Nothing.

My nerves dissolve a centimetre, his food is getting cold, that's what I tell him when I place the plate on the bedside table-top. He's not interested in eating.

"Why are you here?" His question shocks me a bit, I didn't expect it from him. I want him to look at me. His elbows are on his thighs, head bowed, and I almost feel jealous of the floor that it has his undivided attention.

"I want to apologise for that day." That's not why I'm here, I miss him.

"You rejected me, Khethi. I don't like rejection." He drops his voice into a huskier tone, through it I hear pain, so fragile that it shatters my heart. Is he afraid of rejection? It can't be about me, he

made it clear that this is not serious.

“I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.” I’m telling him this because I want him normal and crazy again, not this detached Ntaba. I touch his shoulder, a first move I never initiate, afraid he might reject me.

He looks at me and this is the first time seeing a speck of emotion filter in his eyes. To be polite, I ask how Vukuzakhe is although I know already.

“He will live,” there is no real emotion behind his words, nothing in it to indicate what he feels. He is almost like a zombie, I saw it with Mathonga and Ndleleni as well. They have their moments where everything seems normal and they are laughing like nothing is wrong, then there’s moments when they are quiet, distant and gloomy.

Vukuzakhe is the backbone of this family,

without him they will all crumble.

Ntaba stands and claims my space, I feel myself becoming unstable, my knees failing me. He starts drawing a finger along my chin, tilting my head so that I look into his cold eyes. He captures my lips into a slow-soft kiss, it's different. I almost believe he feels something for me. I stand on my tippy toes and shawl his shoulders with my arms.

His hands are tight on my sides, fingers digging in my flesh as the kiss transitions from soft to intense. His tongue flicks against mine, enticing a moan from my throat which is met by an increasing pressure of his body into mine.

Everything he is, everything I've always known about him seeps into me, around me, until I'm unable to catch my breath. If this is how dying feels like, then I accept it.

I gasp for air in our vicious kiss, he stops and tears away. His eyes are wide, swirling with confusion. He looks shocked by what just happened, then it's gone like it was never there.

I can't let him regret what just happened, I have to distract him by all means.

He frowns when I drop to my knees and start pulling down his track pants.

“What are you doing?”

I want him to relax, I want him to let out something past that mask of his. This is the only way, of course I wasn't a virgin when I slept with Ntaba for the first time, but I have never blown a guy before.

Ntaba is different, he's not just a guy but the man I love. I'd do anything to have him notice me.

“I want to taste Moses’ rode.” I can hear him chuckle at my answer, I really do not have a name for what I’m looking at. It’s mouth-watering, I can only thank God that I get to have a taste of him. The man upstairs did say ask and it will be given, and Lord I have been given the best.

I’m sending my mother 20% of my tithe this Sunday.

“No, get up. You don’t have to do that.” He grabs my shoulders and stands me up.

There must be someone doing it to him then, disappointment shows in my face. I know the odds are high, but I would hate to share his d*ck with someone. I want it for myself.

I don’t have time to respond, before he digs into my neck, kissing and sucking without mercy.

“Ntaba,” I moan, overwhelmed by a kiss. I will die when he penetrates me.

He presses his body against mine, and traces obsessive kisses from my shoulder to my ear, leaving nothing untouched.

His hands start to move, touching me, making my skin tingle with enthusiasm. I always want this, his breath is unbearably warm against my skin, reminding me of the number of times we've slept together. I know it meant nothing to him, but it meant everything to me.

He strips me naked, while attacking every spot on my body with open mouthed kisses. My nipples respond to his wet lips, I weave my hands through his head and his back until I slip his t-shirt off his body. My clit is twitching with need, it's unbearable. I need him inside me now.

"You're falling apart Khethi, should I stop?" The arrogance.

His whisper sends shivers through my body.

“Ntaba please...” I plead. “Please, you’re torturing me.”

I hear the arrogant chuckle again, extremely sexy.

“Get on the bed,” he doesn’t have to repeat himself.

He’s looking at me with this smirk while I’m lying on his bed resembling my mother’s Christmas stuffed-Chicken. The bed sinks down when he tops me, separating my legs with his warm hand.

They roam around my thighs, he’s trailing them north and I’m in agony, squirming on the bed with desperation latched on my face. A sound reminiscent to a wounded animal escapes my throat, when I feel him rubbing my clit, he’s using his thumb.

I’m barely coping when he slides a finger into my throbbing hole, and starts plunging with no

mercy. Another finger is added, I have to bite my bottom lip to muffle my screams.

“Don’t hold back Khethi, I want to hear you scream.” He mumbles against my ear, something moves in my belly, something like jelly and butterflies.

“Ntaba, I need you... please.”

He increases the pace, roughly thrusting and twirling his fingers inside my warmth. My knees are wobbly, I'm wiggling on his bed, heaving and panting not knowing what to do with my legs and hands.

“Squirt for me, Khethi.” It’s a whispered order, and squirt I do.

“Ntaba,” His name shoots out of my mouth in a yelp, as I throw my head back and fidget on the bed.

A pulsating heat engulfs me, making my entire body swelter as he licks his fingers coated with

my juices. He's grinning like he just won a million bucks, what is wrong with him today? This is more than I expected, hey, I'm not complaining.

"Time to feed Ngwane now, how bad do you want him?" He's kneeling on the bed, giving himself slow strokes. My heart is pounding at the sight of his d*ck, it's veiny, hard and pointing north. I want to lick the pre-cum glistening on the tip of Ngwane's mushroom head.

"I'd die without him... please give me all of him. Don't hold back."

I'll repent on Sunday, God will be shocked to see me in church. My skin is burning with desire for this man. He drags me up, making me kneel in front of him. He sucks one of my nipples into

his mouth, swirling his tongue around it. His hand is on my cookie, fingers rotating around my clit. I reply with moans, and desperate cries. His hand flies to my hair, grasping it tightly.

I moan unexpectedly and grit my teeth, I'm losing my mind.

"Do you know that you're worth it, Khethi?" He whispers in my ear, licking my earlobe and slowly rubbing my clit. God, I'm going to cum. "Tell me, you know your worth, Khethiwe KaMadonsela."

His voice is firm and commanding, he roughly rubs my clit when I don't meet his command, sending me to the edge of extinction.

"I do... I know my wo... worth." I heave, barely recognising my voice. Ntaba stops and looks at me with half-lidded eyes, bursting with lust. The arrogant smirk on his face is the sexiest thing. He pulls my hair, forcing me to groan in pain.

“Good because I am about to fuck you like you’re my bitch.” He pushes me back on the bedstead and I land on my back with a loud gasp escaping through my open lips.

I watch as he opens the side drawer and retrieves a condom, he slips it on with his empty eyes glued on me.

His lips close mine in a greedy kiss, his tongue forces its way into my mouth taking my moans. My eyes pop open when I feel his tight grip on my throat, he doesn’t stop devouring my lips.

“Open your legs for me, Khethi.” He commands and bites my neck sensually. I scream with pleasure, spreading my legs like he wants me to. He fits perfectly between them, I want him here forever if possible.

I will lose my voice if I continue screaming like this, he’s pushing his erection inside my warmth,

lowly hissing with pleasure.

“Shit, Peaches. I hope you haven’t been giving anyone my cookie.” He groans, I am stunned by the endearment.

“Tell me, Peaches. Tell me I still own this pussy.” His words are possessive, his voice is a seductive whisper. His eyes are thin, drilling me for an answer, the truth. Ntaba pulls out and slams into me to get me to speak.

“It’s always yours Ntaba, I’m your bitch. Only yours.”

The first few thrusts are agonizingly slow, before he throws caution to the wind, shoving his d*ck deeper inside me and thrusting like his life depends on it. I cry out, clutching my hands on his shoulders... that will definitely leave scars.

He wraps both hands on my throat, and fucks me like an animal. He’s growling like one too, and me, I’m seeing stars. My vision is blur, tears

seep from the corners of my eyes. I think I'm going to die while having sex.

I arch my back to offer myself to him, and move my hips, matching his thrusts. The sounds I'm making are not holy, there's a bed waiting for me in hell.

Ntaba is like a pervert, a possessive sadist with a high sex drive. I gasp for air as soon as he removes his hands from my throat and grips my waist to press me down on the mattress.

I place my legs on his shoulders, he pins them together and continues to slam and pump like a hungry lion that's been starved for days.

He pushes my legs from his shoulders, and I wrap them around his waist and buck my hips up, yearning for more of his shaft. He leans in to steal a long zealous kiss, our sweaty chests connect and I lock my arms around his neck. Our bodies are one.

Ntaba weaves his hands through my hair, kissing me like I deserve it. He doesn't forget to thrust his erection inside my cookie, they transition from rough to soft. I yelp when he bites my bottom lip.

"Ah, Ntaba." He's in too deep, I can feel his erection poking my stomach. I can't get enough, yet I can't take anymore. It's too much, it hurts, but it hurts so good. It's like heaven and hell making love, the sun and the moon swaying in a violent storm.

Without warning, Ntaba slips out and flips me around. I'm on my hands and knees, and whimper as his tongue runs over butt cheeks. I shriek as he spanks my ass, it burns and stings and I want more. As if he's read my mind, I feel his teeth sink into the flesh of my left butt, forcing pleasurable moans from me.

I feel Ntaba's violent touch at the back of my neck, before he pushes me down until my face is hidden on the pillow, the grip will surely leave a mark.

He enters my heat, pounding and slamming faster. The more he slams into me, the more he presses my face on the pillow. My hands tightly curl on the sheets as I push my ass back to accommodate more of his crazy thrusts.

I don't have to control my moans, they are loud and red. The pillow swallows every one of them. My orgasm is closer, I want to tell him I'm coming.

"Do it Khethi, let go and fly with me." He's growling, and heaving and panting.

I groan into the pillow as his finger starts rubbing my clit, his rod roughly plunging into me. The sickening sound of skin slapping has taken

over the room. My body is trembling, accommodated by tears. I'm no longer moaning, but sobbing loudly.

Just as my toes curl and I explode, Ntaba releases my neck, I lift my head and scream out his name while gasping for air.

It's like nothing I have ever felt, an intense orgasm while trying to breathe. For a while, it feels like life and death are at war, fighting for my soul with me soaring in the air like an intoxicated drug addict.

He finishes seconds after me, groaning like the animal he is. The animal I didn't know he was.

His arm is around my neck as he brings me up, pressing my back to his sweaty chest. We're on our knees, yet I'm certain that if he lets go, I will collapse on the mattress.

My heart is overflowing, Ntaba didn't fuck me like I'm his bitch, he fucked me like he loves me. I refuse to see it any other way.

He buries his face in my neck and breathes words that send my heart on a crazy rampage.

"Thank you," he mumbles, with bated breath.

I don't know what he's thanking me for.

Whatever it is, I will continue giving with no questions asked.

"Ntabezikude, what are you doing in there?" A shout and banging from the door gets him up from the bed. It's his father, he won't take this disrespect.

"Shit, get under the bed." His eyes are wide and he looks like a kid who's been caught doing something naughty.

I'm not getting under any bed. I spoke too soon,

he's pulling me and shoving me under his bed, naked as I am.

"Don't sneeze." He says and I don't see him anymore, but his feet. Is this the price people pay for mind-blowing sex?

MATHONGA-

Thirty-four

THE SHANGE TWINS-

The picture hangs loosely on the zipper of his school bag, and when he gets home, he removes it and hides it in his pocket. Whenever life seems too hard to live, and his heart is on the verge of stopping. He presses the picture to his chest.

"It makes me feel alive," he once told Thobani when he asked why he hugs a picture of their

mother. Thobani couldn't understand what his twin brother was talking about, neither did he care to ask.

In his mind, the world is colourful and sometimes it's cloudy. He is very dependent, and wouldn't survive a day without a guardian.

Meanwhile, Thabani is not living up to his name. He's too young to feel lost and confused. Why their mother had to die and leave them with strangers? Why he has to listen to other kids talk about their parents when he has nothing to show?

He yearns for a mother's love, to lie on her chest while she strokes his head and sings him a lullaby until he succumbs to a deep slumber. Like their "cousin" Sizwe who has both parents. A mother's love and a father's protection.

Thabani can't help but envy the boy. They are the same age, and in his eyes, it's not fair that Sizwe has a mother and father when he and his brother have no one but a sister who is always emotionally detached.

He hates it here, he hates that Nala let uncle Petros bring them here. If he could, he would run away, but what will become of Thobani? What will become of him without his twin brother? They are like a belt, if you cut it in the middle it becomes useless.

Life without the other is impossible to imagine. When they grow up and are ready to build homes, and take wives, they will live in the same compound. They have discussed their future that far, it's perfect because in that way, they won't have to be apart. Thobani's mind is that of an 8 year-old, while Thabani has surpassed by a few years. He's the voice of reason, the one who makes decisions for them

both.

They are freakishly identical, but, Thabani has a scar on his forehead he got when he was a toddler.

Science says they are the same age, but culture says Thobani is older because he came out of his mother's womb minutes after his brother. However the big brother role has been taken by Thabani, he's comfortable being his brother's keeper.

"I'm not eating this again." Thobani shouts, throwing the plate of pap and boiled cabbage across the kitchen floor. It's late in the night, past dinner hours.

"Thobani, what is wrong with you?"

Mam'Makhubo screams, it's a special talent she has. Screaming like it's a competition, the boys would sometimes walk out on her when

she starts with her moods, knowing a belt follows.

“That was our last meal. Go pick it up.”

It was Thobani and Thabani’s last meal, Sizwe and his parents have a whole shelf of goodies in Mam'Makhubo’s bedroom. Every once in a while, the little family would jump into a car and leave the twins behind. Hours later, they would come back with heavy stomachs, ice creams cones in their hands and nothing for the twins.

Debonairs pizza, thick base is presently massaging their stomachs.

“No.” He shouts, pushing the madam of the house when she grabs his arm. She’s shocked by the strength of an 8 year-old, see what God did there.

“I’m going to beat this child. Come here.” She’s grabbing him again, the grip is tighter. Thobani

screams, and pulls his little body back, the struggle between him and the woman becomes violent. He's on the floor squirming and screaming, and she has a tight grip on his wrist, thrashing his ass with a wooden spoon.

"I'm going to beat you, wena Thobani. You think I'm your friend."

"Sisi please don't beat him, I'll give him my food." That's Thabani, he's on his knees. His eyes speak of resentment and rage, in his head, there are images of Mam'Makhubo lying on the cold floor, motionless.

Thobani is released by the raging woman.

"One of these days, you will sleep on the streets. I don't know why I have to put up with you two. Petros must come and fetch his pigs, he doesn't pay me enough to bear this nonsense."

She clicks her tongue and leaves to get her beauty sleep, Thabani helps his brother to a

chair. He uses the sleeves of his dirty t-shirt to clean his face.

“I told you never to talk back,” Thabani reprimands with love in his eyes.

“I don’t want to eat pap and cabbage, we eat that every day.” He’s crying again.

“We’ll go and buy fried chips in the morning, I sold my school shoes to Zamani’s grandmother.”

Thabani’s words have to be comforting, but Thobani feels bad. They don’t have much, it’s always been like that. Petros might show them love once in a shiny moon, he buys them toys more, than clothes and school uniform.

“Wipe your tears, I will clean this mess, then we’ll share my food.” Thabani promises.

He retrieves a broom and a mop from behind

the door and gets to work.

MATHONGA-

What happened to my father's homestead? The many coops that were surrounding the ranch are not here. This place looks different, like it did when I was a little boy. It's dark and cold here, I should've taken a jersey. I should be shivering from the strong winds, but my skin won't acknowledge the cold.

Giggling sounds of children playing catch my attention, my feet move on solid ground, taking me to the direction where the sound is coming from. What are they doing here? No one is allowed to go near the burnt house, it's prohibited.

“Vimbela, Sakhile!” They lift their heads with smiles on their faces, Sakhile is sitting on Vimbela’s lap whose arms are protectively wrapped around the little one. There are pieces of clothes melted into their blackened skins, a sickening smell of burning skin and hair fills my nostrils. It’s quite disturbing to the senses.

“Mathongo.” Vimbela’s tiny voice oozes through me and settles in my heart, I laugh at the mispronunciation of my name and accompany it with a headshake.

“It’s Mathonga, Vimbela. Your front teeth haven’t grown yet, that’s why you can’t pronounce my name.” I tell him. “Why are you sitting here? Come inside, baba will spank you if he sees you like this.”

“There’s no way in Mathongo,” Vimbela says, insisting on the name. His eyes are dreadfully

sorrowful.

“There’s one, I just walked out of it. Come lets go.” I extend my arms toward them.

“But we smell like fire, and there’s smoke in my lungs. Sakhile says he can’t breathe, he’s suffocating.” At Vimbela’s confession, my gaze chases Sakhile to find innocent eyes drowning in tears. My brother is in agony.

“Bring him to me, I will heal him.” I don’t know why I say this.

Vimbela is against my proposal, he shakes his head and tightly holds on to Sakhile.

“The fire won’t stop, Mathongo, we are tired. We need to rest.”

What fire is he talking about? And why is Vimbela not listening to me? His stubbornness reminds me of Ndleleni, I want to lift them both up and take them by force but they are gone.

“Mathonga wake up.” A voice calls and instantly drags me back to life, it’s Nala. She’s sitting on the edge of the bed, glancing down at me. “Are you okay? You were crying in your sleep.”

I open my mouth to speak, but the smell of burning flesh flickers in my senses. It’s too late to get to the bathroom, I turn over and spew the contents of my stomach on the floor.

A vile soup of meals-past lies before me, the bad smell of vomit hits my nose. I cover my mouth and gag, using every ounce of my willpower not to throw up again. Nala rushes to the bathroom and comes back with a bucket and a mop.

“You don’t have to do that,” I tell her, running the back of my hand over my mouth.

She regards me with a look that shuts me up.

“You're not okay, I can't leave you like this.” She tells me, I cover my face with a pillow, and groan silently.

NTABEZIKUDE-

Who knew that the chief was a cock blocker? Vumile has a woman sleeping in one of the rooms in this vast homestead, but he's here at this time of the night.

“Ntabezikude open this door, now.” That is a terrible way for someone to announce their arrival, Ntaba curses under his breath as he dons a pair of boxers. The room smells like sex, and spraying the air freshener does nothing to rid of it. He gives up and hurries to open the door, shirtless.

“Is everything okay, baba?” He is a master at keeping calm, nothing shows that he just had a

sex marathon with the cook. Then again, Vumile has a sharp eye, the look he's giving Ntaba is that of suspicion. Ntaba does not shy away, the emptiness in his eyes makes it impossible for Vumile to read his mind.

"What's going on? What was that noise? I heard screaming."

Vumile queries, eyebrows arched as he shifts his gaze from him to the room. This is none of his father's concern, so he steps out into the humid September night with air so thick it presses upon his bare skin. As he shuts the door behind him, he fakes a smile.

"Nothing muntu omdala." (Elder.)

He lies, crossing his arms over his chest. This one is as sly as a fox, he'd convince you the world is ending in a second, to give away all your possessions, and you'd believe him.

"Are you bringing prostitutes in my house?"

Vumile glowers at him, but Ntaba is not daunted.

“Prostitutes baba? What do you take me for?” He’s laughing, you can’t take him seriously with this childish attitude.

Vumile’s eyes quickly inspect him, then dart to the closed door and back to him.

“Your uncles are here, go and greet them.” He says and saunters off. That was close.

Yeer! This can’t be good, he didn’t mean to let it go this far. Today he felt broken and lost, nothing new about it.

Sure he goes around flashing a smile if not kissing cheeks, or killing people. But reality kicks him sometimes and today when it kicked him, she was here.

He touched her like he wanted her, he gave her

rights over his body, and penetrated her like she'll bear his children one day.

He's not blind to the love in her eyes, he knows she loves him, she is too loud about it and he can't help but close the doors to his heart. The last thing he wants is to complicate his life with the four letter word, he's not even sure he knows what the word means.

However, he can't deny that she's the closest he's been to a deep female connection, there were other women before. There are other women now, but there's something about Khethiwe that makes him keep coming for more. It doesn't have a label and it sure as hell is not love. Maybe things are better off this way, love is overrated anyway.

Ntaba thinks of going back inside to put on

something decent, but decides otherwise. So what if he meets his uncles barefooted and with only a pair of boxer shorts covering his body? It's not like he has an alien physique.

He steps deeper into the night, the familiar breeze has a scent like salt, greenery and compost. This is what he loves about the village.

Chaos and loud laughter meet him, as he nears the parking area, everyone is here. Bopha, his wife Thethelela and Khothama his son. Ntaba is told that Dumile and Sne have gone to their rooms.

"Why are you naked?" Khothama asks.

"I'm not naked." Ntaba replies, frowning at his cousin.

"Ndoda, you're walking around with your ding-dong dangling about. It's disgusting, at least put on some panties." Khothama snaps.

"Fusegi, men don't wear panties, nja." Ntaba sputters, firing him with a cold stare.

"Go put on underwear ke." Khothama returns.

"Why are you here?" He waves his cousin off and sets his gaze on Thethelela. "Mama, finally someone worth looking at."

His arms wrap around her, he buries his face on her neck. The hug doesn't last long, Thethelela shoves him off, a disgusted look on her face.

"You smell like sex and you're sticky."

Ntaba chortles, he knows and he doesn't care. Everyone walking around here is evidence of sex, nothing to drop your jaw for.

"Have you been allocated rooms? I have enough room, I don't mind sharing." Ntaba.

There's a cagey smile pulling at the corner of his mouth, his eyes are all over Thethelela as he licks his lower lip.

“I’m sleeping in your room,” Khothama breaks his little seductive trip and lands a punch on his shoulder. A frown gathers Ntaba’s eyebrows, he wants to punch him back so he can feel what he just felt. Khothama is just as tall as him and looks like he fights wrestlers for a living.

“No you’re not.” He takes the dominant route, just to tap some logic into Khothama’s head.

He forces a smile when Bopha smacks him on the head, telling him to go get dressed. Hand in hand, the couple follow one of the helpers to their designated room.

“We are sharing a room, ndoda. I’m not going to touch you without your permission.” Khothama has not moved past that, his hand is around Ntaba’s shoulder.

“Uyinja, doti.” Ntaba cusses, trying to fight out

of the hold. Khothama's nose crinkles, his face crumples in disgust. He is sniffing for the spicy smell threatening his senses. There's an awkward silence as his eyes linger on Ntaba who shrugs his shoulders in return.

"What?" Ntaba.

Khothama pushes him.

"You disgusting prostitute, who were you fucking in your father's house?" His voice is accusatory.

Only this one can laugh when being accused of selling his body. Khothama is defeated, he releases a huff and rolls his eyes at the man laughing like he's in the presence of Trevor Noah.

"Life is good, ndoda." Ntaba sings, wrapping his sticky arm around his cousin's shoulder. It's the limit for Khothama, he pushes him off that he staggers a step.

“Awukahle ndoda,” Khothama grumbles. “I need to burn these clothes and take a long bath. Do you have Dettol? I will also need the orange sack to scrub my body and the sunlight green bar. You have left the smell on me. This is pure bad luck.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” That’s Ntaba clapping back, his arms hug his body to keep the cold away.

“I’m not, you’re out here flashing your sex...”

“My sexy body?” Ntaba finishes, a smug look on his face. This only frustrates Khothama further.

“No, that’s not what I was going to say. You’re glowing with...”

“Now I’m glowing? Is there something you want to tell me?” Ntaba, he is having a jolly good time. Khothama clicks his tongue and keeps a safe distance, he’s getting uncomfortable. This idiot he calls a brother is a pompous bastard who

thinks he's God's gift to the world.

"Shit," Khothama growls as he repeatedly rubs his face. "Stop twisting my words wenja. Get me a bloody razor too. I'm going to cut my tongue out."

Ntaba's lips curl in amusement. Is seeing his cousin annoyed better than sex? Nah!

"Where are you going, Tham-Tham?" Ntaba asks.

The question chases Khothama who raises a middle finger without glancing back at him.

"I thought we were going to share a room, and cuddle all night." Ntaba shouts and gets another middle finger.

"We'll talk about the Sangwenis after I have recovered from this shit." Khothama yells as he disappears into the darkness.

This is what Ntaba wants to hear. His enemies don't deserve a soft life, it's been long since he spilled blood. He's beginning to forget the smell, and he can't have that.

He closes his eyes, slowly lifts his head while spreading his arms open, and sniffs the air. For a second he thinks he can smell the metallic scent of blood, it hangs at the back of his throat. Thick and arousing. The corner of his mouth curls into a sadistic grin. Yeah, it definitely smells like someone busted a vein out here.

The last man he killed visits his dark memories, how death took him, the blood beautifully gushing from his open wound.

Shivers ripple through him, it's as if it's happening all over again.

Nothing in the world has ever felt so good, he can almost taste the thrill.

Everything is in his head, a memory he can relive whenever he calls upon it. Unlike most killers, he doesn't have to keep a murder trophy to preserve the memory of the victims or re-enact his fantasies.

He is jolted back to reality by his painful erection tightening in his boxer shorts. The thought of killing again has left him horny.

"Dammit," he grunts, covering his front with both hands.

"Khethi, get ready for round two."

This he shouts as he hurries towards his room.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-five

FUNOKUHLE-

Birds should be banned from the world, how are they allowed to make noise so early in the morning. Not everyone is a morning person, if only I had stone.

A sigh leaps past my lips as I sit up from the bed, the morning light is bursting through the open curtains. It's only now I notice the windows are open as well.

Someone was in here. My mind wavers a little, and I find myself drifting into a world of worry. It doesn't last long because I snap myself back to reality, it's the next day and I'm still alive.

The truck driver didn't give me his name, nor did he converse much throughout the trip.

The only thing I got from him was a name of the person who was to give me shelter while in Joburg, this he did after finding out that I had no place to lay my head. He dropped me off

outside this house. I don't know where this is, I'm not entirely familiar with places in Johannesburg.

There was a man waiting outside the gate when we arrived last night, I was a bit creeped out by his dark appearance. His black clothing gave off a dangerous aura, Kenneth is what the truck driver called him. He left me with him and departed like the stranger he was.

There's a small clock on the side of the bed, it's a few minutes after 7am.

Thankfully the room has a small bathroom, I make use of it and change back into the same clothing I had on.

Someone tickles my door, it swings open revealing a little boy around the age of 4 and 5 in a denim jumpsuit. Around his shoulders is a Spiderman, baby blanket, worn as a cape might

be, as if it gives him superpowers.

“Hello,” his tiny voice sends a smile to my face.

“Mama says come eat.”

He’s out the door before I collect my vocabulary.

There’s a narrow corridor just outside the guest room that leads towards a flight of stairs. The boy must’ve ran, he’s nowhere in sight. It’s not hard to find the dining room, I can see the family from the stairway seated around the table filled with food.

The lounge is beautiful, turquoise sofas, with mustard cushions stand out the most. There’s a pallet coffee table that blends perfectly with the furniture.

The grey walls hold picture frames of what I assume is Kenneth’s family, he’s in one of them. A large portrait featuring him, the little boy who was in my room and a woman, I assume is his wife. Most of the pictures are of her and the boy.

As I approach, the same woman dressed in a short, casual sundress smiles, showcasing her perfect white teeth. She has a calmness to her, sophisticated and carries herself with confidence.

“Morning... Funokuhle right?” She’s bursting with positive energy, I answer her question with a head nod. “I’m Zithobile, but you can call me Zitha. Kenneth says you’re a friend of a friend, I guess that makes you our friend. Make yourself at home, don’t be afraid to ask for anything.”

She must be talking about the truck driver, he didn’t give me a chance to thank him for his kindness.

My eyes flicker to Kenneth on the chair, his focus is exclusively on the little boy, feeding him what appears to be porridge. I figure Kenneth is not a morning person, then again, he

didn't say much to me last night.

Zitha gleams once more, before embracing me in a warm hug. Her rosy scent permeates my nostrils. The hug feels a bit awkward, I won't lie.

"I'm sorry, forgive my forwardness. We never have guests, it feels good to have some company."

"What about us? Are you going to fanboy over him and pretend Buhle and I don't exist."

Kenneth's voice is quite deeper than I expected, it lacks emotion which makes it hard for me to point what he's feeling. Zithobile takes my hand as she bubbles with giggles.

"Don't mind him, he thinks sharing is a disease." She articulates, pulling a chair for me to sit.

"I'll get you something to drink, please sit. This is home, sit back and relax." I'm overwhelmed by her kindness to a point where I feel ashamed for invading their space. People don't randomly

house strangers, what did that man say to Kenneth for him to agree to this arrangement?

I'm left with Kenneth and Buhle when Zithobile strides to the kitchen.

"Thank you for accommodating me, I won't overstay my welcome. As soon as..."

"Don't worry about it," he cuts me off. His dark aura makes it hard for me to relax, it denies me confidence. "We have enough room, you can stay until you're sorted."

"Thank you." My gratitude comes faster than I planned.

"Are you going to stay with us?" Buhle asks with his mouth full, the adorable look on his face brings a smile to my masked expression.

"Dlozi, what did I say about talking with food in your mouth?"

Zithobile chides, striding back with a jug of juice. I thought his name was Buhle, asking would be too forward of me.

“Sorry mama,” he apologizes, then swallows.

“That’s our cue,” Kenneth announces, Buhle mirrors his action, standing to his feet. “I’ll drop Buhle off today, and don’t worry about picking him up from school.”

“Lucky me,” she sings letting her arms wrap around the dark man. They are kissing, and I don’t have a place to hide. Buhle is puddle of giggles, and a good distraction for me.

“I’ll be home for lunch at 12pm.” Kenneth alerts while she hugs her son, I note how she flinches and bites the corner of her bottom lip at the announcement.

The door shuts closed behind them, Zithobile turns to me, rolling her eyes.

“I wonder who he’s going to find home because

me and you are going out.”

Oh, that’s news to me.

“Kenneth is too possessive, he needs to spend time away from me. A day won’t kill him.” She complains, yet her tone carries adoration for the man. I would do anything to have someone notice me like that, she is a lucky woman.

VUKUZAKHE-

His head has been smashed with a blunt object, repeatedly. This is the first thought that visits his mind as he wakes up from weeks of sleep, there must be something forcing his eyes to stay closed—they feel heavy. But he refuses to toe the line, he needs to wake up—he wants to wake up. It’s been a long sleep and he’s tired.

The light in the room blinds his eyes, it doesn’t

stop him from forcing them open. It takes a minute for his eyes to adjust to the light, he's in a small room—the hospital.

His mind takes him back, he remembers someone hitting him on the head and his wife screaming. He wants to call her name, have her come before him so he knows she's okay.

His head is vibrating with pain, someone has him trapped in their arms— their head is on his chest. He clears his throat to do away with the blockage stopping him from speaking.

“Bo...” is all he manages.

The person shifts and looks up at him, it's not his wife, but his mother.

“My baby... Vukuzakhe. You're back, you came back to me.” The waterworks, she hugs him and showers him with kisses. “Let me call the doctor.”

The bed makes a sound as she climbs off, his tired eyes follow her figure until the corridor swallows her.

As she walks back in with a man in scrubs, his gaze lingers in the doorway. Where is she? Why is she not here? Did they get to her?

A bright light is flashed in his eyes, it worsens the headache. He wants to curse at the doctor, tell him to remove that thing from his eyes, it's too bright.

The doctor asks him question that frustrate him, he answers them, slowly.

"Where is Bongiwe?" The question is directed to Dalisile, her face turns sour.

"She's at home," her answer confuses Vukuzakhe, yet eases his worries. Bongiwe is fine, but why is she not here with him? Are they not married?

“I want to see her.” He says.

The doctor is done examining him, he advises the patient to sleep, promises to monitor him throughout the day and leaves.

“Bongiwe will be here later,” Dalisile waves her hand to dismiss Zakhe’s needs. “How are you feeling? You scared me, baby, I thought you will never come back.”

He’s too weak to engage in a conversation, his body is in pain. Images of his attack keep replay in his head. Bongiwe was helpless, she wouldn’t stop crying.

“Where is Bongiwe?” His eyes linger in the doorway once more. Why is she not here with him?

Dalisile sighs in frustration, as she sits on the edge of the bed, ready to get her son’s mind off Bongiwe, the lady in question ambles into the room.

Her feet forget how to move, her eyes are wide and teary.

“Bongiwe!” Vukuzakhe calls in relief. Bongiwe bursts into sobs and rushes into his arms, he wants to hold her back, but struggles to lift his arm. Their little reunion is not appreciated by the mother, Dalisile serves them with a tongue click as she stands back.

MATHONGA-

I wake up with Nala wrapped in my arms, she stayed with me when I asked her to last night.

“Your heart is beating really fast,” she points something I was not aware of.

“Because you’re so close to me.” I quip, tightening my arms around her and placing a kiss on the top of her head.

“My heart is beating fast too,” she reveals. “I’m sorry about last night. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Maybe I overreacted, it annoyed me that she questioned my feelings for her.

“I’m not playing you, MaShange. You made me lose my mind, from the first day I met you. I barely realised myself that I had strong feelings for you, please consider me and my feelings.”

She shifts her head to glance at me, the look in her eyes tells me it’s okay to plant a kiss on her lips. She responds better than I expected.

“Mathonga,” Ndleleni’s voice and the sound of the door opening startle me. Nala is on her feet in an instant, head dropped and hands fiddling with her nightgown. I throw a look at Ndleleni, to meet anger on his face.

“Don’t you know how to knock, bhuti?”

I feel a rapid surge of annoyance and mortification, annoyance because he should have knocked, this is my room. Mortified that he caught me in an intimate act with Nala.

“What kind of nonsense is this?” He roars in a voice that points toward disgust, if looks could kill, Nala and I would be entering the afterlife right this moment.

“What were you doing in my brother’s bed?” He’s looking at Nala with a strange expression on his face, one of hostility and fury. I don’t understand what his problem is.

“No... Nothing sir...” Nala stutters before his intimidating black eyes that are hooked on her.

“Nala you don’t have to answer him,” I blurt out, gracefully rising to stand next to her. Her hands are trembling, it’s normal, Ndleleni has a talent of frightening people.

He turns his lifeless eyes towards me, they tell

nothing but desolation.

“Get out of my room, bhuti.” It’s like talking to a brick wall, he’s not moving. Perhaps I’m speaking a foreign language. “Phuma ndoda.” (Get out.)

“Like hell I will, she’s the one who is leaving. What has gotten into you Mathonga? You’re sleeping with the maid, now?” He asks.

Where does this attitude come from? We don’t look down on people in these premises. Nala runs out of the room, I start to run after her, but Ndleleni blocks my path.

“You had no right to do that, Nala is my girlfriend.” The words rush to my mouth.

There’s a look in his eyes I can’t pinpoint, “She’s the maid.”

“She’s my girlfriend.” I maintain. It must be

appalling to him because his lips curl with disgust.

“Are you insane, Mathonga? You are sleeping with whores in your father’s compound?”

I didn’t expect him to say what he just said, maybe that’s why I punch him on the nose. Shock sparks in his eyes for a millisecond, I also can’t believe I punched my brother. Guilt exudes from inside me, it settles heavily in my heart.

Ndleleni will never let me forget this, as much as he loves me, all of us—he is different from the others. I would like to believe that he holds grudges.

“I’m sorry, bhuti. But you shouldn’t have called Nala a whore.” My apology sounds lousy, he chuckles darkly and wipes off the blood oozing from his nose. He lands a sudden punch on my face, it throws me on the bed.

I plan on standing up and asking for forgiveness, but Ndleleni is on top of me faster than lightning, throwing punch after punch. He must think he's Van Damme, or he wouldn't be punching me like this.

"I'm sorry, bhuti." I shout after failing to get him off me, my apology is doing nothing. Moreover, it's fuelling his anger.

I should've ran out of here, I hate that he's stronger than me.

"Ndleleni, get off him." I hear my father's angry voice.

Ndleleni is pulled off me by Ntaba. He is holding him back, this gives me a chance to return the punches he gave me. It's the anger and pain pushing me to retaliate. I only give him two, my father is holding me back.

"Baba he hit me, let me hit him back." I groan in

pain, as I attempt to wriggle out of my father's grip. I can taste blood in my mouth, my eyes are throbbing with pain.

"Calm down, Mathonga." A warning lies in Ntaba's voice, he turns his cold glare to Ndleleni who suddenly looks larger than I know him, more menacing.

His eyes are burning with a rage I've never seen before. He should act in a Nigerian movie, that look on his face was adopted from a Nigerian movie.

"Let me go, Ntabezikude." He shakes himself off, but Ntaba is just as strong. He grabs Ndleleni by his shirt and pastes him against the open door.

"He's your brother, uyahlanya wena?" (Are you crazy?)

Ntaba yells, slamming soft fists on his chest. My brother is hard headed. He escapes Ntaba's

grip, clicks his tongue and turns to leave. On his way out, he bumps into Khothama, yet continues to march without turning back.

“Ndleleni come back here.” Baba barks, hurrying after him. It’s not guaranteed he will be safe with Ndleleni, he is currently not thinking straight.

“What’s wrong him?” A tongue click from Khothama, he’s angered by Ndleleni’s crudeness. Turning my gaze to Ntaba, I notice that he is looking at the same thing. Blood stains on Khothama’s ingwe vest.

“Where have you been?” Ntaba asks, his voice suggests he knows where Khothama has been and what he has done.

“I killed him,” without any ounce of remorse, Khothama replies. “He pissed me off and I killed the old man.”

MATHONGA-

Thirty-six

THE KHANYILES-

“You didn’t have to call the dads, we could’ve have handled this on our own.” This is Khothama’s complaint to Ntaba.

“I had to call them, you decided to fuck up after I specifically told you not to do anything stupid.” Ntaba is spitting fire, he’s basically sweating under that beard of his.

His reaction over this matter is not usual, this is the same man who is not easily shaken. It must be bad.

“I told you it was a mistake,” Khothama is the only one who believes his words. Vumile, Bopha, Dumile, Ntaba, and Mathonga. They are gathered in the lounge, awaiting Khothama to

explain.

No one knows where Ndleleni is. Mathonga is worried about him, guilt is eating him up. What transpired between them was not normal.

“Everything happened too fast, I was admiring my uncle’s land when the man came out of nowhere and threatened to kill me. He could easily tell I was a Khanyile, it must be the big nose. Anyone can spot us from a distance.”
Khothama.

He says he killed Ongezwa Sangweni after the man threatened to slaughter him. His story sounds too made up, it doesn’t add up. They know he loves stirring trouble, he’s a master at it.

That’s why he came home with Sangweni’s blood in his hands. The story is as he tells it though, except the part where Ongezwa

threatened him without a reason.

The two got into an argument about Vukuzakhe, vile words were thrown around and Khothama's anger possessed him to pound the man's head with a brick. Of course he had to feel what Vukuzakhe felt the day his sons attacked him. But that's his secret to keep, he is not going to tell these people how things went down.

"So let me get this straight, you went looking for Ongezwa Sangweni with the intent to kill him?" Bopha is livid, glaring at his son with a deadly stare. They should be singing "soon and very soon, we are going to see the King," right at this minute.

"No baba, you are twisting my words."
Khothama.

"Don't tell me nonsense, boy." Bopha yells in a dangerous tone, he stands and towers over his

son. The idiot does not look fazed, whatever is wrong with Khothama, God bless his dark soul.

“I had a list Khothama, a list of everyone who was involved in Vukuzakhe’s attack. I was going to deal with them accordingly and secretly...”

Ntaba reveals his plans.

“Ntabezikude.” Vumile barks, Ntaba immediately looks bored. “What is wrong with you boys? Is this what you do behind our backs, you kill people?”

“Only those who piss me off,” of course it sounds normal in Ntaba’s head. Vumile is defeated, he shares a look with his brothers— a furtive conversation.

“And I told Khothama to wait it out, to put Thonga first. You people came here for the ceremony not a massacre, now thanks to this stupid fool my plans are ruined.” Ntaba.

“Ongezwa Sangweni was an old fool, weak and

useless. Not only did I do us a favour by killing him, I did his family one too.” Khothama validates.

It is how he does not look remorseful or regretful, in fact, he is bursting with pride. Ntaba exhales as frustration bothers his soul and rubs his face vigorously.

“An old man provoked you?” Ntaba hisses, glaring at Khothama who is leaning back on the chair, a leg crossed over his thigh.

“Yes.” His wonton answer is shocking only to his fathers.

“We have to call the police, you are not getting away with this, Khothama.” Something must be wrong with Bopha, he can’t have his son arrested. It’s uncalled-for.

“No one is going to jail.” Finally, Dumile steps in. He has been too quiet. He shifts to the edge of the chair, eyes cast on Ntaba and Khothama.

“Secure the gates, tell Hlabela to come home and get Vukuzakhe’s room safeguarded. The time has come to face our enemies, those sons of bitches have made us wait for too long.”

Dumile’s declaration has Ntaba and Khothama grinning from ear to ear, Khothama winks when he meets Ntaba’s eyes. Ntaba’s tongue click ruptures into the lounge.

“What’s going on Bhuti?” Vumile is not for this, as expected.

“Khothama messed up, that’s what happened. The Sangwenis will not let this pass, he killed their bull.” Whatever Dumile means.

There is no love lost between the two families, it’s no secret. No one but his brothers knew he was burning coals, that he has been carrying so much hatred for that family.

“I killed their cow,” Khothama snorts. “We are

not afraid of them, we're the Khanyiles." He should not be saying anything, he messed up enough already.

"Shut up wena," Bopha roars. "If it were up to me, I would have you locked up behind bars. You're a stupid boy, Khothama, very stupid."

"I'm not a boy, baba. I'm a man."

Really? Khothama cannot be serious.

"I refuse to be part of this," Vumile stands. He better not be running away from this. "As the chief of this village, I will fix the damage you have caused. I will rectify your mistakes."

"The Sangwenis don't care that you're a chief, their father is dead. All they want is revenge." Dumile tells him.

"They will listen to me..."

"Will you stop being stubborn, Vumile. Your son was almost killed, do you think that was an

accident? Do you want the Sangwenis to attack your other sons for you to finally wake up?"

Dumile is trying to be respectful, but struggles to keep his voice down.

"I'm a chief, Dumile. What will my people say?"

A terrible syndrome for one to have, 'what will people say?' All eyes are on Vumile, they can't seem to grasp why he is so stubborn.

"Your family comes first, I'm not saying grab a gun and start shooting people. Just be prepared for anything, double the security and keep everyone safe."

Listen to Dumile, taking the big brother cap from Vumile. He is not fond of the Sangwenis, this is his chance to wipe them out.

Ntaba stands while clapping his hands, too dramatic, Vumile thinks.

"Thank you bab'omncane. Now that that's

settled, we need to get Mathonga out of the country.”

Now, Mathonga knows he did not hear right. He shifts on his seat, eyebrows skyrocketing.

“What?”

“I knew this day was coming, unfortunately it came sooner than I expected. You’re leaving the country after the ceremony tomorrow.” Ntaba explains.

“To where?” He’s not agreeing to any of this.

“Namibia, if there is going to be a bloodbath, I don’t want you, Zamangwane and Nandi anywhere around here. Bonguwe will tag along, I’m sure that’s what Zakhe would want.” Ntaba says.

They can’t choose family, but Dalisile has not been mentioned.

“When did you decide this Ntabezikude?”

Vumile asks, his heart is sitting on his throat.

It's the thought of Mathonga leaving that has him feeling unsettled.

"It doesn't matter baba, the main thing here is that they will be safe." Ntaba.

"I'm not going, let Zamangwane and her mother go to Namibia. I'm not a child that needs to be protected." They see him as the child of the family, he has no right to strip himself of that title.

"I'm not losing you Mathonga..." Ntaba snaps, these people are so bent on having him lose his cool lately. "Things are going to get nasty, people will die and I need you alive."

"What about you?" Tears. "I need you alive, Vukuzakhe, Hlabela and Ndleleni too."

"Don't worry about us, we're going to be okay. If anything happens to you, I'd never forgive myself. You are the treasure of this family, Thonga lami." Well, that should convince him,

Ntaba has said enough.

Mathonga sits back and folds his arms, "I'm not leaving."

This boy is testing his patience, Ntaba clenches his fists, tempted to smack the stubbornness out of him.

"We're going back and forth and I am tired. You are leaving for Namibia, tomorrow."

"What about my wife, she's the treasure of my heart. She must be included in this, she is carrying my baby after all." Khothama adds. No one answers him, he would have gotten his answer if he didn't have a loose hand and caused mayhem.

"I don't agree with Ntabezikude's suggestion, but if it will keep you safe, then you must go." For once, Vumile agrees with his son. It must be a blessing in disguise.

"Please, don't count me out, I need this as much

as you do.” Mathonga is working hard to change their minds.

“You can’t even slaughter a chicken, boy. How will you kill a man?” Khothama again, he gets cold looks from his fathers that shut him up.

“Vukuzakhe will never forgive us if anything happens to you, Thonga.” Ntaba.

“He’ll never forgive me if I leave you here. I’m not going anywhere.” Stubbornness refuses to leave Mathonga’s head.

Ntaba stands him up and slaps his bruised face, a perfect example of “smack some sense into him.”

He apologizes by caressing his cheek and hugging him.

“It’s not up for discussion, you’re leaving tomorrow.” Ntaba says. He is done talking, it

says so in the tone of his voice.

What about Nala? He just found her.

A young woman standing at the entrance leading to the kitchen brings silence into the room, for a second she recoils, almost shying away from the eyes cast on her.

“Khethi,” Like he cares, Ntaba is beside her in the blink of an eye. He stops himself from taking her hand. “What is it?”

“Bhut’ Hlabela called, he said you are not answering your phones.”

Getting to the point was the safer route to take, now everyone is looking at her with fear in their eyes. Mathonga gasps, his heart threatening to throw in the towel.

“Did something happen to my brother?” He asks.

“Bhut’Zakhe is awake.”

Sighs of relief fill the room, but why does she look offish?

“Khethiwe,” Ntaba hates not knowing anything. He’s getting frustrated.

“It’s Nala, she’s gone. I tried to stop her, she wouldn’t listen to me.”

Mathonga’s heart sinks to the soles of his feet, this cannot be happening.

FUNOKUHLE-

It’s a weekday, maybe that’s why the mall is empty. Zithobile dragged me to Rosebank Mall where we met up with her friend. Bulelwa is his name, I thought Zitha was talkative, but Bulelwa takes the cup.

He speaks English more than Isizulu, his twang loses me most of the time. He’s married, I’ve

lost count of the number of times he has shown me pictures of his husband.

In a way, I envy him. The freedom he has to love and be with the man he loves, they don't have to hide from people. Vukuzakhe and I would've become that. I ruined it, whatever chance there was of us. I have a need to see him, where do I even begin? I know not of his whereabouts.

"Try this shirt, it will look good on you." Zitha flashes a floral blouse, it's not my style. I didn't tell her that I'm gay, she assumed and promised to introduce me to a friend who is ready to mingle.

"I don't think I will look good in that."

I don't see myself wearing blouses, I've never thought that far where clothes are concerned. A man wears pants, a shirt and shoes and go on about his day. That's what I grew up around,

although my jeans are almost tight fitting, which is never intentional.

Zitha has insisted on buying me clothes, Bulelwa pitched in too. So far, her driver Mandla has packed about four shopping bags in her Range Rover and we are not done—her words. I don't want to leave them bankrupt.

“I don't think that's his style, Zitha. Not everyone is as stylish as I am, come on babe.” Bulelwa comes to my rescue. “I'll take this, Zizwe will love me in this blouse.”

His statement is followed by shy giggles, it's what he does when the name Zizwe slips past his tongue. Zitha also talks about Kenneth, she tries to limit herself, but you can tell that he's her favourite thing to talk about.

“Get Funo a plain t-shirt.” I would like to believe Bulelwa sees my discomfort, I’m not yet comfortable that they see through me. I don’t know them that much to be comfortable with the fact that they know I’m a gay man.

It’s the insecurities swirling inside me.

“We’ve done enough shopping for the day, let’s get something to eat.” Bulelwa says, yawning his way to the tills.

“I’m craving something from Potato Shed.” Zitha points out as we walk out of the clothing store.

“Eating for two already?” Bulelwa laughs, losing me a bit there.

“Kenneth would surely pause this world to throw the mother of all celebrations,” she’s laughing with Bulelwa. “Shame, I’m not having his baby until he marries me.”

“I thought you two were married?” I ask.

They live together, so I assumed it was a sealed deal.

“They are not married, babe. This one abuses that poor man, she wants him to marry her flat ass, but she doesn’t want to marry him.”

Bulelwa replies to my question, confusing me further.

“I don’t understand, is there such a thing?” I ask.

“It’s Zithobile we’re talking about, you will never understand. She is complicated as they come.”

Bulelwa.

“Nothing is complicated here, that man wants to ground me. He wants to trap me with a baby, five years later and I’m one step ahead of him. I will not be carrying a dark skinned baby for a man who has not married me.”

“Then why don’t you two get married?” Another question from me. Their situation sounds too complicated for me to grasp.

“Please ask on my behalf too, I stopped asking that question the day she gave me an answer that does not make sense. How are you not ready to marry someone whose engagement ring is wrapped around your finger? You just want to torture Kenneth, people like you don’t deserve nice things in life.”

Bulelwa’s mouth says whatever is offered by his brain, Zitha is okay with it. She accommodates his silly sally with a loud laughter that turns heads. She doesn’t care.

“As long as Kenny understands, he’s the only one that matters in this situation.” Zitha.

“You mean after you? You selfish son of a gun.”

Did I say Bulelwa speaks without thinking? I think words are words to him, he doesn’t care how it affects the next person. Also, that seems to be the kind of friendship they are

accustomed to, I can't judge them. The only thing I had close to a "friend" was Pule, he made me dump all my friends when we started our relationship.

The noise emerging from these two turns more heads, the many eyes staring turn me into a ball of nerves.

"I need to use the bathroom." This should be a perfect escape.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Bulelwa asks.

I don't want to be stuck in awkwardness with him, I'm not an extrovert like him. It's not that I'm anti-social or anything, but I'm struggling to get out of the shell I was put in.

"I'll be fine, thank you." I can see the restaurant from here, I won't get lost on my way back.

Mandla arrives as I start to leave the two loud mouths, he takes the bags from them, and walks behind them as if to keep them from harm. I have a feeling he's also Zitha's guard, his eyes are constantly on her. When she moves, they move with her. I'm yet to see him looking at anything but Zitha.

I'm met with silence upon my arrival in the men's room, my palms are strangely sweating. I grew up in the village, where we live in darkness. Empty toilets should not scare me.

I quickly wash my hands after making use of the toilet, and head to the door. My worst fear comes true as a familiar figure enters the bathroom.

He is blocking the doorway, eliminating any chance of an escape. The universe must be playing tricks with me, you attract what you

think about most.

Unconsciously, I take a step back, thinking of a way to run past him. He is still big, still towers over me. The realisation that I am trapped hits me, there is no way I can get away from him.

“Long time, Ntando.” Pule says, breaking the silence between us. The victorious smirk on his face makes me sick.

“Please get out of the way, I want to pass.” Yet I’m not making any effort to move my feet, I can’t afford to get closer.

“Still so polite, like I taught you.” He simpers. “You’ve always been a good student, Ntando. Very tentative, that’s how it was so easy to lure you.”

I’ve always been easy and Pule has made an effort to remind me over the years.

“What do you want from me?” I honestly don’t care what he wants.

“The only thing I’ve always wanted, you. You belong to me, Ntando. You’re my slave.”

“I’m not your slave, Pule. Whatever there was between us is over, I’m done following you round.”

“But I’m not, I have plans for us, Ntando. Those rich people you’re mingling with don’t care about you, they will never accept you like I have.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

I knew that day when he came to Vukuzakhe’s house that he was stalking me, and when I went back to my father’s house, I was certain he would back off. He seems to know my every move.

His gaze intensifies as if I have asked something very illogical.

“Look, I’m not a bad guy, baby.”

Where is this endearment coming from?

“I only want you with me, these people are trying to tear us apart. They are jealous of us, that’s why I called your father to come get you from that demon. He was going to use you and throw you away, I didn’t want that for you. My goal in life is to protect you, come with me, Ntando. Only I can keep you safe.”

He speaks like someone who has lost his mind. His arms are stretched out, ready to take me in. There is an urge to accept his offer, to follow him like I’ve always done.

He speaks of safety, something I crave—something I’ve always craved. But how do I believe him when the bulging eyes and intense aura speak otherwise? His whole appearance is that of a deranged man, a

destruction waiting to happen.

“I’m not going anywhere with you Pule, please get out of my way. There are people waiting for me, they will start to worry. I’ve been in here for too long.”

He doesn’t say a word, but only looks at me with a sly grin on his face.

“Pule, move.” I yell because the look he’s giving me scares the shit out of me, it’s just the two of us in here.

Do people not use toilets in this place? No one has walked in here or taken a peek.

“Don’t make me use force Ntandoyethu, I hate your stubbornness, dammit.”

“It’s Funokuhle, Ntandoyethu is dead.”

The look in his eyes... he growls and punches the toilet door. I refuse to tremble under his

overbearing presence, I take a brave step towards the exit.

I'm too close, basically digging my own grave, anything can happen now. He smells like a brewery, like he emptied the whole SAB down his throat.

"I see you've grown some balls, little man."

"I'm not afraid of you, Pule." It's a lie, he's proven over the years how stronger than me he is.

"Funokuhle are you in there? We're changing restaurants, Zitha is such a pain in the arse. She's worse than a penis, I swear to God." Bulelwa's voice yells from outside the restroom, he always has a lot to say. I can hear Zitha returning his statement.

Pule panics, snatches my arm and covers my mouth with the other hand, and starts to pull me inside the toilet.

I protest his forceful touch and throw away his hand covering my mouth.

“Let me go.” I shout, loud enough to have been heard outside the men’s room.

Zitha is the first person to materialize, shortly after, Bulelwa shows face.

“Funokuhle,” her eyes are on Pule’s hand wrapped around my arm. The fool loosens the grip, and laughs softly.

“Who is this?” Bulelwa asks.

“What’s going on here?” Mandla questions, walking in seconds after Zitha and Bulelwa.

For a second there, I’m reminded of my father’s solidity. Mandla doesn’t look like the man who has been driving us around. I’m looking at a beast who is ready to devour Pule.

“Who the fuck are you? Ntando is with me.”

Great, he probably thinks there is something between Mandla and I.

“Is this true, Funokuhle?” Zitha’s question is covered with acrimony. “Are you with this old man?”

She looks angry out of the blue.

“No, he won’t leave me alone.” I confess, Zitha snatches my arm and swiftly pushes me behind her. She is shielding me, we’re almost the same height. Pule’s angry face is visible, he looks ready to kill. A sight I have never seen before.

“Sisi, take your friend and go to the car.” Mandla orders, at least it sounds like an order.

“How many are they, Ntandoyethu? You offer yourself to rich men now, just for food and a place to sleep? How far are you willing to break me, after everything I have done for you? You are nothing without me, I made you.”

I would be hurt if his voice was not trembling,

he can't take his eyes off Mandla. This is the thing with abusers, they are terrified of men, if not men their size. My structure is that of a teenage boy, that's how he was able to dominate me.

"Sisi go." Mandla orders again, turning a dark gaze towards Zitha—appearing more like a strict father.

"But I want to help you bury the body, I know a place in Nasrec."

Bury? Is Zithobile talking about killing Pule? I don't want him dead, I only want him to leave me alone.

"I have a shovel in my car, a refusal bag. As long as Mandla will do the digging." Bulelwa's words slam against my heart. They kill people?

I'm waiting for them to say they are kidding, but nothing. They are glaring at Pule with deadly looks, his death is going to be on my conscious.

“This is not a game, sisi. I don’t want to get in trouble with the boss.” Mandla says, by boss I think he means Kenneth.

“I won’t say anything if you won’t,” my Lord, Zitha is dead serious.

“So, how are we going to do this? Strangle him to death or hit his head against the tiles?” Zitha. Pule’s eyes are bulging, fear abides in them.

“Bulelwa shut the door, make sure no one enters.” Continues Zitha, and he does as told.

“Are... are you going to kill him?” I have to ask, their serious expressions are making my head spin. No one answers me.

Heat rushes through my body, I can’t breathe. Pule looks like he’s standing before his grave, his body is pressed against the wall. And his pants are... wet... God, he just wet his pants.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-seven

THE KHANYILES-

Mathonga is on panic mode, his heart is going crazy in his chest and he has no idea how to make it stop. Nala can't reject him too, he won't be able to handle it. It's bad enough that Dalisile made him feel that he's not worthy of being loved.

His escape is short lived as someone grips his arm, he whips his head back around and meets his brother's livid face.

"Uyaphi?" (Where are you going?)

The grip is too tight, he can feel Ntaba's rage piercing right through him. He drops his head before deciding to be brave and look his brother in the eye.

“Nala is gone bhuti, I have to go after her.” She’s all he thinks about, it can’t be healthy that he’s become so attached to a woman he’s known for a few weeks.

“What is wrong with you, huh? Did you not hear anything that was said here?”

Seriously, if they continue pissing Ntaba off, it might not end well.

“You are not going anywhere, do you hear me, Mathonga? Do you want to join Vukuzakhe in the hospital? What if you die?” Ntaba questions his stupidity.

“All for a woman?” That’s Khothama’s 2 cents, Mathonga lets out a disgruntled sigh and turns back to his seat.

He knows what’s at stake if he goes out there, their enemies have probably turned the village upside down, seeking revenge. And Nala... Nala is alone out there.

“I knew there was something going on between you and that girl.” Vumile adds, sending a disapproving frown to his son. “What happened that one from church? Are you two-timing them, Mathonga?”

Mathonga buries his face in his hands, this cannot be happening to him. The last thing he needs is a lecture from his father, he stands and walks out with slumped shoulders.

“What is going on in this household? People are doing as they please.” Vumile complains, not everyone can stand him when he starts complaining.

Ntaba and kothama move in one accord, they bump shoulders at the door but make it out of the house in time to escape Vumile’s protests.

“I know men who can help us take down those

dogs, I'm going to make a few calls." Khothama says.

On that note, Ntaba has a few people he can appoint as guards.

"Ntaba," The feminine voice takes Ntaba away from his conversation with Khothama. He tilts his head to see Kethiwe from his vantage point, standing just feet away from them. She crosses her arms while holding her elbows.

Khothama strolls away with nothing but a head shake and a smirk dancing at the corner of his mouth.

"KaMandonsela." Ntaba recognises her.

Her stomach bottoms out at the foreign name calling. What does this this mean? He can be unpredictable, it annoys her sometimes.

"KaMandonsela is my father and my brothers."

She replies with a frown. Ntaba's eyebrows pinch together as he tries for a smile, he sees right through this girl it's not even a joke.

It scares him that she dares to stand in front of him with love bursting through her.

"What's going on?" He shoves his hands in the pockets of his track pants, distancing himself. His cold eyes wander across her body, assessing her from head to toe.

"Everyone is... getting protection. What about me?" She brings the question forth.

There's an unwelcome blush rising up Khethiwe's cheeks, she looks away from his investigative gaze, his dark eyes that give nothing away.

"What about you, Khethi?" He asks, as he raises his brows.

“Do I not matter?” She mumbles, clearing her throat and shying away from his deep stare.

He knows what this is about, why she is desperate for his attention.

“What do you want from me?” A question he already knows the answer to.

“To treat me like I matter.” She gives him a probing look as she waits for him to answer her, until she can’t look into his blank eyes anymore.

“We agreed that no strings attached. Don’t ruin this Khethiwe?”

“I’m not asking you to marry me, Ntaba. I simply want you to make me feel worth it. Like you did last night, for a moment I was convinced that you...”

Her statement is left open, she is not brave enough to fill in the blanks.

“That I love you?” But Ntaba is. “I was at my

lowest, I needed a good fuck and you were there.”

That’s all he ever wants, to fuck. It shouldn’t come as a big surprise, but for some reason it does. She wants to hate him and curse him to death, but she can’t. God is her witness, she loves this fool standing before her.

“Why are you like this, Ntaba? Why are you afraid to love and be loved?”

She doesn’t understand him, or why he is the way he is. Why he is doing this to her. Making her love him the way she does, if she could, she wouldn’t spend another minute thinking about this man.

“Who said I was afraid? You can’t be afraid of something that doesn’t exist. Love is a lie Khethi, the sooner you get that the easier your life will be.”

“I’m not cold hearted like you, Ntabezikude. I have a heart and it beats for you.”

“Then tell it to stop, I don’t want anything from you Khethiwe. Who gave you the right to love me? Your pussy is enough for me.”

The damage is done.

When you’re frustrated, it’s better to keep your mouth shut lest you say words you don’t mean. It’s easy to be cruel in a moment of frustration, there is no going back, the damage is done.

“I hate you.” The words erupt from Khethiwe’s mouth, tears are knocking, desperate to be let out.

Not wanting him to see her break down, she dashes away. She is not expecting him to stop her, it’s not who he is. Knowing the truth does not stop her heart from aching.

“Ntaba,” Mathonga calls from behind him. He sighs the second his eyes land on a visibly distressed Mathonga.

“She wants nothing to do with me anymore.”

Ntaba frowns, what is this one talking about?

“Khethiwe?” She is stuck in his head, it explains why her name randomly escaped his mouth.

“Nala, she just sent me a text saying she’s done.” Mathonga articulates.

His eyes are red, and not only that, his head is pounding.

“I understand how you feel, Thonga.” He doesn’t understand shit, why people are so obsessed with love. It does not make sense to him, there is nothing special about it.

“She will come around, give her a few days.” He tries to comfort him.

Mathonga is not having it. It hurts like the day he broke Amandla's heart... Amandla—he broke up with her for Nala and now Nala is gone. A tear trembles at the corner of Mathonga's eye, frustrating Ntaba beyond boundaries.

He has a good mind to look for this Nala girl and bring her to Mathonga, he has no care for her whatsoever. It's all about Mathonga and his happiness.

Ntaba knew Mathonga was falling for her, he could see it and thought that maybe she would be good for him.

“You need to stop crying Mathonga, think about the ceremony tomorrow. You cannot present yourself to the ancestors with puffy eyes, they will think we're not treating you well.”

Sometimes he needs to speak to him like a kid so he feels better, it's a habit they all share.

“I want to speak to her, maybe she will change her mind. I know Ndleleni didn’t mean what he said, he is not a bad person.” Mathonga.

“He’s not, but he can be an idiot. That’s why he did what he did, where is Ndleleni? Have you heard from him?”

How are they talking about Ndleleni all of a sudden?

“I don’t know where he is.” Mathonga answers disinterested, he adds a shoulder shrug.

“Go get some pain killers, and sleep. I’m sure you have a splitting headache from all this crying. I swear you should’ve been a girl.”

“I can’t sleep, I need to see Nala.”

“Eish Mathonga, matters of the heart should be the least of your worries. You will fix things with your girlfriend after all of this is over.”

Wise words from Ntaba, but when will all of this

be over? Mathonga is set to leave for Namibia tomorrow evening. He can't go without fixing things with Nala, he can't go without her.

Mathonga has more to say, he wants to complain and cry and complain so more. But his brother is getting frustrated and he knows, you don't frustrate Ntaba.

"I had a dream about Vimbela and Sakhile, they haven't crossed over. They are trapped in that house they died in."

Ntaba's face changes, bringing those two up stirs up unwanted emotions.

"What do you mean they are trapped?" Ntaba asks, voice lower than usual.

"They didn't crossover, Vimbela said they can't breathe. There is smoke in their lungs, their clothes were burnt. I could even smell their burnt flesh."

Ntaba squints his eyes, perhaps trying to search

for more in Mathonga's bloodshot eyes.

"We should talk to the uncles, they will know what has to be done." He wraps his arm around Mathonga's shoulder and leads him back into the house, Vumile must hear the damage he made.

FUNOKUHLE-

My life is a rollercoaster ride, for a good minute I thought Zitha and her crew were going to kill Pule. Mandla went from being a saviour to an enemy when he called Kenneth and told him what was happening.

The phone was passed on to Zitha, whatever was said by the man on the other side of the line left Zitha very upset. She dragged me and Bulelwa out of that restroom, after threatening to haunt Pule down and kill him.

All three of us are in the backseat, waiting for Mandla to drive us home. I'm too distracted to engage in the conversation with Zitha and Bulelwa, as usual, they debate, fight and laugh at each other. Minutes later, Mandla materialised from the mall's exit doors. Behind him are two men walking with Pule in the middle, I can see he's shaken and doesn't want to go with them.

My hand is on the door when someone stops me from opening it.

"Trust me, you don't want to do that." Zitha warns.

I don't understand what she means.

"Are they going to kill him?" I ask.

"Yes and no." Does Zitha have to be complicated? "It depends on you, if you want him gone, it can be arranged."

“You guys kill people?” I can’t help but ask this haunting question.

The door opens before I get my answer, it’s Mandla. The two men are in a different car with Pule. Zitha’s words stop me from asking about him, they won’t kill him without my word But they are taking him somewhere.

Mandla is asked why he snitched. His reason is that Zitha’s stubbornness left him no choice, he had to report to the boss before she got into trouble.

Zitha is currently on silent mode, she only speaks when Bulelwa speaks to her. I have not dared say a word, perhaps the aftermath has me mute.

“Take us to Bulelwa’s house, bhuti.” Zitha instructs, there is no trace of anger in her voice. She is over Mandla’s treachery.

“I’m sorry sisi, but Sir Kenneth said to bring you to the house.” Mandla says.

I feel betrayed on Zitha’s behalf, I hear her huff beside me.

“And you thought it best not to tell me? Mandla, I’m not okay with this behaviour. Does your loyalty only lie with Sir Kenneth?”

That went south in a blink of an eye, she called him Mandla, not bhuti.

“I don’t want to get into trouble by not adhering to sir’s demands Ms. Zitha, please understand.” He’s pleading, and calling her Ms, he is essentially giving her a taste of her own medicine.

“This is how it is then, fine.” She’s pouting, letting her lower lip overhang.

“Are you pregnant babe?” Bulelwa asks, face ruffled with questions.

“No,” she snuffles.

I didn’t realise she was crying until now, this is the reason behind Bulelwa’s question.

“You’re crying because your husband wants you home, you must be pregnant. That’s nothing to cry about.” I agree with Bulelwa.

“There’s something in my eye, okay.” She justifies. Bulelwa finds a joke in it.

“I better start saving for your baby shower because wow.” Bulelwa says and I instantly feel bad for letting them spend so much on me.

“We can sell some of the clothes we bought, I don’t need all of them anyway.” I really don’t, the two of them give me weird stares.

“This idiot has a company under his name, he has more than he needs.” Zitha says, pointing at Bulelwa. Her tears have dried up, you can’t tell she was crying just now.

“Speaking of more than enough, what are your plans in Joburg Funokuhle?” Bulelwa.

I appreciate that they have not asked me about Pule, I don’t want to think about him. Something happened in that bathroom and only Mandla knows what.

“I haven’t thought far yet.” The plan was to escape my father.

“Bulelwa wants to give you a job,” Zitha states. I wait for Bulelwa to protest and get nothing but a head nod.

“Draft your CV and we’ll see where we can place you.” Bulelwa.

Okay. I'm stunned, they seem too good to be true. How are they this kind?

"I will, thank you." I tell him, trying not to be emotional. At this point, I will do anything. Gardening, mopping floors, anything.

Bulelwa receives a call, a timid smile crosses his face as he swipes the green light.

"Muntu ka Bubu." That's how he answers the phone? Zitha laughs, it's loud and I think meant to irritate Bulelwa. He's not there, all of his focus is on the person he's talking to. We lose his words, he's murmuring and blushing, and giggling.

That feeling of envy attacks me again, I shove it away. I'm free now, I don't have to live under anyone's rule. One day my life will be normal.

We arrive at the house, Zitha sighs and I have to ask what the matter is as I trace her narrowed

gaze to the car parked outside the garage.

“He’s home, when does he get to work?” I assume she is talking about Kenneth. “See what you’ve done Mandla?”

Poor Mandla, Zitha will hang his flaw over his head for as long as she can.

“I’m sure you can soften him up, he is your man.” The things that just came out of my mouth...

She gives me a lopsided grin, “I’ll remember that when he starts scolding me.”

Kenneth walks out of the house as we step out of the car, his demeanour makes me want to rush back into the car. I can’t tell if he’s upset or that’s his natural face. Zitha is all over him in a flash, was she not the one complaining about him being home? Or maybe she is taking my advice.

“This is why I never get involved, those two will

make a fool out of you.” Bulelwa comments on the public display of affection and swooshes past them. The candle these two have made me hold is too hot, so I step on it and follow Bulelwa to the house, not shocked that he knows his way around here.

In the kitchen, he pours me coffee without asking if I want it. We settle down on the stools, a chair away from each other.

“Who is that man?” I know who he is talking about, but I don’t want to talk about Pule.

“He’s no one.” I answer, swaying my eyes away from his direction.

“You don’t have to deal with him, you know? I know people who can make him disappear. One of them is outside, just say the word and that old bastard will kiss this world goodbye.”

His words shock the living day lights out of me,

somehow I know he is not talking about Mandla. I knew there's something shady about Kenneth, something dark and uncanny.

DALISILE-

Elders would tell you that wealth is not for everyone, money does not have everyone's name written on it. Some people are made to suffer, while some are made for the lights.

The rich and the poor, see how that balances the world? Dalisile thought it was bullshit when her mother narrated these words to her, it had been a hard knock life since childhood. While others ate thick slices of cheese, she and her sister Mgobhozi had to stand on the streets every day, and beg for food.

Their mother was bedridden, too weak to fend for her children. It was left to them to make

sure there was food on the table.

In their late teens, she died, leaving her teenage girls to face life alone in the hands of poverty.

Mgobhozi ventured into the night life, selling her body for mere change and Dalisile's focus was getting those straight A's in school. Education is the key to success; her teacher would say. She saw the success, the lavish lifestyle. She knew she was made for more than what life had presented her and so, she worked hard.

The day she was set to write her final exam in grade 10, Mgobhozi fell head first in their one-room mud house, her body convulsing violently. It took the help of a neighbour who burnt impepho and recited the Lithuli clan names on behalf of the two orphans. That's when they found out that Mgobhozi had a calling. This was a chance she couldn't miss, she went to

initiation school.

Life became stagnant for Dalisile while awaiting her sister's return. Mgobhozi came back a different person, she was standoffish and a bit detached. Dalisile assumed it wasn't an easy journey for her sister, in a way she understood. Until her sister told her what she chose to do with her gift, it scared Dalisile. But if that was going to get them out of poverty, then she had no choice but to follow Mgobhozi wherever she took her.

“Vukuzakhe is such a disappointment, what kind of a house is this? With the money he has, he should be living like a king.”

Look what the devil dragged in, Mgobhozi Lithuli. Her long, loose, black dress moves with her as she breezes around Vukuzakhe's little

home in Northcliff. Like she said, with the money that man has, he could've bought a mansion, not this shack he calls a house.

"That's my son, you're talking about, watch your tongue." Dalisile sputters, throwing daggers at her sister.

Mgobhozi finds her very funny, she gives her a dirty glance and continues laughing like she doesn't care.

"Your obsession over that boy is not healthy, I can't blame you for that, though. He is your lifeline, without him, you're going back to the streets." Mgobhozi.

Dalisile cringes at the thought, that's something she will never let happen. Mgobhozi is done detesting Vukuzakhe's little abode, she finds the most comfortable sofa and like a queen, sits her royal ass down. She crosses one leg

over the other, eyes scanning her surroundings. Argh! Vukuzakhe is such a disappointment.

Where are the stairs? The flat screen TV? The sofas that massage your body when you sit?

“You mean we are going back to the streets?”

Dalisile corrects, as she sits down with a cup of tea. “Remember what we did to be where we are? How you tempered with fate to get me married to the chief.”

Mgobhozi throws her head back, laughing like the witch she is.

“We tempered with fate my dear sister, you came up with the idea and I made it happen. We’re both dark Dalisile, you are not a saint.” Mgobhozi states.

“I’m nothing like you, you chose to use your traditional gift to do evil and not good. You practically planted the idea in my head, Mgobhozi. I didn’t know the chief was looking

to take a wife.” Dalisile argues, with no twinge of respect directed towards her sister.

If anything, Mgobhozi demands respect, she didn't get where she is by being trampled on by mere humans.

“You ungrateful brat, I have done so much for you, made sure you continue to wear those ugly two piece suits.” Her fire-spitting eyes point at Dalisile's attire.

“I will not be insulted by a witch.” Dalisile spits, placing her cup of tea on the table.

“Neither will I be insulted by a weakling, respect me, Dalisile. You are where you are because of me, I can take it all away before you can swipe your credit card at the next store.”

That is definitely a threat, Dalisile does not do well with threats. Then again, this is her sister who plays with black magic like it's a normal

thing to do.

“Your first son is the one that keeps you in the Khanyile homestead, he’s the reason you are still queen. If he dies, then all your dreams will come crushing down. His death will break the curse, and Vumile will see you for the lowlife you are.”

A painful reminder from Mgobhozi. To seal the curse, the first Khanyile heir had to be born. It was a joyful day for Dalisile.

“Not only Vukuzakhe’s death, if that boy Mathonga accepts his calling the curse will be completely broken. His birth alone did so much damage, it opened a way for Vumile and Nandi to meet. I don’t share Mgobhozi, but for years I’ve had to share my husband with that dirty trash, Nandi. I told you to kill her, now she’s in my house playing queen.”

Dalisile barks, not fazed by her sister's wrath, she too can shout and she does it so well it almost looks natural.

"I know, Vukuzakhe's near death experience made it all possible. The spirit of delay has been lifted from Nandi, she is finally with the man she was destined to be with."

They had it all planned out from the beginning, and they made sure no one stood in their way. Nandi Shamase— Mgebhozi saw her coming. Destiny had decided that she was the one to marry Vumile, bear his children, and build a life with him. Vumile and Nandi were ordained to meet, they were chosen for each other by— whoever is in charge of this love thing.

With the help of an old woman, Mgebhozi met at the initiation school. She put walls between the two strangers, making sure their paths

never cross.

Dalisile is aware of what is currently happening, if she could, she would cut off Nandi's head and feed it to dogs.

"No, Mgobhozi, no. You have to do something."
A queen throwing tantrums?

"Don't you think I know that? When will you do something for me, Dalisile? The only thing I wanted from you was Mathonga, I wanted you to keep your far end of the deal. You failed to hand him over to me when he was born."

"Mathonga is protected, he's always been untouchable." Dalisile.

"Nonsense, the same ancestors who couldn't stop me from having my way with your husband's fate? I— Mgobhozi went against them. I challenged them just to give you a comfortable life. Yet you couldn't deliver

Mathonga to me, you went to the extent of wanting to kill him. Knowing very well that I need his heart beating. Am I a joke to you Dalisile?”

Dalisile jolts up from her seat, she’s struggling to control her anger.

“Stop asking me nonsense, Mathonga has to die. You said to do whatever it takes to make sure he doesn’t accept his gift, you said it yourself Mgobhozi, that if Mathonga recognises his ancestors it will be the end of us. I will lose everything, I refuse to go back to that life we lived.”

Calmly, Mgobhozi stands to match Dalisile’s height.

“All the more reasons I want his gift, you failed to convince your husband to give him away when he was born.”

Well, looks like Dalisile will never hear the end of this.

“I tried, you know I tried. When Vumile finds out what I did to get rid of that useless boy, he will kill me. Didn’t I work hard? Didn’t I sacrifice so much for us?”

“You did work hard Dalisile, I am proud of you.”

Oh, that went well.

“Okay, do something then. Kill Nandi and take Mathonga. I want Vukuzakhe to take over from Vumile, I want everything in his name. He is my insurance.”

“My greedy sister, things are not easy as you make them seem. But worry not, we will find a way. There will be no ceremony tomorrow.”

Mgobhozi declares, and laughs her heart out.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-eight

WARNING!

This chapter contains scenes that might be triggering or sensitive to the reader. Reader discretion is advised.

MATHONGA-

It's around 12am and I can't seem to get any sleep, I have been tossing and turning for hours on end. It's irritating really, I tried the warm milk thing, it disappointed. I would like to say it's Nala, thoughts of her refuse to leave my head.

However, Nala is not a spirit.

There's a second presence in this room, it's eerie, unexplainable. It brings about fear in my heart, I feel it so close to me that if I were to reach my hand out, I would touch it. Fear is a lie,

it's all in the mind.

I have enough courage to get up, stand tall and with a confident voice yell...

“Whoever you are, you have no right to be here. I command you to go back where you came from.”

I think of praying, but my head is too occupied to access that ‘small mustard seed’ faith. I don’t feel the presence anymore, it’s safe for me to go back to bed.

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“Wake up, we need to pray.” I recognise the voice, the person is shaking me awake. Nandi is in my room, looking like she just woke up from a deep sleep. Her puffy eyes and pouted mouth show and tell.

“Sisi?” She laughs... strange.

“No, call me Nandi.” I have no response for her, seriously, did she wake me up just to tell me to call her Nandi? I can’t call her by name, it’s un-African

“What’s going on?” I sit up, making sure to keep my legs covered. I don’t know her to be comfortable in her presence.

“There’s a dark cloud surrounding the house, we have to pray.” Great, this, I didn’t expect.

“What time is it?” I ask, as I rub my heavy eyes. I don’t fight the yawn that attacks me.

“Few minutes after 3am?”

This is why it feels like I died and came back to life, it’s too early to be awake.

“Ma, what’s going on? Why are you waking me up?” How did she get in here, anyway? I locked the door before I went to bed. Did I lock it? I think I did. She stands back as if to give me privacy, too late, you entered my room

unpermitted.

“Will you sleep while your enemies are plotting against you?” She waves a bible as she says this. Christians and not being original, that’s definitely a line from the bible.

My life is a struggle, I’m being bible bashed in the wee hours of the morning.

“What are you talking about? Don’t you think it’s too late in the night for this?” I’m getting annoyed, sleep is calling my name. I need to go back.

“Your enemies are wide awake, Mathonga. They are celebrating your downfall, you can’t sleep when your enemies are ready to dance on your grave.” Grave? She came here to scare me, that’s it.

“Ma, please don’t say that. There is power in the tongue, I’m not going to die. I refuse to die.”

“You won’t...” Her words are swallowed by my

ringing phone, I fish for it from under the pillow. I don't recognize this number, +27—whichever is calling is in Joburg.

“Who is it?”

Haibo! I don't think that's any of her business.

“Mathonga, who is calling you?” Nandi insists, stepping closer while flipping the bible open. Honestly, she is acting strange.

“Please leave my room, who let you in anyway? The door was locked.” I'm not strict enough because she is not listening to me. She's paging through the pages, eyes squinted and focused.

“If it's an unknown number do not answer it, it might be a trap.” Her gaze is on me now, I glide out of bed, not caring that I only have boxers on. She's on the other side of the bed, looking at me like a mother would her child. I'm the one who shies away from her stare, not fair, this is

my room.

“Don’t answer the call, Mathonga.”

“It might be Nala.” Why am I even telling her this?

“I’m not here to dictate your life, please listen to me just this once. Do not take this call, we need to pray. You can phahla if you want, and I’ll do the prayer after. Don’t ignore my plea please, I have a bad feeling about that phone call.”

“Fine,” I put the phone back under the pillow and join her as she kneels down.

I hope she’s not one of those who pray until we forget where we are. I know I’m going to fall asleep on Jesus.

The first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is check my messages, I have twelve missed calls and five messages. Four are from Dalisile, they all came through during my prayer

session with Nandi. Yeer, that woman prays like the world is coming to an end. I'm pretty sure God was ready to mute her voice.

Answer your phone.

It's an emergency.

This is why we will never get along, you are unreliable. You will never make it in life with this kind of attitude, you stupid boy. I would have done myself a favour by aborting you. Answer your damn phone.

I don't read the last message, knowing she insulted me further. She never calls my phone, neither does she talk to me. Why would she call me at such an unearthly hour?

There are messages and a whole 8 missed calls from an unknown number, I open the messages,

they are from Mgobhozi, telling me to answer my phone and that she misses me. This is strange, I haven't heard from that woman since I was about ten years old, I didn't know she had my number.

She called and texted around the same time as Dalisile, they were probably together.

Today's outfit is a pair of khakhi pants, an ingwe vest and a pair of sandals, it's a big day for me.

Khethiwe tells me the news of the ceremony has reached the villagers, those who care to know what goes on in the Khanyile premises believe the Chief should have made it a big deal and threw a big celebration.

That's something that will never happen, not if Ntaba has anything to do with it. It is just a ceremony after all.

The yard is flooded with guards carrying guns, protocol says no one is to come in and no one goes out unless they are family. I greet baba and my uncles seated under a tree, and don't give them a second look lest they call me. It's too early to deal with old people.

In the kitchen I find Khethiwe, she greets me with a diffident wave and goes back to her duties. I couldn't help but notice her puffy eyes, I'm ready to ask her what's wrong when Dalisile's sister walks into the kitchen. From what I have seen in pictures, her clothes are always dramatic, too black and obviously expensive. Mgobhozi is a strange woman, strolling in here like she hasn't been missing in action for years.

Her gaze immediately finds me as if she knew I would be standing by the fridge, she smiles, too wide. Bizarre because this woman is a stranger, we never see her around here.

She's that rich aunt who is always travelling from one country to another.

"Don't just stand there, come give me a hug."
Her voice is almost similar to Dalisile's, her features are softer though.

"Aunty?" I'm stunned really, I mean what are the odds. Does she even remember me? She stretches her arms, in her hand is a small gift box wrapped with baby-blue wrapping and a red ribbon around it. That better not be for me, I'm not a little boy. I accept the hug she's offering, it's not the most comfortable.

"Your mother told me about this day, I had to come and see for myself. I have a gift for you."
She holds me the box, she didn't have to, really. I mean, what's the occasion?

"What is it?" Curiosity has me by the neck, Mgobhozi shows me her adult teeth. I wish she

didn't, smiles are not for everyone.

"It's a watch, I bought it in Italy during one of my trips." Her eyes twitch with oddity, willing me to take the gift.

"Mathonga!" Sheesh, then there's Nandi. Will it be rude of me to tell her she's not my mother and I am not looking for one? She's standing in the doorway, a scolding look on her face.

"There's a problem, umqombothi didn't brew. Your brother is calling you, I will take care of the guest." She says.

I can't say no to Ntaba, he's not familiar with the word. It's going to be a long day.

NALA-

The room is freezing cold, matching the metal chair I'm tied to. The only furniture in this room

is a small wooden table and this chair I'm restrained on. The light is a bit dim, it doesn't clog my vision. I'm able to grasp every corner.

I don't know where this is. A man in a police van brought me here, he wouldn't tell me who he was. I was on my way to take a taxi, the plan was not to go home. I don't have a home, I wanted to get away, not from Mathonga but I guess from myself.

The twins where in my head the entire time, I had a plan, a plan to come back for them one day. I was standing on the side of the road, waiting to flag down the next taxi when a police van stopped in front of me. Of course I panicked, thinking it was Petros. Then I remembered he was injured and had lost his job. I couldn't recognise the man, he offered me a ride. I kindly refused only for him to pull a gun on me.

My mind went blank, I couldn't scream for help.

The streets were empty, he would have shot me on the spot and went on about his day.

My first instinct is to call out for help before Petros limps through the door with the twins on each side. He has a cast on his leg and using the kids as his crutch, his face bears marks of healing bruises.

“Sis’Nala,” The twins scream in unison, Pule pulls them back, stopping them from running to me.

“Twins” Fear shoots down my being like a needle, and ripples through my pounding heart.

I have never been afraid in my life to see them with him, he’s handled them before but with care. Now—now it’s as if they are nothing. I have no clue what is going on in that sick, twisted mind of his, what he would do to my babies. This is the first time he has exposed his

darkness in front of them, they don't know him as this man.

"Nala, why?" I don't understand Thabani's question. I have never seen him breakdown like this, Thobani is the soft one. He's the baby between the two.

"Don't cry Thabani, I'm here now." I assure him, as powerless as I am. He breaks down in loud sobs, falling knees first on the ground. Petros lets him and is left holding Thobani. I don't understand why my baby is crying, the sound of his sobs is traumatising—utter torture.

"Please stop crying, Thabani."

"Argh, let the boy cry my dear Nala. It is your fault his life is a catastrophe."

What is this monster talking about?

"What did you do to them?" Shouting at him does nothing, the devil is not affected.

“I’m a man Nala, a man with needs. Didn’t we agree we’d meet on weekends so you’d satisfy my needs? Look what you went and did. Was he good Nala? Did Mathonga fuck you good?”

“Shut up, don’t mentioned his name you bastard.” I yelp, fighting on the chair.

“Well, that answers my question. His dick was good, that’s why you aborted mission. I sent you to kill him and you chose to backstab me, this is why I did what I did.” Petros.

He is not making sense, also, I don’t like how he’s stroking Thabani’s head. It’s too... God I can’t be thinking the worst.

“Julia is an old woman, she fails to satisfy my needs. Her pussy is a borehole, that’s what happens when you spend your teenage years sleeping with different men and aborting every baby God blesses you.”

I feel a curl of nausea in the pit of my stomach as he speaks, he begins laughing like a maniac, and drags a quiet Thobani in a tight hug that brings chills down my spine.

“I hate that woman, I dream of killing her, you know?” He says, without emotion.

Oh my God, he is sick.

“What does that have to do with me?” I ask. Wanting to know the reason behind Thabani’s painful cries that continue to echo through the capacious room.

“Oh my dear Nala, if I knew how tight your brother was, I would have gone for him, both of them actually, and saved you years of sex slavery.” His revelation brings my world to a standstill, I watch with horror as he licks Thobani’s face. Thobani does not fight him, he’s immobile. I’d think he’s dead with how he does not flinch under Petros’ hold.

“What... what are you talking about Petros?” The words leave my mouth in stutters, it can't be what he just said.

“Nala...” Thabani raises his tear stained face, I can't stand to see the pain in his eyes.

“My baby, what did he do to you?” I ask but I don't want to know, I have a feeling it will kill me.

“Let's just put it this way,” Petros starts. “I was horny with no one to fuck and Thabani became my saving grace. Thobani was a good spectator, he had to watch so he'd know what to do when his turn comes.”

No, no. He... he raped my brother.

“I want to die Nala, please... I want to be with my mother.” Thabani's tears drop, each one burning my soul. They are followed by loud sobbing, uncontrollable and unbearable. I want to get out of this chair, take him into my arms and hide

him from the world.

“Thabani I’m...” My words die out like a flame gushed out by strong wind, he needs to know how sorry I am. That I would never let anything happen to him.

“I’m sorry, Thabani, I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you.” My chest is slowly tightening, feels like a truck is sitting on it.

“Do you hear that, Nala? These are the results of your actions.” He pushes Thobani aside and grabs Thabani’s arms, dragging him up.

“Listen to the sound of your brother’s pain. Was he worth it Nala? Was Mathonga worth your brother’s pain?”

He’s yelling, and ripping Thabani’s shirt off. The twin won’t stop crying.

“Stop it, you’re hurting him, stop.” Petros doesn’t heed my cries, he is practising his power on a defenceless child. Thabani has put

up a fight, but it's pointless. He's only a boy, too fragile.

"Petros, I will do anything. Don't hurt him please." I plead with desperate cries, rattling on the chair in hopes that I will be released.

"I like this boy, Nala. He's a fighter, he will make a good bitch."

He strips off his pants and underwear, leaving my brother stark naked. At this point, my head is spinning, I think I'm going to die, I want to die and take them with me. I want to free us from this suffering.

"Ma, ma, mama." Thabani cries through a heavy breath, his little body trembling with fear. It hurts me that he's crying for our mother, a woman he's never met a day in his life.

Petros' haughty laughter erupts.

“Yes baby, scream for daddy. This is how he screamed when I went inside his little tight hole and man I have never felt so alive. I almost exploded.”

My stomach clenches at his revelation, he crouches down so he’s almost the same height as Thabani and starts touching my brother in a way he shouldn’t.

“Petros stop, give me my brother, please.” I shake from the chair, choking out a scream. Thabani gags on sobs, failing to get away from him, he’s too big to be fought – too big to be taken down.

“I told you that I will make your life hell if you dare double cross me, you underestimated me, my dear Nala.” The cold bastard is calm and unapologetic, I can’t keep my eyes off his hands that are dangerously roaming around Thabani’s little body.

Petros ignores the twin's fighting, focusing on the deadly touches, down his chest, past his nipples, over his stomach and stops on his penis. He's a paedophile fondling with a little boy's penis.

A shiver skids down my body, my lips part in screams of terror. I fight with the chair and ropes restraining my movements, desperate to be set free, desperate to save my brother.

"Please I will do anything, let him go please."

I should not be crying, I need to be strong for them. Petros considers me with a smug look, and continues with his escapades.

"Don't touch him," at the sound of the order, I blink my eyes to see Thobani. I almost forgot about him, he's holding a knife, eyes red and wet with tears. Petros would see what is about to happen if his focus was not on me and Thabani.

Thobani charges at him and plunges the knife into Petros' thigh. It must be shock, but everything is happening too fast that it takes me a minute too long to register what is really happening.

Petros growls like an animal, and pulls the knife out. He slaps Thobani on the face that he flies across the room falling with a loud thud. He stands and targets Thobani whose little body's first instinct is to tremble like a wounded puppy on the cold floor.

I choke on silent screams, somehow I have forgotten the process of breathing.

Petros' trip is cut short because Thabani jumps on his back, carrying the knife Thobani had used on Petros.

RUN!!!

I want to scream, but fear presses down my chest, suffocating me.

Petros quickly grabs Thabani by the shoulders and throws his little body against the brick wall.

All I hear is a sickening thud and something akin to the sound of bones cracking. Another stomach-turning sound echoes as my little brother's naked body lands on the floor, then there's blood leaking from his head.

MATHONGA-

Thirty-nine

AMANDLA-

"How long are you going to lie on that bed, Amandla?"

"Gogo please, not today." I simply don't have the strength to argue with her. What I want or

say does not matter, she pulls the blanket, exposing my skin to the cold.

“What is wrong with you? You’ve been laying on that bed for days, are you pregnant, Amandla?”

I wish I were pregnant, Mathonga wouldn’t have left me. Is it normal for a person to love someone so deeply? I don’t see myself continuing with life, I can’t do it without him.

“No, gogo. I’m not pregnant.” My nose flares as I grab the blanket from her and cover myself, people annoy me lately. I don’t want to be around anything that has a face and can talk.

I don’t get to enjoy my quiet time, the old woman pulls the blanket again, forcing me to sit up.

“What is it?” I might have sounded rude, now I have to apologise. Hopefully she will leave me in peace after stroking her ego.

“Ngiyaxolisa salukazi sami, that came out

wrong.” There I said it, it seems she wants more because she sits on my bed, facing me and exhales deeply. Should grannies be sighing like this? At this age, they need to be counting their breaths, time is not on their side.

“What’s going on Amandla?”

I can’t tell her, she will sing the ‘I told you so’ song. She predicted this, from day one, she hated Mathonga and always said he was going to break my heart. Her words have come to life, I won’t mention anything.

“I lost my job,” it is part lies. I did lose my job after missing work for days without giving a reason.

“How could you let that happen, Amandla? How are we going to survive without the money?”

The audacity to ask me this when her daughter works for white people, I’m pretty sure her salary will be enough to sustain us. She was

able to buy me a new phone anyway.

“I will look for a new job,” I tell her lies and nothing but lies. I have no interest in looking for a job. Maybe I will go back to school and see what I do with my life, I’m pretty sure my father is a wealthy bastard living a lavish life somewhere. I have to find him and demand 23 years of pap geld. (Child support)

We hear the sound of a car pulling up outside, curiosity pushes me to check. There’s a red Jeep parked outside the gate, my heart skips a beat. Could it be Mathonga?

“Who is it?” Grandmother asks, still seated on the bed.

“I don’t know, I’ll go see.” I have to at least look decent, there’s a terrible odour springing from my clothes. I smell and look like a hobo, I was too dejected to get up and bath, or change into

something clean. Mathonga doesn't know me like this, plus, I can't let him think I have been miserable without him.

I quickly change into a dress and spray my Armani Gardenia perfume, I bought it from Nqobile, my former colleague. She sells them for R120. Who said you need to be rich to smell expensive?

As I approach, the driver's door swings open. The first thing I see is a pair of black ankle boots— that can't be Mathonga. I would see who the person is if the windows were not tinted.

Instinctively, I turn back to see grandmother standing against the doorframe. I knew she would follow me.

"Amandla." My mother's voice calls, I snap my head back. For the life of me, I cannot recognise the woman walking through our gate.

“My baby.”

Okay, she has my mother’s voice. But Sabusiswa bathes old white women for a living, she doesn’t wear designer clothes and drive expensive cars. She can’t even drive, for Christ’s sake. As for the long ass weave.

“Ma?” I whisper condescendingly. I’m flabbergasted, really. Her arms are stretched out as she nears me, a motherly smile spread across her face.

I can’t help but notice the long pink nails. Was she going for the Cardi B look? This woman is too old for this, what happened to her?

She suffocates me in her arms, I’m too shocked to reciprocate. Did mom win the lottery? If she did then I’m buying my ancestors Dash Vodka and Red Bull, they’ll be drunk and sober at the same time. I respect them that much.

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VUKUZAKHE-

The road to recovery is long, he will need to have therapy before he goes back to being himself. He can barely stay awake for longer than ten minutes, he's always tired. His brain struggles to process everything happening around him, his vocabulary is limited. It's baby steps for now, nothing to worry about. He can say a few words, then he's tired and needs a break.

Yep, the road to recovery is long.

Hlabela, Bongwiwe and Dalisile have tried their best to help him go back to the person he was, but it's left to the doctors now.

When he wakes up, the first person he asks for

is Bongiwe. Lucky woman, Dalisile does not seem to think so. It's frustrating to see her son obsessing over his wife.

Ntabezikude called this morning, the phone call didn't last long. It's understandable—the road to recovery is long.

“My mother is coming over on Tuesday, she wants me to do cleansing for the miscarriage.” Bongiwe absentmindedly says, gently kneading his hand. Vukuzakhe can't deny that he's enjoying it, it's relaxing and helps him forget that he's lying in a hospital bed.

“What miscarriage?” He furrows his brows peeping beneath the bandage wrapped around his head.

Oops! He doesn't remember, she bites her bottom lip, trying to look for a way out.

“I... I was pregnant and the baby didn't... make

it.” She didn’t mean to stutter, or tell him this. The doctor said to stray away from topics that might cause him stress. Like this one, his eyes are popping out of their sockets, tears blinding his vision.

Not only did they lose a baby, he doesn’t remember that his wife was pregnant.

“Are you crying?” She’s panicking, what if the news affects him mentally? His brain is weak, the doctor did say. He might remember some things while some might be vivid or completely wiped out. Bongiwe stands and leans over to nettle his whiskery cheeks.

“No Ngwane, this is not you. You don’t bow down to tears, you’re stronger than that.” Argh, man. He who finds a wife, finds a... that.

“I’m sorry.” He sniffs, he really is crying.

“It’s not your fault,” she lies.

He who finds a wife, finds a good thing. Yes,

that's it. Their foreheads meet, they are lost in each other as they breathe the same breath. A few pecks here and there leave Vukuzakhe feeling a bit better, though he can't seem to move past the fact that they lost a baby.

“What's going on here?”

Not only do cats drag in unwanted guests, the devil does too. Bongiwe clears her throat and steps away from her husband, it's the impassive look Dalisile is wearing. It makes one want to dig a hole and bury themselves in it.

“Why is my son crying?” Dalisile asks, leering at Bongiwe.

Argh, the wife didn't wipe her husband's tears. Just when she was given the good wife crown.

“Why didn't you tell me that Bongiwe lost our baby?” That's the most he's said today, usually, dear old Dalisile would smile seeing the

progress her son has made. But today her face resembles Shrek's.

"There was nothing to tell," her 4 inch heels clink on the floor as she strides toward the bed. "You never wanted to have children, I don't get why you're upset about it."

The wife forgot to mention this, nc nc nc. Vukuzakhe feels embarrassed, like a child, his wide eyes shift to his wife. He feels embarrassed by the revelation, it can't be that he never wanted to have babies with this woman who wears his ring.

"Is that true, Bongiwe?" His speech is slow now, it's the brain telling him that's enough for the day. His eyes are heavy, but he fights the feeling. He can't sleep before getting an answer from Bongiwe.

"Bong..." his words are taken away from him. Humans can be weak sometimes and that's

okay, it's okay to give in sometimes when everything feels too much. That's what his brain is telling him and give in is what he does.

Bongiwe exhales sharply, she's tired of this. All she wants now is to take her man home and help him heal.

"What are you still doing here?" Dalisile's question is coated with shi... pardon, coated with resentment.

"I don't understand your question." Bongiwe.

No one understands Dalisile, heck she doesn't understand herself.

"Shouldn't you be back in KZN doing your wifely duties? I can take care of my son."

Bongiwe grimaces at her, the audacity this woman has.

"If I remember correctly, we are both Khanyile

wives.” Bongiwe crosses her arms on her chest, the corner of her mouth twisting, perhaps this is the last straw. Dalisile’s obsession over Vukuzakhe is draining the life out of her.

“Vukuzakhe is my husband, that’s why I’m still here. I follow him wherever he goes, maybe you should rephrase your question mother-in-law. Shouldn’t you be back home taking care of your husband?”

With that said, she pulls a chair, takes Zakhe’s hand and starts massaging his fingers. There should be a return from Dalisile, but nothing. She is left tongue tied.

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NTABEZIKUDE-

He hates it when things don't go according to plan, today was meant to be a success. Do the damn ceremony and ship Mathonga off to Namibia.

He's on the phone with Alfred when Mathonga enters his room, Khothama flips a blanket over a load of guns spread on the bed. Too late, Mathonga saw them, it's the first time seeing so many guns. There's an urge to ask, but he has a brother who smacks you when you start to get annoying.

"Mathonga." Ndleleni is here too, he stands from Ntaba's bed, an apologetic guise on his hard features and hugs him. "I'm sorry... you know that I..."

"We are brothers, we don't say sorry." Mathonga articulates.

Ndleleni understands, they understand each other. It is how their relationship is and has

always been. Ndleleni reclaims his position on the bed.

“It would’ve been nice if you knocked ndoda, what if we were naked.” That’s a very stupid thing for Khothama to say, very expected, he is the word clarified.

“Thula ndoda,” a warning comes from Ndleleni. It has Khothama shrugging his shoulders, he finds a comfortable space on the bed and lies on his back, arm supporting his head.

“What’s going on?” Mathonga must have been very active in class during his school days, he sends an inquisitive gaze over the blanket hiding the guns. No one is willing to give him a reply, no one bothers to look his way. He turns to the one person who is not afraid to speak his mind, Ntaba never lies.

The chance to pry is taken from him by a lanky

man dressed like he just walked out of Big Zulu's music video, he entered without so much as a knock. Now, this is aggravating. Ntaba frowns, he wants to tell him to go back and knock because this is his room. Then again, Muphumuzi is one of his associates, they go way back.

"Alfred said he found the cleaner's location, Petros is with them." Muphumuzi reports, standing in the doorway.

Ntaba gives Mathonga a fleeting look, he's hoping he does not grasp anything. The ceremony has to be done, brewed mqombothi or not.

"The cleaner?" Mathonga and his smart mind.
"Are you talking about Nala?"

"I think that's her name." Muphumuzi rejoinders.
Dammit! Ntaba wants to punch him out of his room.

“Ehh baba, voetsek. Phuma.” (Get out.)

Ntaba bites his head off, the man is trapped in confusion. He looks between Ntaba and everyone in the room, Ndleleni’s face is cold, Khothama is entertained by his flapping big feet, and Mathonga is ogling back, expectedly. Ntaba can be a disrespectful bastard, Muphumuzi clicks his tongue and walks out.

“Where is Nala?” Mathonga asks.

This one was given a love portion, no way can he be so riveted by that woman. There are better things he needs to worry about.

“I’ll go get her, you stay here.” Ntaba slithers a hand under a pillow and brings out a 23 calibre, it’s raining guns in here. Mathonga’s eyes widen, his mouth hangs open.

“Why do you need a gun?” Mathonga is too interrogative for his liking, he seems to have forgotten that his brother carries a gun for the

fun of it.

There is sudden noise outside, the three men run out carrying guns, Mathonga follows unarmed. A crowd is gathered by the tree where Vumile and his brothers are, everyone is talking at once. The brothers scurry there, guns blazing.

“Bring the car around, now.” Vumile shouts at no one in particular.

There, in the middle of the crowd lie his two brothers, wincing in pain.

“What happened?” A terrified Khothama asks, as he kneels down to inspect his father.

“They got bitten by a snake, one minute we were sitting and out of nowhere a black mamba appeared.” Vumile answers.

“Are you sure it was a black mamba, baba?” Ntaba asks, if that’s the case then they will be

having a funeral in the Khanyile premises. Vumile grimaces, his mouth twitches as if wanting to open and utter something.

“I don’t know, Ntabezikude. It was too fast.”

“A snake, in these premises? That’s impossible.” Mathonga is the one to voice this out, they grew up in this place. Not once did they have any encounters with snakes.

“Bring the car around, Ndleleni,” is an order given by Vumile. Ndleleni does not move a muscle, his face lacks emotion, must be shock paralysis.

“They are going to die,” he mumbles, gaze wedged on his uncles. Ntaba wraps a hand around his shoulder and lugs him away from the scene.

As he pulls him away, Nandi, Sneh and Thethelela dash from the house, it looks like the

news has reached them.

“Bopha,” if the psychiatric hospital catches a glimpse of Thethelela, they’d lock her up thinking her screws are loose. Ntaba meets her halfway, his arms envelop around her from behind, clogging her from getting to Bopha.

“Get out of my way, Ntabezikude. My husband needs me.” Yep, Sterkfontein should be on the way, right about now.

Thethelela collapses in his arms, crying like a widow she is not. Ntaba is holding her too close, and it’s not okay, Khethiwe seems to think so. He can’t be holding another woman like that. Wailing or not, it’s wrong, it is utter nonsense.

Sneh is doing her own share of blaring, no one stops her from getting to Dumile. She drops down before his rigid body, the state he is in scares her to hell and back. She raises her arms,

tears stream past the calamine lotion on her face.

“Oh Jehovah, umyeni wami. Thixo somandla, Ndodana ka Davide, ngihawukele. Thethelela Bawo, hai unamanga weSathane. Not my husband.” (Prayer.)

Ndleleni is the one to pull her back so they can help the brothers, he has to snap out of his trauma, it's raining fire here.

“Let's get them to the car,” Vumile puts the suggestion forward.

Government services can never be trusted, who knows, the ambulance might pass by McDonald's to grab a snack on their way to the chief's house. Who cares anyway? They will still get to smile at Mandela notes at the end of the month.

With the help of some of the guards, they

succeed in putting the brothers in Vumile's Nebula blue, Toyota Fortuner.

Mathonga chooses to stay behind while the others drive to the hospital.

The car is sent off by Thethelela's loud cries, she's calling for her husband and begging him not to leave her.

Why is she not allowed to follow her husband? What if he dies and she's not there to say goodbye? She will never forgive herself. Sneh is praying like the pastor promised her lunch after church, Dumile has to make it, he is her lifeline.

"Take me to my husband please," shame Thethelela. She's wrapped in Ntaba's comfortable arms, her blood pressure is probably at a 100. Oh wait... she's in her mid-twenties.

"Shhhh," is all Ntaba can say.

"Take her to the room, she needs to rest." What

will the world be without Nandi Shamase? This one has not shown any form of weakness, someone needs to be strong for these marshmallow women.

Ntaba whisks Thethelela up like she weighs Khethiwe's salary, the married woman clings on to him and hides her face in his neck like a new bride.

Where is that snake? Khethiwe needs to borrow it, her envious gaze follows them till they are out of sight. Rolling her eyes is one of her many talents, she scuttles back to the kitchen to nurse her shattered heart.

Mathonga is standing where he was when the car pulled out of the premises, it's all because of Nala, that girl is haunting his mind. From what he gathered, she is in trouble. Wrong thoughts Mathonga, the ancestors have not

been attended to yet.

He catches sight of Muphumuzi, the fellow who had come to deliver the news about Nala and decides to go dig further.

Nandi should be joining Sneh in nattering with God, but she can't. Her eyes are on a woman in black leaning against the hut that took Vimbela and Sakhile.

If her thoughts serve her right, Mgobhozi has been watching everything unfold from a distance. She's stroking something in her arms, Nandi can't tell what it is from this distance.

She's not a prophet neither is she a seer. But her prayer life is as strong as baby's grip, it's not hard for a praying woman to sense the presence of evil. There's something about Mgobhozi that sends cold shivers, slithering through her body, perhaps it's about time she

joins Sneh on that prayer session.

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MATHONGA-

Forty-

NALA-

He's gone, he ran out of here like something was chasing him. I don't think he's coming back, it's been too long. Something is wrong with Thobani, he is not hearing me, no matter how loud I shout.

He's holding Thabani in his arms, there's so much blood, and I just know that something is terribly wrong.

"Thobani listen to me, please. You need to untie

me, so we can take Thabani to the hospital.”

He does what he has been doing, rock Thabani back and forth in his arms, without giving me a glance. There is no other escape for me, but through Thobani, and that blood stained knife on the floor. Our brother will die if he doesn't get any help.

FUNOKUHLE-

Zitha left me alone with Kenneth, she took Buhle to the doctor for a check-up. I wanted to tag along when she told me that Kenneth will be my housemate for a few hours.

I'm in the lounge watching television when he walks in, from God-knows where.

“Sir.” I'm suddenly fidgety, do I stand or remain seated? He's standing close to the couch I'm

sitting on, hands on his back and brows lifted. His presence is unsettling, I wonder if he ever cracks a smile. I find myself standing and drop my gaze when my eyes meet with his.

“Call me Kenneth.” He deadpans, little does he know I don’t need his permission to call him Kenneth, not that I would ever call him by name. It feels like he’d slit my throat if I ever breathe his name.

He holds out a thin black phone, with that expression.

“What is that?” Why am I asking an obvious question? Can he smile a little, at least? Maybe I won’t be so nervous.

“A phone, it’s for emergencies.” He replies.

For a second there, I sense some annoyance in the tone of his voice. Maybe Zitha put him up to this, she thought it was not okay for me to be without a phone.

“I’m okay sir, you really don’t have to buy me anything.” He frowns at me as if I said something wrong.

“There are people out there who want you safe, it’s up to you if you want protection or not. I’m doing my part as a friend.”

Something tells me he is not going to explain himself even if I waste my time asking. I might as well take the phone, I don’t have one anyway. Slowly, he cracks his head to the direction he came.

“Enter.” His voice is demanding and steady.

This man is too formal, he speaks like he doesn’t want to speak and has an aura of a lone walker. How does Zitha cope? I would surely be trembling most of the time.

A bulky man in a black suit ambles into the living room. Great, another man with blank eyes and a poker face like Zitha’s husband. How

many of them did God make? He forgot to add some emotion. The man greets with a single head nod and stands like Kenneth.

“This is Black, he will be your personal guard.” A bodyguard? Why am I given a guard?

“I don’t understand sir.” Thoughtlessly, I fold my arms across my chest. A defensive posture I guess, I don’t like being followed around. I have serious trust issues.

“He’s your bodyguard,” Kenneth continues like any of this is normal, I’m a herd boy from Izingolweni.

My father has nothing tangible to his name, he lives on borrowed land and has no solid income coming in.

Funokuhle Sangweni having a bodyguard is too funny a thought.

“Like I said, you have people who want you safe.” He elucidates like he sees the discomfort on my face. “Excuse me.”

Where is he going? My eyes warily snap to Black, I hope he won't be staring at me the entire time. It's creepy and I don't trust him simply because he is a stranger.

“Mr. Kenneth.”

When Kenneth turns back around, I want to smack myself on the head. He looks pissed, or that's just how he looks. Sometimes I forget.

“I'm sorry, sir. I...” It's not by choice when I bite my bottom lip, I want to ask him not to leave me alone with this man. Yey, I don't know him, I've been through a lot to trust strangers.

“Black won't do anything to you, he knows I'd kill him and his entire generation if he does.” I shiver visibly, as his words affect me. Stealing a glance at Black, I notice how his Adam's apple

bobs up and down. Kenneth is a demon, no way can he be human. How do you deliver a death threat like it's nothing and still be able to inflict fear in the next person?

He's gone, leaving me alone with Black. I hope he won't be following me to the bathroom or my room.

AMANDLA-

"This is for you ma," my mother says, handing grandmother a big floral, church hat. That's nice of her, my old lady loves her hats. We're in the sitting room, unwrapping the gifts she bought us. There is a lot I must add, I haven't mastered the courage to ask her where she got the money.

"Thank you." Grandmother says.

I know a fake smile when I see it.

“Haibo, gogo. Where is your real smile? You are a lover of hats, you’ll add this one to your collection. No offense but it’s nicer than the other ones.”

I’m trying my best here, it’s not like her, unless something is up between them.

“I’m happy, I love the hat. Thank you, Sabusiswa.” Grandmother articulates.

“Won’t you try it on? I want to see how it looks on you.” I ask, wanting to get rid of her sour mood. With a faint smile she places the hat on her head.

“Aish! Muhle ugogo wami, your friends are going to be green with envy.” I’m talking about those loafers she drinks with. “Gogo, I’m still waiting for your smile. My phone will crack with that frown on your face.”

What’s wrong with her? This is the first time

seeing her this down, her daughter is back and she's rich. She should be ululating for the neighbours to hear. Her once black eyes have lost their pigment, I don't know when this happened, but it's been years. She's in those years where she takes forever to stand.

I finally get the smile, and click more pictures.

"Make your mother something to eat." The old woman utters slowly.

I would rather sit by mom's side and bask in her presence, knowing this old woman, she would make it a big deal.

My mother bought enough groceries to last us two months, cooking will be a joy for me. I should've reminded her about the fridge, we can't keep all this meat next door. I wonder if we can go buy one now, she looks moneyed;

that woman.

“Ma, we don’t have a fridge.”

I think I walked into a tense conversation, grandmother sighs as she leans back against the couch. On her reed mat is where she prefers to sit, she finds it more comfortable.

“What is it my baby?” Mom asks, that million dollar smile puts a genuine smile on my face.

“Can we go buy a fridge? We don’t have one, the meat will spoil.” Testing waters here.

“Sure, baby. Finish up there and we’ll drive to town.”

Oh goodness gracious me, would you look at that? I’d be damned.

Grandmother is stressing me now, she is not happy one bit.

“I’m going to rest, make sure your mother is comfortable.” She states.

I'm by her side in a split second, helping her stand.

"Do you need help gogo? I can tuck you in."

"I'm fine, make sure your mother is comfortable and clean your room before she sleeps."

Exposing me like this, if it were not for the warm smile dancing on her face, I would have argued with her. I accompany her to the door of her room and go back to the kitchen to finish making tea.

I unpack the groceries while waiting for the kettle to boil, there are muffins in here. I serve mom three with black tea, she's grateful.

"You've grown, Amandla. I feel bad for not being around to see you grow." She observes and says, as I sit beside her and place my head on her shoulder. She smells nice, I must admit.

"It's okay ma, I understand." I don't, I hated her

most of my life for leaving me behind.

“I’m sorry that I wasn’t around, but things are going to be different now. We’re going to be together.” At her words, I shift to look her in the eyes, the sincerity lain there makes my heart dance a thousand beats.

“You’re moving back home?” It would be nice having her around for a change.

“No baby,” a beam, faint yet warm. “You’re coming with me to Joburg.”

“Gogo loves this place ma, she will never agree to this.” I have a stubborn grandmother, mom places her cup of tea on the table, only to fill her hands with mine.

“Your grandmother won’t be coming with us, I spoke to her and she agreed.”

Just like that? I thought what we had was deeper than that, yes I’m happy about living with my mother, but my old lady can’t let me go like

that. She has to fight for me, it will be nice to have someone fight for me for once in a blue moon.

“That breaks my heart, I’m going to ask her.” I stand, she won’t let go of my hand.

“Let her rest baby, you heard her say she’s tired.”

Ai, no that woman never sleeps during the day. It’s strange of her to suddenly succumb to sleep when the sun is dancing up in the sky.

“I’ll be back ma, I need to know if she agrees. Maybe I can also convince her to come with.”

“Amandla,” her worried voice chases me. I’m my grandmother’s daughter, stubborn as a mull.

My heart suddenly feels heavy as I approach her room, I shake off the feeling but it refuses to leave me. I push the door open to find her lying on her back, her eyes are on the ceiling. No one knows this granny like I do, she never

sleeps during the day.

“Gogo, pack your petticoats and hats, Sabusiswa is taking us to Joburg.” A good way to start the conversation, I sit on the bed to get her attention. She doesn’t look at me, is she angry about the trip?

“Gogo, you’re not going to ignore me like that, are you?” There is no movement from her as I shake her shoulder, and she has not blinked once.

“Gogo,”

My stomach churns, I’m pretty sure it’s not what I think it is. That’s if my mind has not left me yet, if I were thinking at all then I would know that she’s not breathing. I wave my hand over her face, her eyes don’t move, neither do her lashes.

My heart tumbles to the acid in my stomach and I wish the acid would burn it.

“Mama,” I scream for mom as I check

grandmother's pulse point. No, no. She cannot be dead, I don't understand.

MATHONGA-

I couldn't find my car keys, so typical of me. That's why I'm in an old Nissan Langley GL, I won't be shocked if it breaks down before we get to the destination. Somehow I convinced Muphumuzi to take me to her.

I can't do the ceremony without the uncles, it's not part of tradition. As long as they are still alive, they have to partake in the ceremony, guide me through it.

"How far are we, Mzi?"

He said it wasn't that far, maybe I'm too impatient.

“Almost there, ntwana.” That’s what he calls me, really. He ignores my deep stare, keeping his gaze on the road. My ringing phone demands my attention, I think twice about taking Ntaba’s call. Then again, that is one person you should never ignore.

“Bhuti,”

“Tell Mzi to turn that car around now.” Sigh!

“We’re almost there, Ntaba. Nala is in trouble, she needs me.” I hear something crash in the background, I think he just threw something against the wall or floor.

“Are you seriously thinking with your dick right now, Mathonga?” He shouts. “What did I fucking say to you, huh? I told you I will take care of this.”

“So much was happening, Ntaba. I couldn’t wait anymore, and the ceremony is obviously cancelled. Abo babomncane are in the hospital,

so I presumed the ceremony has been cancelled.”

“You presumed Mathonga? You presumed?” He continues to shout, I’m tempted to drop the call. “Your father has cousins, we’re going to do that ceremony come rain or high waters. Uyalazi ulaka lwabaphansi, wena?” (Do you know the wrath of the ancestors?)

“Okay, I hear you. Let me bring Nala home and I will do anything you tell me to.” I’m hoping he understands where I’m coming from.

“Put me on speaker,” he commands. The perks of having older brothers, taking a glance at Muphumuzi, I find him glaring daggers. His brows are rumped, eyes flashing from me to the road ahead and back to me in milliseconds. What is he nervous about?

“You’re on speaker.” I alert Putin, seriously,

Ntaba needs to relax.

“Comrade.” Muphumuzi.

Huh? Is this how they address each other?

“Alfred’s men are probably there by now, if not on their way. My brother stays in the car, Muphumuzi. If anything happens to him, I am holding you responsible.” Ntaba pronounces.

I almost feel sorry for Muphumuzi, the look he gives me tells me he is not happy with me. I feel like a brat that randomly throws tantrums.

He nods and switches gears “I hear you.”

“You have an hour tops to bring him home safe.” Ntaba is embarrassing me, I’m glad when he drops the phone.

“I’m not a spoiled brat, you know?” I’m clearing my name with this one, he must think the worst of me. A grown ass man treated like a child.

“Sure.” What is that supposed to mean? “You

heard your brother, stay in the car. We'll bring your girl to you."

He has an air of confidence surrounding him, I would be worried if he didn't look as trusting. He also gives off Ntaba vibes, the type of guy who likes violence for violence's sake. I'm damn sure he is not fazed by Ntaba's threats, as deadly as they sounded.

We spend the rest of the drive in silence, apart from the constant text messages he keeps receiving on his phone.

I know we've arrived when he parks the car outside a three-story building, resembling an abandoned hostel. A white quantum is parked outside, it must be the men Ntaba mentioned.

"You know the drill, don't leave the car. I'm not going to die because of some spoiled brat, I'll call you once I see her." That's very

disrespectful of this idiot, my nose flares as I click my tongue. I'm not afraid of him, if that's what he thinks.

Worry clings on me like a house on fire, as I watch Muphumuzi disappear into the building. The streets are dubiously calm, cars passing by are few and far between. If anything were to happen, no one would be around to offer any kind of help.

Checking the time, it dawns on me that not more than ten minutes has passed since Muphumuzi went inside. My mind is going crazy, conjuring different scenarios of what is going on in that building. If Nala really is in there.

Panic and worry tag team and attack me, this is the result of neglecting my ancestors.

Results of their wrath, nothing is going right.

The old man and woman have not shown themselves in my dreams, it's worrying really.

I think of calling Muphumuzi and asking what's taking so long, the idiot didn't give me his numbers.

I'm about to jump out when two men stride out of the building, each carrying a little boy. One draped with an adult coat is unconscious and the other clinging on to the man carrying him. The blood stuck on their bodies has me cringing and thinking the worst. Who are they? Where is Nala?

My question is answered when Muphumuzi walks out with Nala next to him. Her arms are folded across her chest, eyes gript on the quantum where the boys are. I climb out of the car, the heat from outside slowly descends around me until I wish I had something to cool

my throat.

“Nala.”

She regards me with a single glance, eyes blown wide and jumps into the quantum as if she did not see me.

Muphumuzi pulls me aside when I attempt to enter the quantum.

“Her brother is dead, the other looks like he’s seen a ghost. I don’t know what happened in there, but that girl and her brother are going to need serious help.” He says, and I am lost in my own world of confusion.

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A/N: 200+ Comments unlocks the next chapter, it will be posted around 9pm. Don’t forget to like and share. Thank you in advance.

MATHONGA-

Forty-one

KHETHIWE-

“Khethiwe, please prepare sugar water for Thethelela.”

Nandi speaks behind me, I don't want to do anything for that Thethelela woman. Honestly, she intimidates me in the most challenging way, if there is such a thing. I can't with her and how she is around Ntaba. I'm a woman, we see these things.

How she blushes when he walks into the room, how she doesn't bother to call him out when he looks at her inappropriately. That flat ass bitch, and Ntaba— he does not see me.

To go to an extent of eyeing his uncle's wife in

front of me, he makes me feel like trash each time he does that. It hasn't been two days since they arrived and Thethelela has stolen my spot in his life, it's not my fault she is married to an old man. She needs to look in the mirror and take it up with herself.

"Khethiwe, did you hear what I said?" Nandi drags me back to her presence, I would roll my eyes at her if she were not kind and the chief's... whatever she is to him.

"I heard you ma," I reply, internally rolling my eyes at having to serve that witch Thethelela. I'm going to add salt, or maybe those pills that make your stomach run. That should keep her in the toilet for a while and away from Ntaba.

"Ntaba says the ceremony will continue when Mathonga gets home. He's called one of the

chief's cousins, he will arrive in an hour's time." I would care about what is really happening if my thoughts were not centred around Ntaba.

"Okay, ma."

Is all I can give her, I'm not in the best mood to engage in conversations. While Nandi is alive and kicking in the kitchen, touching this and that. I boil the stupid water, add the stupid sugar in a stupid white mug.

"Please check on Sneh on your way back, she's also not feeling well." Nandi.

I might as well wear a nurse's uniform, those women should be able to take care of themselves. Haibo! I'm also suffering from a broken heart.

"Where is Thethelela, ma?" I only want to know if Ntaba is with her, I will turn into a dragon if he's still with her. Sigh! A bloody toothless

dragon, that spews smoke not fire. My life is a mess.

“In her room, I think.” She doesn’t disclose if Ntaba is with her, let me just go. A servant asking about the chief’s son would raise questions, I won’t be able to answer.

After pouring the water, I grab the mug and head out of the kitchen to find your highness. It is quiet outside, the guards are still here with their guns and menacing presence. I greet one walking past me and wish I hadn’t when he doesn’t return my salutation, I did say their presence is menacing.

The room Thethelela shares with her husband is close to what was once Nala’s room, I can’t help but think of her as I pass by and wonder if she is okay wherever she is.

“Sis’ Thethelela.” I call out to her when no one answers to my knocking, I hope she’s sleeping. I am not in the mood to see her.

A couple of loud knocks later, I decide to leave. I’m not going to be chasing after a grown woman. Sneh will probably do with the water, she too is distressed.

I almost forgot about the aunt in a black dress. No one has seen her since the men were taken to the hospital, Nandi and I looked everywhere. The only evidence of her visit is the gift she brought for Mathonga, I saw Nandi tossing it in the fire a while back and didn’t bother asking. I’ve seen enough drama in this family.

No words were exchanged between her and that woman, but I could sense some hostility between them. Must be because Nandi is playing house wife in her sister’s marital home.

“Please touch me,” that voice...

The world pauses a minute when I realise it's coming from Ntaba's room, I was lost in my nonsensical thoughts that I didn't see I was passing it.

My heart dives to my throat, Ntaba is with another woman in there. We're not an item, I should not be doing what I'm about to do. Maybe I distaste my heart for controlling me and not letting me do my will, go where the heart leads you.

Is it always a good idea? Will it always take me to a place of peace and love?

My question is answered with a big no when I push the door open and die a thousand times at what my eyes are beholding. Thethelela is on top of Ntaba, naked as the day she came into this world; curse it— grinding her hips back and forth.

The cup slips from my hand to the floor, the splattering pieces causes them to jump.

The thelela's eyes are about to leave her head, she scampers off the man I love, runs to the bathroom, and shuts the door.

“Khethiwe!” He almost trips as he jumps off the bed, part of me finds comfort in the towel wrapped around his waist. A big part of me hurts for what I have just witnessed. My feet are not fast enough when I rush out, my head is all over the place. I don't know where I'm going, all I know is that I want to get away from this place. From him and the feelings suffocating me, I want to rip my heart out and maybe I'll be able to breathe.

Big arms tightly enfold around my waist from behind, stopping me from going nowhere hastily. It's him, I'd recognise the feel of his arms blind folded.

His breath is devastatingly warm on the curve of my neck, I think I can't breathe. My stomach overturns in a violent wave, and I lose sight of my surroundings and gain it just as fast.

"Peaches," his voice dances in whispers in my ear. If I didn't know better, I would think he is trying to seduce me. But this is how he always sounds to me, seductive and erotic.

"Don't touch me," my voice embarrasses me by coming out in shudders. And my heart betrays me by not meaning what I said, I want him to hug the pain away. I want him to bring me back to life, make my world bright again.

He seems to read my thoughts and because he never gives me what I ask for, his arms loosen around me until I don't feel him anymore but a heavy shadow behind me. It takes courage to turn and face him while holding back my tears.

“Nothing happened back there,” he’s always assumed that I’m stupid. Hence the nerve to tell me this, I know what I saw.

“I’m not an idiot, Ntabezikude.” I’m betrayed by my voice again, I can’t take standing in front of him. His half naked body, all I see is that woman grinding on top of him. That... that bitch.

“I never said you were,” his retort is too quick.

I want to know what he’s thinking. I want to know what is hidden behind that blank stare.

“Why didn’t you knock?” The question finishes what was left of me, whatever he was doing with his aunt is a sin. Yet, he is not bothered by any of it.

Tears feel a need to humiliate me, they come in numbers creating a disconcerting pool down my face. I’m struggling to control my sobs, and this man does nothing to comfort me. I want

him to comfort me, and if he asks, I will forget I saw anything and take him as he is.

His face is inexpressive, there is no emotion behind his eyes. Typical Ntabezikude.

“How could you do that to your uncle? He’s in the hospital and you’re having sex with his wife.” I’m disgusted by the mere thought.

“Do you really think I would do that? Why don’t you ask me what was happening in there before you jump into conclusions?”

I cannot believe this guy.

“How long have you been working here Khethiwe? You should know I would kill for my family.”

“I know what I saw Ntabezikude, I am not a fool.” I yell, it’s not intentional. I respect this fool, and I loathe myself for it. His jaw ticks a few

times, it's the only emotion he portrays and I cannot tell what the hell it means.

"Whatever!" He says, as if giving up on... I don't know on what.

"She's your... aunt, Ntabezikude." More tears mock me.

"She's not my aunt," he delivers, cold as ever. He is closed off now, he's not trying to explain himself anymore.

"She's married to your uncle, what kind of betrayal is this?" I dig, thinking he will finally open up.

"Life is a bitch Khethi, you either screw, or get screwed."

His lips curve into a slow smile, as if he enjoys seeing me breaking into pieces. The look he's giving me reminds me that he holds my life in the palm of his hand.

My knees are wobbly, they want to give in, kneel before him and worship the ground he walks on.

I fight it; the urge and my heart. In slow motion, his contracted eyes trace my body and land on my knees. The smile is gone, but the arrogance remains. He sees it, the war raging inside me and how I esteem him higher than God Himself. He'd tell me to turn my back on everything I know and believe in, and I would do it like my eyes have lost sight.

“Peaches,” for a minute I think he’s possessive as his eyes lock with mine. I’m left feeling like a fool when darkness glazes over them, I’m about to give in— go down on my knees and beg him to love me, promise to give him the world when he takes a step back, turns and walks back to his room.

I can’t still be alive, after what just happened.

MATHONGA-

Thabani was declared dead upon arrival, Nala fainted when the doctor delivered the sad news. The other twin; Thobani has been hospitalised. He's in shock and probably traumatised, the minor bruises on his body were treated. He will have to stay in the hospital for a few days, for close observation.

We're in the cold room, Nala says she doesn't want to leave Thabani alone. I have failed in convincing her that he is not alone, his soul is not one with his body anymore. We'll get in trouble with the hospital staff if we continue staying here.

"Nala, won't you tell me what happened to you and your brothers?" It's the second time asking this question, all she does is breakdown.

She keeps her gaze on Thabani's body lain on a metal bed, I want to drag her out of here. Her alive brother needs her, this one is gone. There is nothing she can do for him.

"How will I help you if you don't tell me what's going on?"

I see the light at the end of the tunnel as her teary eyes meet mine.

"Can I borrow your belt?" I'm confused by her ask, hesitantly, I unbuckle and hand it to her. Our eyes stay locked for a while, it's almost as if she's transferring her pain into me. Every ounce, a blink breaks the connection.

"Nala, what is going on? Who killed your brother? Tell me and I will find them."

She shakes her head, folding the belt in half. Her gaze is back on Thabani's body.

“No, Thabani will avenge his death.” She murmurs.

Goose bumps evade my skin, Thabani is dead. How is he going to avenge himself? Mystified, I clear my throat, in search of clarification.

“Nala,” I place a hand on her shoulder, so she knows I’m here and hope I will meet her gaze again and convince her to come with me. She pushes my hand away.

“Thabani Shange, you’ve always listened to me, your big sister Nala Shange. Do the same today, go out and avenge yourself and your twin brother Thobani.”

My heart drops when the belt lands on Thabani’s thighs, twice. She scream cries as loud as she can as if she’s the one being thrashed by a belt. Repeatedly, she thrashes

him as if he never meant anything to her. She's belting him like she would an enemy, what kind of witchcraft is this?

I turn back at the sound of the door opening, it's Ntaba. I wasn't expecting him to come, there is a frown on his face. I know he is upset with me, but there is still time to do the ceremony. The sun has not set yet.

"They took you away from your twin, they dared to split your mother's womb in half, go punish them. Don't leave anyone behind, destroy whoever stands in your way. Make them all suffer, do you hear me, Thabani Shange? Go and avenge yourself, only when you are satisfied will you rest in peace." Nala is yelling, or sobbing rather. It's so loud and heart wrenching I'm convinced the nurses will run in here.

She speaks with such hatred that it has my heart pounding against my chest, I can almost feel a twinge of the pain engulfed around her. It's unbearable, I wonder how she is able to breathe. I can hardly catch my own breath.

"There goes my chance of spilling blood," Ntaba says, the smirk on his face has me feeling confused. "But this is way better, I'm impressed."

"I don't understand, Ntaba. What is she doing?" I ask.

"Vengeance served on a silver platter," his low chuckle catches me by surprise. "This was practised within the Chewa tribe in Malawi, when a loved one is killed, the family leaves it to the dead to avenge themselves."

"How does Nala know this, she is not Malawian?"

He looks at me like I'm bringing shame to the family name, excuse my lack of information.

"Education is knowledge." That's a nice way of calling me stupid.

*

*

We're in Thobani's hospital room; Nala and I. With Ntaba's help, I was able to drag her out of the cold room. The first thing she did when we entered was sit on the chair and hold Thobani's hand. She hasn't said anything to me, nor looked my way.

"koko," comes a chirpy voice and a loud knock at the door. I tilt my head to see a police officer in uniform. He's too happy for a sad day like this one.

“Sho sho mfanas,” he greets too loud and annoyingly. I don’t have the strength to entertain his energy.

“I’m here to take the suspect in for questioning.”

“What suspect?”

His eyes find Nala, “this one.” He points at her with his big head. This is when Nala comes to life, taking her gaze off Thobani.

“I didn’t kill my brother,” her voice cracks. Tears have refused to leave her eyes, I would wipe them away if she lets me touch her.

The officer chuckles, revealing a gold tooth. Nothing is amusing about this.

“What’s funny?” I’m ready to throw him out of here, law enforcement or not. He raises his hands in defense, chuckling once again, I swear to God if I see that gold tooth again.

“Well, this is what every suspect says.”

“Nala is not a suspect, someone killed her brother. You should be out there looking for them, not harassing an innocent woman.”

He grins, bloody shit. I’m about ready to lose my cool.

“Bhuti, let me do my job, or I will arrest you for interfering with police work.” This bastard has the nerve to snap at me.

“Who are you going to arrest?” Ntaba’s voice sashays into the room, his mouth is twisted with threat. A pucker forms between his eyebrows.

“Comrade Khanyile...” There, is that comrade word again. The officer gulps, questioning eyes moving from Ntaba to me. These two know each other, police officers are not afraid of civil citizens.

“What a coincidence...”

“Cut the crap Mabaso,” Ntaba interjects. “Why are you here?”

Mabaso frowns, looking my way again.

“Doing my job, comrade.” He sounds confused.

“Without your superior? You’re just a cop with no position, how is it that you’re the one investigating a murder case?”

How did I not think of that? Maybe it’s always okay that he fights my battles.

“Come here,” Ntaba’s voice is frosty. He gestures with his hand when Mabaso moves a foot backward, eyes bugling out. “It’s okay, Mabaso. Come here.”

He sounds harmless, but the murderous fire glowing in his eyes does not fool me.

Mabaso is not fooled either, “Com... comrade.” It’s a squeak, his feet falter.

“Shhh,” Ntaba presses a forefinger on his mouth, gesturing Mabaso says nothing more. Panic is now holding the policeman hostage, I want to ask what is happening, but I can’t. Not with how Ntaba is right now, I can’t recognise him.

He’s not the playful, idiotic brother I know and love, something about his presence is disturbing.

A growl resounds from his throat, he is clearly growing impatient as Mabaso makes no effort to do Ntaba’s bidding. And I know my brother, he can be full of it when he wants to. I know he is not about to stoop so low and meet the cop halfway.

“Come to me, Mabaso. It’s okay, I won’t hurt you.” Ntaba calmly says.

Yeah, a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

Mabaso tiptoes his way to him, trembling like a leaf. Ntaba cups his cheeks and leans in to kiss him on the forehead, weird brother I have. For a moment there, I thought he was going to do something to him.

I turn to Nala next to me, she's watching them with a frown on her face, like she knows what is happening.

"You're a good boy Mabaso." Ntaba mumbles.

Mabaso is not a boy, he looks well in his late forties. Ntaba's hand glides down Mabaso's neck, the cop panics and grabs Ntaba's wrist maybe to pull it off him.

"Don't touch me," disgust is in Ntaba's voice. Mabaso obliges, and removes his trembling hands from Ntaba's wrist. If his eyes could get any bigger, they would.

My brother digs his fingers into Mabaso's throat until he's gagging and desperate for air. His

hands lift, he wants to shrug Ntaba's hand away but doesn't, he's afraid of touching him, I guess.

"I know why you're here and I know who sent you." His voice is dangerously low. "My mistake was letting him live another second, I want you to go back and tell him that I am coming for him and whoever assisted him. Let this be a lesson to all those cops who work under that bastard. No one touches what belongs to iThonga lami and that woman over there, belongs to him."

Two and two is not always four, that's why I'm still not following. I ogle down at Nala to find her in tears. She blinks my way, then back to Ntaba and Mabaso.

The policeman is choking, struggling to breathe. Not once has he tried to fight for his life. It feels like an eternity before Ntaba removes his hand, he lightly slaps Mabaso a few times on both

cheeks and gently cradles them.

“Now be a good comrade and go do what I said, then go home and spend time with your wife and kids. Life is unpredictable Mabaso, we could be laughing together now and throwing soil into your grave tomorrow.”

He says this with respect and friendliness, I can't with his chameleon side. His lips stretch into a wide grin, and he's laughing like a psycho the next. Head thrown back and hand clutched his stomach.

Mabaso can't find the joke. It must aggravate my brother because he stops, and glares at Mabaso.

“Do you think I'm crazy, phoyisa?” (Police man.)

Oh Jesus, he is crazy. Oh bipolar, somewhere between the two.

Mabaso hesitantly shakes his head. Ntaba tilts his head to the side, I can't describe what I'm

looking at but it can't be human. He is cold and dark, evil would be the right word. The twitching smirk, the blank expression, the empty piercing eyes.

"Then why am I laughing alone, mgodoyi?" Ntaba whispers, cold shivers coat my skin. Mabaso bursts into fake laughter.

"Voetsek, get out of here." He pushes the officer, Mabaso stumbles his way out. We hear his footsteps echoing in the hallway in a fast pace.

I want to say something, I'm not sure what. My mind won't provide me with anything, maybe it's because of the look on Ntaba's face.

"Sisi wami," he smiles at Nala like he wasn't representing the devil just now. "For the love of God, come clean to my brother. We'll deal with the trauma after everything is said, otherwise

leave him alone.”

“Ntaba...” He stops me with a scolding glare.

“Thula wena, I’m tired of running after your ass, when will you grow up, Mathonga? You think life is a movie, huh?” Okay, I deserve that.

“I’m giving you ten minutes with this girl, if you are not in the car in exactly ten minutes, you will know me, Thonga lami.”

He clicks his tongue and leaves thick tension behind.

MATHONGA-

Forty-two

KHETHIWE-

“I’m not playing with you, Zamangwane. You’ve been gone the entire day, who gave you

permission to leave?”

I don't fancy being a mother, Nandi seems to be having a tough time with Zamangwane. Imagine having a child who does not listen to you, I would beat the life out of them.

“Stop lying Zamangwane,” She's shouting, which is not new. It's what she's been doing for the past ten minutes, she went as far as neglecting her pots and burned the onion.

“I want you home now, your friends can wait. It's not safe out there.” I don't know what Zamangwane says in return, but it has Nandi looking defeated. She removes the phone from her ear, and frowns at it, then puts it away while shaking her head.

See what I mean? She must beat her, that's how I was raised, I never dared to raise my voice at my mother.

Curiosity is urging me to ask Nandi where

Zamangwane is, she's chopping carrots—butchering them actually. If those carrots could talk, they'd open an attempted murder case against her.

“That child is unbelievable, how was she let out of the premises? She knows it's not safe out there, but she's gallivanting with her friends.” Nandi complains, she's fuming I must say.

She throws the knife on top of the cutting board and marches out of the kitchen, headed for the lounge.

The men are seated there, waiting to be served food.

I can hear their voices from here, laughter, complaints and cheering. Yes they are watching soccer, I stopped trying to figure out the Khanyiles a long time ago, they are a different breed. Bopha and Dumile are in the hospital, not

fighting for their lives, thankfully. Fortunately, the snake was not a black mamba.

They were able to flush out the poison before it reached their... argh! I'm not a doctor.

My heart knocks on my chest when I hear Ntaba's voice, he's one of the loudest, him and Khothama. Mathonga is somewhat too quiet, he's not the Mathonga I know. He looked like a Zombie when he came home with Ntaba in the afternoon.

The ceremony went well, I don't have much details. I am a servant after all and this servant has not seen Ntaba yet. I miss his face and his smile, all of him.

"Sisi!" Yeer, what does this woman want? I don't bother to school my features as she nears me, she must know that I know she's a low class slut. My focus is on the pap I'm stirring on the

stove, if Thethelela nears me, I will slap her with this wooden spoon.

“Khethiwe.”

Warning! She’s too close.

“What is it?” I ask as I close the pot and give her my attention. Folding my arms across my chest means I am not comfortable with her around me. It will take time for me to slap her with my hand far from reach, I have a feeling she’s here to spew nonsense.

She scoffs, eyeing me from top to bottom as if I’m nothing but a house keeper.

Gee, what do you know? I am a house keeper, but I have something to boast about, and that’s knowing Ntabezikude naked and buried deep inside me.

“What is your job description around here?”

What kind of a question is that? I look around,

maybe she's not talking to me because wow...

"Excuse me?" I spit, if I could, I would spit venom that would kill her on the spot.

"I'm asking because it's not normal for a servant to enter the royal rooms without knocking." Hehehe!

"Are you serious?" I cackle, arrogantly. "And who are you to tell me this?"

"I'm married to royalty, and you little girl belong under my feet." Oh wow! My mother never told me that I belong under Thethelela's feet, she should've prepared me for this day. I am beyond shocked—not.

"You don't know me, sisi. I would appreciate it if you refrained from insulting me and me walking into Ntabezikude's room without knocking has nothing to do with you, Mrs. Bopha Khanyile." I get into her space, she frowns, looking at me like I'm covered in shit.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, sleeping with father and son. Does your husband know he married a prostitute?”

This one thinks I’m afraid of her.

“Yey wena?” She snaps, pushing me. I push her back that she staggers and hits her back against the counter.

“How dare you? Who the hell do you think you are?” She sputters, she’d be shocked if I told her who I think I am. Ntaba’s queen to begin with.

“I’m a woman who respects herself enough not to sleep with my uncle’s son.” I make sure to rub it in her face.

“No one is ever going to believe you, do you have any proof that I slept with Ntaba? Anything? A picture, a video?” She asks.

How does Bopha deal with her, she’s annoying

as fuck. Her eyes are scanning me, as if she's found a hidden treasure in me.

"The way you act, I would think Ntabezikude has given you a taste of him." I sense jealousy in her tone, she masks it with an egotistical expression.

"Oh my goodness, you slept with him haven't you?" She's laughing, resembling a bloody hyena. Bopha must burn this useless thing.

"You got a taste of royalty and now you think he will take you from rags to riches, maybe make you queen of this mansion." She continues.

Why am I shocked by her behaviour? Oh that's right, she looks like an angel when her big mouth is shut.

“You don’t know me, Thethelela and what right do you have to pry in my affairs with Ntaba?”

“Ntaba?” She hisses. “First name basis with the chief’s son?”

“Get out of my face Thethelela and crawl back to the hole you came from.” I sizzle, clamping my teeth in annoyance.

“I have every right to be here, the only person who is supposed to leave is you. You need to stop aiming high weKhethiwe, stay in your limits and stop chasing my nephew.”

Wow! She said nephew.

“Says the woman who fucks her nephew while her husband is fighting for his life in the hospital, you define prostitution so perfectly, weThethelela” My voice is starting to rise, it happens when I’m provoked to the last degree.

“You uncensored bitch, do you know who I am? I will have you fired from your job.” She yells.

Uncensored what? My mother has some explaining to do, here is this woman calling me things I did not know I was.

She's smiling with so much arrogance, her face stirs anger in me, a fiery anger that is stronger than anything I've ever felt—anything but Ntaba's love. Actually the smile on her face makes me sick to my stomach that I throw a fist, punching her right on the nose. She screams, staggering back.

The blood on her nose makes me feel like a winner, the feeling is taken from me when she returns a painful punch on my jaw line, it literally throws me against the stove.

My hand accidentally smacks the pot of pap, it tumbles to the floor with a clanging sound—all the contents splatter everywhere. I burnt my hand, this one punches like a man. Dammit my head is spinning.

I grab her head, removing the ugly head wrap on her head. Her hands are on my dress, pulling and wanting to tear. I bite her shoulder, and it sends her screaming in pain. We end up on the floor, wrestling against each other. I feel like I'm on top, scratching and biting her, but she tops me, slaps me multiple times on the face.

There's a sudden noise in the room, I hear someone shouting "Stop it."

Thethelela is pulled off me by Ntaba, like this morning, his arms are around her. I want to kill her for that. Khothama is taking a video with a smile on his face. Everyone is here, including Nandi and other house helps.

Mathonga is the one to help me up, I'm heaving and growling, wanting to kill a bitch.

"Are you okay?" Mathonga asks, I don't have time to answer him. I'm jumping for Thethelela,

trying to grab her with my claws. Ntaba releases her and whisks me up, carrying me on his shoulder like I'm a dead body he's going to bury in a shallow grave.

"Ntaba put me down, I want to deal with that bitch." I shout as he heads for the exit, I scan the kitchen before he steps outside. Everyone had come to watch the smack down, I'm in so much trouble. The chief is going to fire me.

It's dark outside, I'm not sure what time it is—probably after 7pm.

He takes us behind the main house and drops me on the ground, with no gentleness.

"Why did you do that?" He's asking me nonsense, eyes narrowed with disappointment.

"She started it..."

“Don’t lie to me, Khethiwe. You threw the first punch, I don’t like what I saw.” His forehead is twitching, is that even possible? I don’t like how he’s looking at me, I’m not a bad person.

“She provoked me, Ntaba. What, was I supposed to stand back and let her insult me? I can stand my ground Ntaba and I will not let people walk over me. Being a servant does not mean I will subscribe to nonsense.” My voice is hushed, but he knows I’m fuming. It’s all over my face.

“I didn’t ask you if you can stand your ground or not, I said I don’t like what I saw back there—you in that position, do you know what that did to...”

“You’re taking sides aren’t you? Is it because you’re fucking her now? Is she better than me, Ntaba? Or you were too busy focusing on climaxing to compare? I’m surprised you were able to strip your uncle’s wife naked...”

He doesn't wait for me to finish, I'm pressed on the wall, a hand tightly gripped around my throat. Breathing becomes a struggle, I don't bother to fight him. If he wants me dead, then I will gladly give my life for him.

Funny how I'm turned on by this. I need a pastor and a whole bottle of baby oil, or an exorcism. The devil is always roaming this earth looking for who he may devour and he found me the day I fell in love with this man.

"Let this be the last time you speak to me like that, do you hear me, Khethiwe?" He keeps his voice low, but a cloud of warning has settled over his face.

"If you want to act like street trash, do not involve me. We'll talk when you've grown up, KaMandonsela." Fuck it, I hate it when he addresses me with my surname.

I catch my breath the second his hand leaves my neck, my throat burns. I have to stop myself from coughing, lest Satan feels too powerful. He feeds on my weakness; this man.

He turns and begins to walk away like he always does. But no, not this time. I'm too angry to watch his back, and swallow saliva while reprimanding my clit to act like a lady would, until I can't see him anymore.

"Listen to me, Ntabezikude, one day you will look for me and you won't find me. Mark my words." I yell after him, it's enough to get him to stop and turn back around.

"Are you threatening me, Khethiwe KaMandonsela?"

I must not be in my right state of mind, but this man just growled at me. He's standing like a

predator spotting his prey and ready to attack, it's a calculated, sick—devilish appearance.

“It's not a threat.” I answer when he demands an answer without uttering a word.

“Then take back what you just said.” A command and a step brings him into my space, it's fretting that I'm trembling under his dark gaze that's scrutinising every inch of me.

“Take it back Khethiwe.”

A second command, my clit vibrates at it and my body visibly shudders. The bastard is well aware of the effect he has on me, hence that haughty smirk displayed on his facial features.

“No!” Smack my mouth and send me back to my father's house.

I whispered, which was so not how it played out in my head. I meant to shout with authority, what do I do when my body also turns on me? I'm not loved in this world.

“Really?” He asks, raised brows and narrowed eyes set on my lips. It’s how he licks his bottom lip that has me gulping loudly and letting out an awkward moan.

“Do you want me to make you? Is that what you want, Khethi?”

I know what I want, but it doesn’t matter. Khethiwe Mandonsela is nothing in this world.

He’s touching my shoulders, these are times I wish I had worn something that covers my shoulders. His bare hand on my skin burns, I feel like a witch being torched at the stake. I want to scream, but I also want to cry at how my body yearns and recognises his touches.

“Tell me, Khethi. I’m here, I’m listening.” He says, brushing his nose against mine. His warm breathe seductively kisses my mouth.

What does he mean he’s here? He’s not here, he’s never here.

“I don’t want anything from you, Ntabezikude.” I feel like each time I lie, my bed in hell expands. He’s laughing, I know it’s because he doesn’t believe me. How will he when I don’t sound convincing, myself?

“Stop laughing at me, I’m done.”

“Argh you’re so cute, you’re like a cub. Growling with blunt teeth.” He’s insulting me.

“You are never going to have me again, Ntaba. I’m choosing to belong to myself.” I tell him, I think I’ve lost my confidence.

Whose child am I? My father ought to be ashamed of me. Ntaba’s eyes darken, the devil should be envious.

“Don’t fool yourself Peaches, you’ve never belonged to yourself and you never will.” The roughness in his voice will be my downfall, I want to say it’s caused by his crazy loud laughs, but no—God saw it fit to give this impulsive man

a rugged voice. Right now it sounds premeditated and inconsiderate.

“Get behind me, Satan.” I yelp.

It takes every strength in my body to shrug him off, he’s a brick that is grounded on the floor.

“Get away from me, Ntaba.” I repeat, I would be proud of myself if he’d listen to my request.

His hand curls around the small of my back, pressing me to his warm body. He’s left no space between us, it’s always a dream come true to be this close to him.

I know I’m going to regret snuggling into him and breathing him in. I clutch my fingers on his biceps, as his scent shadows my vision, his face is on my neck sucking and biting. This is the only thing he ever grants me, the intimate touches, the passionate kisses.

We're heaving as his lips crash against mine, teeth clashing and tongues swirling. I feel his big hand gliding under my dress until he's pulling my panties and tears them with just a pull.

I scream in shock, I knew PEP was going to disappoint.

"Peaches!" He whispers, while biting my lip in the process. I'm waiting for more, but he turns me around and bends me over. There's a strong arm wrapped around my waist, my dress is flipped over and instantly I feel wind kissing my butt.

"Ntaba..." I want to ask him what he's doing, but the feel of wet fingers rubbing my vagina stops me. All I can do is gasp and moan with pleasure, I know what he's about to do and I don't plan on stopping him. It's always mystic to have him inside me, in a blink, he's pushing his rigid erection inside my hole.

It's too fast and rough, he rarely gives me time to adjust to his length before he is thrusting inside me. I hold on to the wall lest I fall, he's plunging with no mercy, as if he wants to leave a mark everyone will see. The entirety of my body screams for me to call out his name, but we're behind the house—there's no privacy.

“Why aren't you screaming Peaches?” Is he insane? I will do no such thing. “I want to hear my name leave your mouth, scream for me, Peaches.”

His breathing is picking up with each raw thrust—raw... oh my God, he's not wearing protection, this is the right time to tell him not to cum inside me.

“Ntaba... don't...” I'm denied the opportunity as a whirling sensation overtakes me, making me dizzy. Electricity circuits in my belly—no it's

butterflies—then again, I think it's birds with wings of fire.

My body tenses a jiffy before I'm vibrating and convulsing, he pulls out and spills his cream on my ass. I whimper at the warm feeling and curse destiny as the realisation that he would never cum inside me without protection hits me.

Gaining my strength and trying to breathe like I'm not dying, I fix my dress and turn to face him. Wobbly knees and pounding heart.

"I'm leaving," I stick to my decision because he's still indifferent.

"Okay." He notes.

Huh?

He's moving away from me, I can still smell him though, he's imprinted on my skin—inside me and that's the only thing keeping me from dying.

“What?” I want to be sure I heard right, he’s not saying anything—rather just staring at me with hands rammed in the pockets of his track pants.

“Ntaba, I’m leaving and I’m never coming back.”

“Do what makes you happy Khethi, if leaving will, then don’t let me stop you.”

How coldly he says this, I’m an idiot and I keep making a fool of myself in his presence. After giving me another piece of him, he says this to me?

A slap lands on his cheek, leaving my palm throbbing while the bastard did not twitch. I want to caress his face, tell him I’m sorry—that I will never hurt him again.

“Is that what you’re going to say to me? After what just happened?”

Instead of offering an apology, this is what comes out of my mouth.

He breaks my heart like he always does by shrugging impassively and walking away from me. It hurts so much, I can't stand it. It is do or die at this point, I run after him, my arms enfold around him from behind.

"Please tell me you feel my heart breaking, only you can make it stop. I don't want it to hurt anymore." My arms tighten around him as I hide my face on his back.

Love me! Love me! I scream internally. His hands touch mine, a soft caress.

"I fell in love Ntaba, and that was my mistake. I've fallen in love and it makes me wonder what I did wrong in life to be rewarded with such a violent thing."

He breaks free from my hold and walks away, I watch him, helpless and aching, till he's gone from my sight.

Enough! This time I'm walking away from him, I

have no choice but to go back to my father's house.

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How about we do that 200+ comments thing again? Let's meet here at 9pm, don't forget to share. Thank you.

MATHONGA-

Forty-three

AMANDLA-

The house feels weird without my grandmother, Sabusiswa called the funeral home. It's been a heavy day for me, nothing is going right in my life. How can grandmother leave me? How dare she picks death over me, I will never forgive her.

The women from church and neighbours came to offer their condolences, and mom sent them back. She said we will bury our own, I don't know what she meant by that.

I tried to put my foot down, told her it's not done like that. We bury each other in the village, she went ballistic and locked the gate, and doors.

Grandmother's hats are lined up on her bed, like she would every Saturday before church. This is how she would choose which one to wear, I always thought it was crazy.

That there was no need for any of that, but that was my grandmother, she loved to admire beautiful things.

I cross my legs, Indian style, my gaze kept on her collection. I would do anything to see her wearing them again.

The one Sabusiswa bought stands out, it's the

prettiest. I flip it over a few times, admiring it. Tears stream down my face, she only got to wear it once. Maybe I should wear it to her funeral for her friends to see, it's what she would've wanted; to show off her newest treasure.

The door opens as I send the hat to my head.

"Amandla!" Sabusiswa yells, horror is evident in her eyes. I'm immobile, shocked by her outburst. She marches towards me, grabs the hat. A loud sound resounds as her backhand collides with my cheek, I fall back on the bed, wincing in pain. This woman has never hit me before, I would have expected it from grandmother, not her.

"Ma?" Tears have found their way to my face, she's grimacing at me. I don't get why she is angry, why she would slap me.

"You don't wear clothes belonging to the deceased, you're bringing yourself bad luck."

She shouts, pointing a finger at me.

“It’s gogo’s hat ma, she...”

“I’m not going to argue with you,” she interrupts with a raised hand. “The funeral is tomorrow, we’re leaving for Johannesburg right after.”

“The funeral can’t be tomorrow, what about the memorial service?” I’m on my feet, ready to stand up against this injustice.

“She was my mother, I won’t be told how to handle the funeral.”

What is wrong with this woman? She walks out with the hat, and shuts the door behind her. I’m left dumbfounded.

THE KHANYILES-

“I saw that.” Thethela says as Ntaba approaches, her arms are folded across her chest, looking like a wife who just caught her husband fornicating.

A frown crosses Ntaba’s hard face, he chooses to pretend that she’s not even standing in front of him and manoeuvres past her. Thethelela grabs his arm and pushes him back outside.

“What you’re doing is wrong Ntaba, you’re sleeping with the house help.”

“What do you want from me, Thethelela?” He questions, glaring sharp knives at her.

“I...” she struggles to answer him, Ntaba clicks his tongue and decides again to move past her. But Thethelela is not letting him, she takes his arm again and pulls him back.

“That girl thinks you love her, I see how she looks at you.”

Bopha has to come home and put his wife on a

leash. She's barking at gates where she's not allowed access.

"You don't know me, stay out of my business."
He says politely and continues to walk past her. This time, she is not the one to stop him.

He's looking at her, eyes poring over her body.

"Your presence is not welcomed here anymore. Get your things and go back to your house, your husband will find you there." And with that, he walks back into the house.

He blames himself for eyeing his uncle's wife, he just didn't think she would take it as far as preying on him. Yes she is a beautiful woman to behold and he plays around praising her beauty. That does not mean he really wants to share a bed with her, she's his uncle's wife—it's disgusting.

Nothing happened between them, Thethelela

came on to him, too strong and playing Eve after she ate from the forbidden fruit. Any man would salivate at the sight of a naked woman and maybe lose their mind for a second.

Khethiwe just happened to walk in while his mind was floating in the air, it flew back into his head when she dropped the cup.

The men have moved outside, Sneh tells him this and that he'll find them around the bonfire. Khothama laughs upon his arrival and pulls him aside.

"Look," he shows Ntaba his phone. There's an ugly video playing there, it's Khethiwe and Thethelela's wrestling match and it seems to be trending on social media. Alongside it is a handsome picture of a menacing Ntabezikude Khanyile that would surely have ladies drooling, and creating fan accounts.

“What did you do?” Ntaba grabs the phone and starts reading comments, people have taken sides. Team K and team T, some are guessing what the fight was about and some have it right. Ntaba’s jaw clamps and unclamps, seeing her in that position again—it angers him.

“Take it down.” He’d do it himself if he knew how this Facebook thing works.

“No way, this is the first time I’m taken seriously on social media. Do you know how it feels to get 2 likes and 0 comments on your posts? I broke a record in less than thirty minutes. 10k likes and 700 shares.”

Khothama laughs, grabbing his phone back from Ntaba.

“Do you know how this will look on Khethiwe? Take it down ndoda.” Ntaba stresses.

“What about my step mother? It will look bad on her too, she better thank her lucky stars my

father is using an Ericson. She's too much that one."

"Should I regret ever telling you that your step mother tried to shag me?" Ntaba's question tickles Khothama, he's laughing his heart out.

"I don't blame her really, my father was warned. Let Thethelela live her best life, she's still young."

Khothama's words leave his cousin scowling inquisitively.

"Are you trying to tell me something, ndoda?" Ntaba asks, Khothama catches fast. He wriggles his shoulders, disgust covering his face.

"She's not my type," of course she's not because he is not Bopha, they don't have the same taste in women.

“Ntabezikude.” Qinisela calls, he’s seated on a small wooden chair in front of the fire, beside him is Mathonga and Ndleleni.

While the chief is keeping watch on his brothers at the hospital, Qinisela Khanyile, a tall beefy man—Vumile’s first cousin came through for the kids. He’s in his late 80’s, and thanks to the Khanyile gene pool the man does not need a walking cane to help him balance his weight.

He had to leave his home in Durban where he lives with his wife and children, as if he had a choice— Ntaba has a way of making people do what he wants, Mgobhozi should come right if she spends time with him.

Nandi and Zamangwane have been put on hold, the man of her life is not available neither is her sister wife who is supposedly unaware of her presence.

“Delete that video wena.” Ntaba instructs as he nears the uncle. “Yebo baba.”

“We should go inside and eat, I want to retire for bed. I have a long road ahead tomorrow.”

Qinisela says.

Ntaba nods, respectfully. He helps the man up and ushers him to the dining room.

They walk in on Nandi and Sneh placing food on the table, Sneh helps them wash their hands and dishes up for each person. Ntaba’s eyes linger on the door, Khethiwe is usually the one to serve them, to serve him. Did she leave like she said she would?

“Yini?” The question comes from Ndleleni, he’s asking Mathonga who is too quiet for someone who is talkative. The man in question shrugs, he’s lost in deep thought.

Mathonga hasn’t been the same since he came home from the hospital, the ride was a long,

quiet, dreadful one. His mood went from minus zero to nothing after Nala narrated her life story and how she got to where she is. She was stone cold the entire time, probably a defence mechanism or her heart has grown cold.

She didn't want to come along with him, which is understandable, Thobani would wake up asking for her. Money buys you 24/7 visiting hours and thanks to Ntaba, Nala and Thobani have a glowering man with a gun eyeing their every move.

Vumile walks in, looking distressed and tired. Nandi is on standby with a glass of water... must be nice.

"Sanibona, ekhaya." He greets and gulps down the tasteless liquid, a thank you is given to Nandi accompanied by a small smile.

Right in these seconds, between Vumile's

salutation and drinking of water, Mathonga falls from the chair groaning and shaking. He kneels, head downcast. Ntaba gets to him first, he extends his hands to touch him.

“Don’t touch him.” A quick instruction from Qinisela, as he swallows a chunk of meat. He wipes his oily hands with a dish cloth while using his tongue to clean his teeth. “Let him be.”

He continues, and somehow appears to be aware of the situation at hand.

“What’s happening to him?” A worried looking Ntaba queries, ready to help Mathonga up.

“Vumile!” Mathonga groans, setting his eyes on Vumile.

Vumile looks as worried as everyone, it’s the first time seeing his son like this.

“Mathonga?” Vumile returns, posing a question.

“Who is this woman standing beside you, I don’t recognise her.” Mathonga.

The question leaves everyone’s faces plastered with confusion, they share inquisitive stares.

“I don’t recognise that woman, who is she? Why is she standing in my presence, Vumile?” Anger is heard in Mathonga’s voice. It’s an argument none of them seem to understand, all eyes turn to Nandi. She too is not following, she’s as lost as everyone.

“Do you not hear me, Vumile? Who is that woman standing in my house?” He shouts this time. “Angizwani nombhedo.” (I don’t like nonsense)

“Abadala are here, can you not see?” (The elders)

Qinisela chides his cousin.

It's crazy how Christianity has swallowed Vumile whole that he's forgotten how the ancestors communicate. Vumile's heart plummets, this can't be. This is what he was afraid of, having Mathonga realise his gift. This could mean that... that... oh shucks! What if those resting old people tell Mathonga the truth about his identity? He would die.

"Ba... baba!" Vumile stammers.

"Have you forgotten how your grandfather speaks? Have you forgotten Khahlamba Khanyile's voice?" Mathonga, or Khahlamba rather, snaps like a parent scolding a child.

"No... no mkhulu. I remember you." Vumile says, slowly sitting down on the floor. Everyone does the same except for Khothama who hurries out of the room, eyes wide and heart thudding on his chest. He can deal with the living, but not

the dead. He's not about that life, it scares him to think that dead people can speak through the living.

"Fine, then you must remember that I don't like nonsense. Get that woman out of here, I will not speak in front of strangers."

Khahlamba tilts his head... oops! Khahlamba tilts Mathonga's head to the side and spits right on the floor, he is disgusted by Vumile's life choices. Bringing a woman who is not traditionally recognised by his ancestors into their home.

Eyes turn to Nandi again, she's old enough to know what to do. She does not look offended as she strides out of the dining room.

"Lingcolile leli khaya, lisetshenziwe man. There's bad vibes in these premises." (There are bad spirits here, a spell was cast in this

home.)

Khahlamba alerts them.

“People come as they please in my yard, it’s a playground for witches. How did you not see that Vumile? What is this you are doing in my house? Did I make a mistake by leaving you in charge?”

Silence.

“Answer me, Vumile.” He’s becoming aggressive.

“No mkhulu, you didn’t make a mistake. I have done my best to keep my family together, I believe I did everything I could to...” Vumile.

“You did nothing Vumile?” Khahlamba shouts.

“You did nothing but destroy this family.”

“But mkhulu...”

“Are you disagreeing with me?” His voice

rumbles with authority.

“No, I’m... I’m sorry.” Vumile drops his gaze.

“Where are my grandchildren?” Khahlamba asks, his eyes have not moved from Vumile.

Vumile hesitates a little, he turns to Ndleleni and Ntabezikude.

“They are here mkhulu, Vukuzakhe and Hlabela are in Johannesburg. They will be home soon.” Vumile answers.

Khahlamba’s eyes move between Ndleleni and Ntaba, he’s shaking his head, disapproving of whatever he is seeing.

“Blood! Blood! Blood! All I see is blood on them, these children have spilled blood and you did not cleanse them? What have you done to my children? Why have you turned them into wild animals?”

A scolding cannot be this intense, Vumile is

sweating thick bubbles.

“They live their own lives baba, they...”

“Are you going to continue giving me excuses, Vumile?” He interjects. “Where are the others? Why are they not with me?”

Agitation claws at Vumile, he wants the old man to go before revealing things he’s not ready to let out.

“I told you that Hlabela and vukuzakhe are...”

“Don’t act smart with me, where is Vimbela and Sakhile? Why are they not with me?”

Khahlamba’s spirit is not having it, he’s not here to play.

“Mkhulu, I don’t understand.” It seems Vumile does not understand a lot of things, the man did miss his son’s ceremony. Maybe it was done on purpose, just to avoid... this.

“Vimbela and Sakhile were presented to the ancestors, we asked that you accept them.” Qinisela decides to step in, unlike Vumile, he was present.

“Then where are they? Why have I not seen them?” Khahlamba snaps.

“They were introduced baba...” Qinisela.

“Am I lying Vumile? Am I lying, huh?”
Khahlamba.

His anger is directed to the chief, and no one else.

“No, mkhulu. You are not lying.” Vumile ripostes, shame mocking him.

“Do the right thing, bring my children home or you will have no peace. I will purposely destroy everything you touch. Your wife is a disgrace to this family, she has tainted the Khanyile name and provoked amathongo. Fix this mess Vumile, fix this mess.” Khahlamba orders sternly, his

sharp gaze fixated on Vumile who tentatively nods in response.

“I will mkhulu, I will fix it.” Can he go now? Geez!

“And the girl? Why is she not with her brothers? Why have you let the Khanyile blood be consumed by our enemies?” Khahlamba brings a confusing question forward.

The only girl child of the family is Zamangwane and as far as they know, she’s kept safe in these premises, alive and kicking.

“You continue to fail these children, Vumile. When will you be a father to them? Are you waiting to join me so you can trouble them with demands?”

Eh! This old man, when is he going back to the underground? A heavy sigh is sitting on Vumile’s chest, but he can’t release it or he will offend the elder.

“No, mkhulu. I will introduce Zamangwane and

her mother soon.” Finally, Vumile is saying something that makes sense.

“I’m not happy with you, Ngwane. I’m not happy at all.” Khahlamba drops his head, a smidgeon of pain stuck in his voice. He takes a long sigh and another one, and another one. They are all signs of enragement, and disappointment.

The family waits for him to proceed, no one has the courage to lift their voice in his presence.

That is one angry old man.

It’s when Mathonga clutches his hands on his temple that they realise the old man is gone, he screams and loses consciousness.

“That was too much for him, take him to the sofa.” Qinisela advises, he’s eating again. No way is he going to leave his plate empty.

Ndleleni and Ntaba carry Mathonga to the lounge, as they place him down, they exhale at

the same time like twins who are in sync. What in God's name just happened?

Vumile has not moved from the floor, he knows what to make of what just transpired. It's the fact that it happened that has left him in shock, there's movement from his vantage point. The woman who is only known by his heart and not his ancestors, her eyes are red, she's been crying.

"I'm sorry." He tells her, he'd say more if he had anything more to say. Like a distressed woman, Nandi lets her breath out and walks back to where she came from.

MATHONGA-

Forty-four

DALISILE-

She bumps into a tall man as she steps out of Zakhe's hospital room, her tongue goes for a loud click. Sometimes she forgets there are men keeping watch of this room, she finds it totally unnecessary.

It's been a long day, the plan is to go home, clean up and go to bed. 10pm is on standby, waiting for its shift.

The cold evening air hugs her as she walks out of the hospital, it's too empty and too quiet out here. She's not afraid though, it's not the first time leaving the hospital this late.

Approaching her BMW 4 series, she notices two men taking pictures of it. It's obvious they are admiring the expensive vehicle. Like the snob she is, Dalisile hurries to tell them to scoot and go pick in dustbins or something.

"Excuse me! Hey, hey! What are you doing?"

She's shouting, loudly clapping her hands and conceited as ever, otherwise she wouldn't be Dalisile.

The men don't look startled, or afraid. Neither do they move muscles.

"This is my car, and what you are doing is illegal. I can get you locked up for this." This one thinks she's in the village.

One of them finds a joke in her statement. Antipathy claws beneath her skin, this is not how she is treated back in the village. Lowlifes like them kiss the ground she walks on.

Besides, these men look dodgy, she knows she will get into trouble if she doesn't jump into her car and leave. She hurries to the driver's side, pulls her keys out from her designer bag. Her hands are trembling, it's the negative energy she's getting from the men who have not bothered to move, or say a word.

“I’ll take that, thank you.” Comes a disrespectful, shallow tone.

The key is snatched from her. She was busy fiddling with the door to notice them moving in on her.

“If you scream, I will shoot you.” The other says, pointing a gun at her from the other side of the car.

“Keep the bag, magriza.” He adds, laughing mockingly.

Why do hospital parking lots have to be empty? The men don’t spare a second glance, they climb into her car and drive away without giving anything off.

You’ve got to love Johannesburg.

Dalisile is left shaken, frozen on the spot where

her car had been. She scans her surroundings looking for anyone who might be willing to help, this damn place is a ghost town.

It could be that visiting hours for normal people ended hours ago and midnight is approaching. What do you do when life decides to show you balls of fire?

She is brought out of her obscure state by the loud ringtone in her purse, her eyes flip to the back of her head as she sees the name displayed on the screen.

“Are you still alive?” Okay! Mgebhozi can be caring, must be nice to have a sister like her.

“Some scoundrels just stole my car.” Dalisile yells, huffing over the line.

Anger can be deadly when kept in, it’s good to vent sometimes and maybe take it out on someone when given a chance.

“It’s only going to get worse.” Mgebhozi says,

she seems to know something; that witch.

“What are you saying to me, Mgobhozi?” Her eyes are as wide as coffee mugs, Dalisile never associates herself with the word “worse.” Nice life problems is what she is accustomed to.

“I have to say, I hate your son Ntabezikude. He’s the one driving Mathonga to do nonsense, he’s too smart for my liking. Can we kill him? My cult and I are still undecided on who to eat this month. That boy looks edible.” Mockery is found in the tone of her voice and for a bit, Dalisile could hear her drooling. It’s aggravating and makes her cringe.

“You’re not touching my children, Mgobhozi. I might not show them any affection, but don’t let that fool you. I gave birth to those boys, and the answer is no. You cannot have them, I sacrificed enough in the past.”

Mgobhozi cracks into a loud guffaw, it has Dalisile wanting to drop the call. She performs another eye roll, why is life such a rollercoaster?

“Fine, that biltong Mathonga will do.” The ungrateful witch grumbles. You give her a country, she wants the whole of Africa.

“But if you ever change your mind, give us Ntabezikude. It would be a sight to watch him die before we devour him, your son thinks he’s a god.” Mgobhozi serves her statement with a tongue click as a side dish.

“Are you done? Why did you call? I have a case to report.” Dalisile says, walking back to stand at the hospital entrance. It’s safer there, maybe.

“How many cases will you report after this? Don’t bother yourself, my dear sister. Our end is near, the ceremony has broken the curse, soon Mathonga will see you for who you are and that

idiot you call a husband is going to throw you out of the house. The second he lays his eyes on you, it will be over for you Dali. Don't leave Joburg just yet, make sure you don't meet Vumile at any cost. Rha! I hate that man."

She hates everyone.

"So my life is basically over? How could you let that happen Mgobhozi? You promised you'd stop the ceremony."

This is the right time to practise being a middle class citizen, learn how to flag down taxis. The robots are not far from where she's standing.

"I have a plan," well that's nothing new—Mgobhozi always has something up her sleeve. I'm with Nyoni right now, she's going to help us."

"Am I supposed to know who that is?" Dalisile.

Mgobhozi snorts arrogantly, "The only one who deserves to be called a witch. We need access

to Vimbela and Sakhile's graves. I need to get soil or stones from there, it would be better if you were the one to collect it."

Dalisile sighs, taking orders from Mgobhozi is annoying. Who is queen here? Her or the evil sister?

"When can you get to KZN?"

Mgobhozi seems to forget that Dalisile is not a witch, her means of transport is not a broom or a loaf of un-sliced bread.

"What is wrong with you? Go get it yourself, there's a back gate, no one ever uses it." That's more like it, or maybe not.

Mgobhozi can always turn her sister into a zombie—that must be what happens when you piss off a witch.

Dalisile tells her where to find the key, Mgobhozi sighs— may it be her last... A silent prayer on behalf of the Khanyiles.

“What excuse will I give when someone finds me there?”

The question is asked rightfully because the Khanyiles don't bury their own where the rest of the villagers do, no sir. It is done on the premises, that's how big the Khanyile homestead is. All of them are under the same soil, even the ones who died before the chief and his brothers were born.

“You are their aunt, why would you be questioned for visiting their graves?” Uh, at night? Well... normal people don't... sigh!

“You're also a witch, you'll make a plan.” Dalisile. Dammit, Vumile's wife didn't finish school. How is she this wise?

“What do you want to do with the soil?” Dalisile asks.

“It’s time we bring your babies out of that hut we trapped them in, they have to be useful for something.” Mgobhozi elucidates.

Dalisile frowns, she would understand if she were a witch like her sister.

“Explain.” Frustration escorts the word.

“Ever heard of idlozi elibi?” (Bad ancestor?)

This sister should’ve choked to death when she went under water.

“Impossible, they were innocent children. Their hearts were pure, you can’t turn them into that.” Dalisile disputes, she is so sure that whatever her sister has planned will backfire.

“That is why I need soil from their graves, it needs to be done at exactly 12 midnight. Soil from the graveyard can be a powerful weapon. Vimbela and Sakhile will enter those premises whenever I send them, they will destroy where I want them to destroy. They will move around in

darkness while everyone is asleep, bringing nothing but ruin.”

That’s it, who opened the gates of hell?
Something slithered out.

“I can’t allow that, what if you use them against me?” Dalisile can’t deny that her sister can be vicious, and it’s not cute. Mgobhozi’s laughter erupts, she loves the idea but... no.

“We are fighting the same war my dear sister. A soldier does not turn on their partner.” Sheesh! They are soldiers now.

“Whenever Mathonga burns impepho and uses snuff to talk to his ancestors, I will do the same on my side, mirroring his actions, but I will be calling upon amadlozi amabi. (Bad ancestors) Whatever they throw away, we’ll pick it up and send it back. Whether it be bad luck, stagnation, if they try to free Vimbela and Sakhile, we’ll be

on standby fighting back. This should buy us sometime, even if it takes us all our lives. We will never give up.”

Good sisters are sisters who would go to hell and back for you, look at Mgobhozi climbing mountains for Dalisile.

It's not guaranteed their plan will work, but fingers with long nails crossed.

KHETHIWE-

Ntabezikude is my weakness, when he touches me all I want to do is give in to his demands.

Staying another second at the Khanyile homestead was not an option for me, so I left after that embarrassing moment with him and spent the night at a friend's place. I have not mastered up the courage to go back to my father's house, no one wants to see themselves

back home.

Leaving the Khanyile home was the hardest thing I ever had to do, I don't know if I will go back there. If I ever do, how will I face that man that lives in me?

He's given me everything and nothing, his skin, his warm breathes and parts of his soul. I will forever be grateful, yet mourn the love I never had.

Will I ever feel important in my life? I doubt it, now I'm going back to my parents with nothing but a suitcase full of unwashed clothes to finish their washing powder and food.

The queue at the taxi rank is long, I'm number thirteen and hoping we get a quantum. I don't want to wait here any longer.

I feel eyes on me, it's crazy because no one is looking at me.

Why would they? There is nothing special about me, honestly. If there was, I wouldn't be here, I would be back at the Khanyile residence, openly loving that bastard, Ntabezikude.

A white quantum stops metres away from me, it's chaos as people push against each other. There's no space at the back, now I have to count change. Just my luck, I'm not good with taxi maths. My suitcase gets to sit with strangers on the first row, yeah nothing valuable is in there.

The man seated by the door plugs his ears with headsets. Should he not help me count change?

"Don't be afraid, sisi. It's not that hard." Says the man who counts change for a living. Haibo, this driver.

“It’s always easy to count money that will go into your pocket,” I utter without taking a second glance at the driver. I hear him chuckle, and fight the urge to sigh. My armpits are itchy, my scalp is itchy and there’s an irritation on my skin—all from this money that’s being passed by some big mouth behind me.

“Can we have change, R200 for three?” It begins.

I give the ignorant bastard next to me a cold look when he gives me R50, this fool expects me to count his change as well while he sits back and listens to Jay Z.

“Ehh, baba.” That’s the driver, calling the lazy man. He removes his headsets and gives the driver an inquisitive look. “You’re used to taking Ubers, we count change here baba.”

He must know... he puts away his headphones and takes the money from me. My only task now is to tell the guy how many people have

paid, to my shock he counts like it's 123. I will never trust men who take taxis, men in general. They are all fake and out there to get us.

"Are you okay?" I know this driver is not talking to me. I don't give him an answer, hoping he won't strike a conversation because I might just be rude, I am not in a good mood.

"Is it because I'm a taxi driver?" That amusement hidden in his voice forces me not to take his question seriously. He can think whatever he wants, I don't care.

"Hau sisi, I'm talking to you."

"I'm fine." Keeping my voice at bay is important at this point, I see where he is taking this conversation. Men don't just talk to women, they start a conversation only when they want something from us. I retrieve my phone from my handbag, I forgot my earphones. Shit!

“If you’re afraid of talking to me in front of people. Can I have your number then.” It’s because of the amusement loud in his voice and the fact that he is not Ntaba, that I refuse to give him my number.

“I don’t have a phone.” I lie, scrolling down my phone.

“Is that a vibrator in your hand?” He asks and I have to check his face. Who would say something so stupid? He’s smiling, a taxi driver comedian. Clap hands for him.

“I knew that would catch your attention.” He recites as if what he said made sense.

“It’s not funny, you don’t know me to be saying things like that.” I’m not okay with his forwardness.

“Sorry, it wasn’t my intention.” He articulates.

He can take his apology and shove it where the sun don’t shine.

My destination is plus-minus fifteen minutes away from the royal house. We're not rich, neither are we poor. In our yard, we have one not so fancy house. My father works at a bakery as a manager, or is it supervisor? I was not paying attention when my mother called to tell me that he got promoted.

My mother is a house executive, her husband pays her salary.

It's a Sunday today, around 10am the last time I checked. My parents are church goers, if I'm not mistaken, they are at church right now. It's me and my suitcase down a dusty street, nearing, I see my father's Toyota Camry parked outside. I really was hoping that he wouldn't be home.

I'm welcomed by two boys around the ages of eight and five, one of them runs into the house

shouting “baba.”

My brother has no shame; the audacity to give birth to kids that look like him.

“Aunt Khethiwe,” the taller one says and I cringe. I don’t like the aunt word, makes me feel old. Lethiwe needs to talk to his children—and there he is, walking hand in hand with his brat.

He looks old shame, my poor brother— 39 years old and still living with his parents, he has nothing to show for the years he’s lived. Not even a wife, women love and leave him saying he’s too good to be true. Lame excuses, I know. Let me get my hands on those witches.

“Mubiza.” (Ugly)

He laughs, he’s always been a bully, towering over me, this is why he pushes my head and punches me on the shoulder.

“You finally remembered home?” He’s smiling, eyes glowing with glee. I’m not sure, but he’s happy to see me.

“You know how we’ve always wanted to escape this place Lethiwe, coming back here is always stressful for me.” I remind him, he shrugs and takes my suitcase.

“At least you and Phathiwe don’t stay here, each time I move out, something always drags me back. I spend the whole day following the sun, this is not the life I envisioned for myself.”

Sadness lingers in his eyes, he exhales like a man who has given up fighting for life. Feeling bad, I ignore the statement and ask him about our brother. Phathiwe is the oldest, 45 years old and living in Joburg. I hear he works as a welder, I haven’t heard anything about a wife or kids.

Our names in one sentence are so embarrassing, my parents were probably high when they named us.

“Are you ready?” Lethiwe is asking if I’m ready to see the parents, I think I am. I’m just not ready for their many questions and the looks of disappointment. I nod and follow my brother inside the house.

AMANDLA-

“What do you mean you had her cremated, Sabusiswa?” This cannot be happening, not to me. I’ve been kind to people all my life, I paid my tithes, kept the Sabbath day holy, and gave my life to Christ at fifteen. How is God testing me when I have been faithful to him all my life?

“I mean just that, Amandla.” She won’t look my direction, she’s ashamed of what she has done—that’s why. I shut the suitcase and grab my piece of clothing from her. I didn’t ask her to pack my clothes for me, she barged into my

room, grabbed my suitcase and started packing, and without any pinch of shame told me that she had my grandmother cremated.

“What is wrong with you?” I yell, I don’t care about that look on her face anymore... it’s intimidating but I’m too angry to care.

“No ma, what is wrong with you? You can’t drop such a bomb on me. How do you have my grandmother cremated without telling me about it? When did this even happen?” It’s barely 11am, we haven’t had breakfast and she’s done this... this... GOD! It’s barbarism. What time did she leave the house? How long does it take to burn a body?

“Tell me!” The only way I can get through to her is by shouting, her stubbornness is the most annoying thing in this world.

“Lower your voice young lady, I am not your

friend.” She’s pointing a finger at me, in her mind she must think I am afraid of her because of that slap from last night... I am afraid of her but that’s not the case.

“Okay,” I take a breather or I will die of shock. She stands with her arms across her chest and eyes condemning me, Sabusiswa is a bloody joke.

“Where are her ashes?”

“Sprinkled them over the river.” My body fails to support me and throws me to the floor. Sabusiswa looks away and side eyes me a second later.

“It’s what she would’ve wanted.” This woman is justifying her actions, did I not have the right to be there? She was my grandmother, how could she be so heartless?

“No, it’s not what she would’ve wanted. Gogo wanted to be buried, she wanted a grave where

we would visit her. You have literally wiped my grandmother off the face of the earth. You have killed me ma.” I’m yelling and crying, and I want to die.

“Get off from that floor, Amandla, and stop being dramatic.” Did she just roll her eyes at me?

“You think I didn’t care about her? She was my mother for Christ’s sake, she meant the world to me.”

Tears—this is the first time she has cried for her since her passing, she lowers her body on the bed, hides her face in her hands.

“I am such a bad daughter, all these years I haven’t been able to provide for my mother. Now that I have the means, she decides to leave us. I can’t help but feel like I failed her.”
Sabusiswa.

Eish! Now who is going to console who? I have my own tears to wipe, besides, I’m angry for

what she did. This woman torched my grandmother as if her life meant nothing.

I stand and find a place beside her, I expect her to look at me. She's not even crying a river but a whole tsunami. Guilt glides through my bones, I find myself comforting her. Her arms clasp around me, she hides her face on my shoulder and sobs like a woman who has lost her devoted husband.

It takes a while for her to recover, her eyes find mine. I don't know what to say I see in her eyes, sorrow, loss or nothingness.

"I want the best for you Amandla, come with me." She takes my hands into hers, sniffing multiple times. "Gogo is gone now, there is absolutely nothing we can do about it. We can't bring her back, I found you a school. You will study and be what you've always wanted to be."

Does she even know what I want to be? And

what's the point of it now? The one I wanted to make proud is no longer with me.

"But you cremated ugogo, there is no grave to visit." My heart drops at the thought, Sabusiswa has hurt me in the worst possible way.

"I know, but I did it for her. You don't know village people, Amandla. They steal corpses, turn them into zombies, and use them against the deceased's family. I didn't want that for your grandmother. Witchcraft is real, that's why I ran to Johannesburg. And now that I have money, they will try to come for me. Black people don't do well with jealousy, they sell their souls to the devil and all that to block ways for other people."

Does she hear herself? She sounds delusional.

"There's no such thing ma, gogo and I were fine here."

“You were blind my baby, they got to you too. Why do you think you lost your job? And that boy you were seeing left you? It’s people’s things, Amandla.”

I don’t recall telling her about Mathonga breaking up with me.

“How do you know about that?” I ask, she shuffles on the bed and clears her throat.

“Uh... Your grandmother told me when you had gone to make us tea yesterday.” The syllables slowly leave her mouth, hesitantly.

“What’s going on ma? How did you attain this wealth? Since when have you been rich?” I need to know before I follow her to another province.

“The white man I worked for found an interest in me, we got married two months ago.” Oh wow, this is interesting.

“You’re married to a white man? Why didn’t you invite us? Why didn’t you tell us?” I ask.

This is too much to take in, really.

“I was married to him, he died last week. I will answer your questions once we have settled in Johannesburg.” No remorse is found in her voice, but people grieve differently. I have so many questions that need answers, but she’s standing up and walking away.

“I’m going to freshen up, get ready we’re leaving in less than five minutes.” She’s out the door faster than a whirlwind.

I have to stall her till Mathonga gets here, I texted him last night. He hasn’t replied to my messages, but I believe he will come. He knows how much my grandmother meant to me, if he cared about me, he will come.

MATHONGA-

Forty-five

MATHONGA-

The week was a hard one for me, between the endless migraines, trying to make sure Nala and her brother are okay and arranging Thabani's funeral.

Today is the day of umlindelo, a few people will be here to grieve with us, if they have not arrived yet. It's kind of them really, none of them knew Thabani. It's the fact that there is a funeral at the Khanyiles, they respect baba that much. He agreed to have Nala and her brother stay with us, I believe he's too stressed to argue about anything.

Their school was informed, it turns out Petros had transferred them out of school in the pretext that they are moving to a different province. That's how their absence was not questioned. I haven't set my eyes on that devil,

if I do... god-knows if I do.

The coffin came in before I left for the hospital, there were a few women from our church singing those depressing songs that make you feel like life is nothing but misery.

Death be not proud... I've heard this saying many times in my life, but death is proud, it takes with no care. God gifts us, only to snatch the very gift he gave. It doesn't make sense at all.

Vimbela, Sakhile, Thabani, Amandla's grandmother. Her death came as a shock, I went to pay my last respects last week. Ndleleni offered to come with, we arrived to an empty house.

The neighbours said she left for Johannesburg with her mother, there was no funeral or anything like that. Amandla's phone is off, I have given up trying to call her.

Thobani was discharged today, there was no need for him to stay in the hospital. We're in the car trapped in awkward silence, save for the radio softly playing in the background. It's almost dark outside, three armed guards are stationery at the gate, it's hard to get used to people hovering around with guns and hard faces. We've never really required protection as the royal family.

Thobani has fallen asleep in the backseat, it must be hard to lose your twin brother, Nala says he didn't say anything when he woke up. She thought he was going to ask for his brother, she's not sure if he can speak, or he'll need therapy to find his speech.

I park the car and turn to Nala, "Are you ready?"

"For what?" She laughs, it lacks emotion.

I don't answer, instead reach out to touch her

hand resting on her thigh, our eyes meet.

“I’m sorry for everything.” She says.

I’m not imagining the regret in her tone, nor do I say a word, waiting for her to continue.

“I was never going to kill you, I backed out when he told me why he was sending me here.”

“He had your brothers, surely you were going to choose them.” I say.

This conversation makes me uncomfortable.

“I will always choose them over anything or anyone, but I also know that I would have never killed you. It’s not in me, it’s not who I am. There had to be another way, Mathonga. Yes, I would’ve chosen my brothers, but I wouldn’t have gone through with his plan.” She says unsteadily, regarding me with an apologetic stare.

“I wish I can turn back time, bring back Thabani.

It's so hard Thonga, I'm alive but dead inside. Petros has taken so much from me, I hate him, pure, raw hatred." Her teary eyes linger on mine, I move in just a fraction, close enough to caress her cheek.

"You're going to be okay Nala, you and Thobani." Nala breaks the stare, sending her gaze out the window.

"Do you forgive me?" She eyes me again, silently crying. I wipe away her tears that prove to be stubborn.

"I can't stay mad at you when you look at me like that." I should be mad but it's not her fault, I have brothers, I understand her. Like Nala, I would do anything to protect them, agree to anything.

"How do I look at you?" She asks, flapping her eyelashes. It's not an act, she really is confused. I allow a faint smile, a little something so she

sees that I am not holding anything against her.

“Like that, with so much love. Like I hold the keys to your entire existence and you cannot see life without me. Must you really do that?” I add, hoping this time I will see a speck of a smile on her face. The look on it says I am not making sense. Maybe it’s a waste of time trying to make her smile, or I’m not doing it right.

I’ve only been with one woman all my life, sure my eyes wandered but I never went as far as looking outside Amandla.

Nala is staring, eyebrows raised, my heart speeds and halts as if commanded by hers. It’s the minor smile on her face, it takes my breath away.

“Am I making sense?” There is no other way to say this.

“Yes, maybe it’s because you do look at me like I matter. I also know that you love me and I am

grateful for you Mathonga. You are a good man, I promise never to disappoint you. I won't hide anything from you anymore, and I'll try my best to love you right."

Worry torments me, worry that she won't be able to get over her brother's death. Her eyes squeeze shut as she runs her thumb over my hand, she traps her bottom lip between the seams of her teeth and sighs profoundly.

"What are you thinking about?" A light tap on her hand gets her to open her eyes, tears follow, trickling down her face. I believe this is her heart worn on her face.

"I'm afraid," a whisper that crashes against my heart, it's really not hard to see the fear that has found a home in her eyes.

"Afraid of what?" I ask.

She takes a peep at Thobani, he's snoring. I don't see him waking up any time soon.

“Everything Thonga lami,” bad timing, but my heart dances at the endearment. “I’m afraid of tomorrow, I’m afraid of losing my brother and... you. People I love always leave me, maybe I’m meant to be alone.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Nala, neither is Thobani.” I assure her.

“What if I wake up one day and you’re all gone? I don’t want to be alone.” I don’t see myself leaving her, this is something to fight for—us, this relationship.

“Don’t do this to yourself, please. Do away with those thoughts, I would never dream of leaving you.”

She believes me, the twinkle in her eyes confirms it. I can’t say we’ve come far, it’s only been a few weeks. I can say though that I will take our relationship to greater heights.

“I will protect you with my life, I don’t want you

to be afraid anymore. You have to conquer this fear and trust in me Nala.” It has to stop, I will do anything to make her feel better. Take away all the pain bestowed upon her by life.

Words leave us for a minute, Nala keeps her eyes on the white tent on the yard. I can't tell if it's full from here, there are people inside though. Having a funeral didn't feel real at first, now with the tent and those people... I hate death, I hate thinking about it.

We can here singing from here, my spirit immediately drops. I was told to stay away from the funeral, and graveyards. Qinisela said so, he said the guardian that lives in me might not agree with bad spirits and I might have a negative reaction to it.

“Is he here? Is Thabani here?” Her lips tremble, tears drown her pupils and get the chance to

course down her face.

“He is,” I answer.

There’s a knock on my side of the window, I turn to see Ntaba waving and looking like Garfield with that stupid grin on his face. It will forever feel strange to see him like this, his two sides I mean. I’m forced to roll down the window, or he will never stop.

“Before you say anything, I want to know if I’m talking to Khahlamba or Mathonga.”

Unfortunately, my blood runs in his veins. Yep, we share a father. This idiot is my brother and his witless question does not need an answer.

“What’s going on?” My query brings a child-like grin to his face. He opens my door and helps me out, not that I needed it. I have to look back at Nala and motion that she steps out of the car.

“I want you to meet someone.” He introduces, I

don't get why he is bobbing his head. He's in a good mood, if I'm right.

"Who?" I ask.

He is now nodding with pride, as if he is pleased with himself... I don't know with him anymore. I follow his field of view that leads me to the unreasonably tall, light skinned man standing with confidence.

He winks when our eyes clash, stern face on display. Bashfully, I move my hand to the back of my head and rub it, it's his probing, guarded inspection of me. People that keep eye contact for too long and without blinking are psychos, trust me, I know one.

My eyes shift back to my brother to find him grinning, how does he manage this juvenile appearance?

"He's your landlord," Ntaba presents and my mind is swimming in thick liquid because I can't

think of anything as to why this stranger is my landlord.

“Sondela ndoda.” With this, Ntaba also gestures for the man to come closer. He is actually an inch shorter than Ntaba, and more intimidating at close range.

“Morning.” I have to send my greeting, the man objectively stands there without a word.

“As you know, the trip to Namibia has been cancelled because my brother cares more about women than he does about his safety.” Ntaba takes over, his untaken eyes are on Nala who is now standing beside me. I am hoping she doesn’t catch anything from his offensive statement. Ntaba can be kindly rude, I know, it doesn’t make sense to me too.

“I had to come up with plan B, wena Thonga lami are going to Joburg and my dear friend Styles is going to house you.” He continues not

to make sense.

“Now I have to live with people I don’t know?” I want to decline, do it politely lest Ntaba slits my throat.

“He’s a friend, you will be safer with him. Your girl can go with you if she wishes, she will receive counselling if she wishes... the kid too. I don’t want excuses Thonga, either you move in with Styles or go to Namibia. It’s your choose.”

It’s not my choice but his, it doesn’t matter if I want to stay here with the family. He will make me leave. The Styles guy couldn’t care less, he is a bit standoffish. He must think it’s a bad idea too, I’m sure Ntaba forced him into it. He’s a narcissist; this brother of mine.

“Will you come with me, Nala? It could be a new start for you and Thobani, a new environment will do you good.” I’m hoping to convince her.

“You’re all we have Mathonga, I want to be

where you are.” She says and I couldn’t be happier.

“Fine, as long as we get to come back once everything has been settled.” I tell my brother, a few months away from my father’s house won’t hurt, it might even teach me independence.

Someone is laughing, it pains me to point at my brother. He punches Styles on the shoulder, laughing his socks off and I can’t for the life of me... I cannot deal with him.

“I’ll take the boy to his room,” he moves past me to get to Thobani. We’re left hanging, wondering why he is laughing. He stops as he lifts Thobani up, there must be a site on the internet where I can put him on auction.

“We’re leaving in two days, my wife and kid are home alone.” Styles says.

I don’t know what that’s got to do with us, he leaves with Ntaba engaging in a deep

conversation.

My grip on Nala's hand tightens, I want us to talk about Johannesburg but it's not the right time, she has to see her brother's body. I ask her if she wants to do it now, her answer put me on the spot.

"Please come with me."

How do I decline her request after promising I will stand by her? Love is about making sacrifices, this is why I usher Nala to the rondavel Thabani's in.

My heart starts hammering as we approach, the church people are still in here singing. My shoulders feel heavy, I blink away the fuzziness to no avail. I stop and take a long breath, Nala has not let go of my hand.

"What's wrong?" She asks and gets no answer from me. I'd rather be telling the spirit in me to

take it easy, it can't be Khahlamba. I doubt it is, I know his face. I've seen a picture of him once upon a time, he has never come in my dreams.

I'm not entirely familiar with the old man and old woman I have seen in my dreams. For three days straight, I've dreamt of the old woman, the aggressive one; that one who wanted to kill baba.

All three times she was sitting in an empty room on a goat's skin, a smile was on her face, for the first time the old woman was smiling.

I shut my eyes and try to connect with ithongo.

"Sbani sami, hambisana nami. Don't torture me, I need to do this. Ngyacela Sthunywa sami."

(My guardian, please accompany me.)

I'm supposed to feel better, a connection or something. I am disappointed that I still feel the same, it's getting worse.

“Mathonga?” Concern rests in her tone, I cover my unease with a refined smile.

“Let’s go.” I cue.

We enter the room, women in black are seated on reed mats, singing soul eating songs. There is something forcing me to turn back around and leave, I ignore it, but my ears start ringing, my head starts pounding.

“Nala,” a whisper is all I can conjure up. My feet are heavy, I can’t move further than this. It feels as if these people are pressing me down, their presence is heavy and unsettling. It must be one of them, or Thabani. I’m not sure. I stagger back like a drunk person, ready to fall head first. It will hurt, that’s what my mind is telling me. Instead of falling on the ground, I’m held steady by someone behind me.

“What are you doing in here?” It’s Ndleleni, reprimanding me.

Qinisela did say not to attend the funeral, and I was hoping it wouldn't be as he said. Just last week Nala and I were standing before Thabani's body, nothing happened.

I'm dragged outside by my brother, far away from the rondavel and the tent. Nala is here too, I thought she'd stay behind. She is probably not strong enough to do it by herself.

"You were warned, Mathonga. Why did you go in there?" Ndleleni can be a strict parent like Ntaba, I am so done with all this chiding.

"I spoke to the ancestors and asked that they bear with me, they didn't listen." I'm explaining myself.

One of the guards scurries over with a chair, I'm made to sit on it.

"I'm sorry, Thonga. I didn't know, I wouldn't have asked that you accompany me." Nala has put

the puzzle together. She gets a cold look from Ndleleni, it makes me wonder if he still sees her as the cleaner. You never know with Ndleleni. Nala recoils, shying away from my brother's unwavering stare.

I tell her it's not a big deal, before she turns her head at the sound of heavy feet trampling on the ground. I follow her line of sight to a woman pushing a wheelchair that contains a middle aged man. I recognise him immediately, the man from the hospital Ntaba had taken me to. Two guards are behind them, looking ready to attack.

"What are they doing here?" That's Nala, hissing under her breath. A frown finds my forehead as I inspect the unwanted guests, the woman falls on Nala's feet and straightaway a foul smell destroys my senses. I can't help but cover my nose, Ndleleni does the same.

"What are you doing here, Mam'Julia? Who

invited you?" Nala barks, taking careful steps back.

"Nala, I didn't know. I promise I didn't." The Mam' Julia woman wails, hands on her head and eyes full of tears.

"I'm sorry, on behalf of my husband. I apologise from the bottom of my heart. Petros told me everything, he told me what he did. Now he's sick, I don't know what's happening to my husband. It's a curse Nala, he smells like a dead dog. We've tried every chemical out there, nothing has worked. It gets worse every day, I've resulted to keeping him in the house, away from people. He can't release urine anymore, he screams in pain whenever he has to, and even though, nothing comes out. The hospital can't help him, he's pressed as we speak and it's killing him slowly. He is in agony, hasn't slept in days and when he shuts his eyes Thabani's face comes to him. Please help him, Nala."

Nala snorts, “How is any of this my problem?”

“We went to see a Sangoma, more than one and they all told us the same thing. Only you can help him, you have to forgive him and do a ritual so Thabani can stop haunting my husband.”

She tries to touch her, Nala jolts back in loud screams.

“Never, I will never forgive him. This monster killed my... my brother. He killed Thabani and I will never forgive him.” I hear how her breathing stutters, her wet face finds shelter in the palms of her hands.

Isthunywa and his dramatics be damned—
smell of a dead animal be damned. I stand on my feet and without giving too much thought to it, kick Petros. My foot lands on his face and sends him falling back with the wheelchair, I grab him by his washed out police shirt,

forcefully bringing him up, and punch him on the face. Screams break out around me, Petros releases a pained groan.

“Please Nala, tell him to stop. He’s going to kill him.” The woman’s cries of despair mean nothing to me, I want to kill this man with my own hands. Nala has not said anything, it gives me confidence, driving me on.

Another punch, he lands on the floor with a nauseating thump, however brings me down with him because his hands are clutched on my t-shirt. He’s powerless beneath me, weak and without defence. He groans painfully, head moving from side to side as I land punch after punch. These punches are meant to kill him, separate his soul from his body like he did Thabani. He deserves to die for what he did to Nala, years of sexual assault. I think I’m not doing enough, the blood on his face is not enough for me. He is still breathing, heaving like

a dying dog beneath me. It aggravates me that's why I strangle him.

There are voices around me, pleading with me to stop. Baba, Ndleleni, Nandi. I hear all of them but Nala's.

I'm pushed away by a person stronger than me, Styles. I'm on the ground, scrutinising him and wanting to yell at him. The void in his eyes and that devilish smirk send chills through my body, it's the only thing stopping me from telling him off.

He stands with hands hidden in his pockets, the bastard is intimidating me.

"As much as I'm enjoying this, I think you've had enough for today." He voices, while raising his brows as if daring me to move. What does he have to do with this?

Petros is barely alive, choking in his own blood,

his wife next to him inspecting his wounds. If only I had a gun, I want him dead. Everything in me tells me to get up and finish him off. My plan is stopped by Ntaba, blocking my view. He's carrying a bucket of water.

"Here, wash your hands." Is said with anger, his stony glower fixated on me. His eyes are a black hole, and I feel it, his dark aura. My body tenses, I don't understand. What wrong did I do?

He's not gentle as he grabs my hands and dips them in the warm water.

"Qinisela says you should wash your body with sea water, we don't have any, so this will do."

Ntaba enlightens, I don't stop him from removing my blood stained t-shirt.

"You can't afford to have blood on you, Thonga lami. Khahlamba will wage war if we dare taint you with blood. Now I will have to take you to the sea to wash out this stench." He tosses my

t-shirt on the floor.

My eyes find Nala, the tears on her face make me want to kill that man. We're surrounded by a lot of people, Baba asks if I'm okay, I assure him with a faint nod.

"Bhuti, he's the one who killed Thabani. He raped Nala and..." I grunt through gritted teeth, rage is still pulsing through my veins. Nala is sobbing now, loudly. Ntaba won't let me go to her, he pushes me back on the ground when I try to get up.

"Bhuti?"

"No," he cups my face. "I need to cleanse you first."

"Nala is crying," I tell him. Can he not hear her? I think I'm making him very angry, he turns to Nandi and like she read his mind hugs a crying Nala.

“You are my first priority, don’t you get that, Thonga lami?” He’s very snippy. “I protect you before anyone, don’t take that right from me. Don’t strip me of my role in your life.”

Guilt is not kind, it drags and envelops me in its uncomfortable wave.

“Ngyaxolisa bhuti.” (I’m sorry.)

“Don’t be, just let me fight your battles. Wena make sure you’re breathing... do it for me—for all of us.” Ntaba says, tightening his hands on my face.

I chuckle lightly when he kisses my forehead, he instructs some woman to bring a fresh bucket of clean water with salt.

*

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Let's push 300 comments, don't forget to share as well. We have a date at 9pm, see you then.

MATHONGA

Forty-six

VUKUZAKHE-

It's crazy how much progress he's made in a space of a week, doctors are unable to explain it. His brothers have not come to see him, they speak on the phone time and time. He's been seeing more of Hlabela and Bongiwe, Dalisile has not shown face yet.

No one has asked about whereabouts. It's normal for her to disappear without a trace.

Hlabela is here, at the hospital. He came bearing dinner and a sour face, one Vukuzakhe has been seeing the entire week.

"What's wrong with you?" He questions Hlabela while shuffling on the bed until he's

comfortable. “You look like you’re the one who had their brains scrambled.”

He adds a laugh, Hlabela does not find it funny. He almost died hau and here he is joking about it. The man put on the interrogation chair sighs, so much is on his mind, he will explode if he doesn’t vent.

“I messed up.” That’s a start.

When a man says he messed up, it’s either the police are after him or he broke the heart of his significant other.

“Where is she?” Yep, Vukuzakhe knows his brother that much.

“I don’t know, she doesn’t want to talk to me, she won’t take my calls.” Hlabela explains.

Very dreadful, Kushi is not okay with what happened the last time she met up with Hlabela. He tried to explain, but how do you tell your girlfriend that you can’t stand kids because your

little brothers were torched alive? It was a traumatic experience, one that's hard to talk about.

"Give her time to cool off, she will come around." This he says after Hlabela has explained what went on when Kushi came to introduce her kids.

"What if she doesn't? She blocked my number, I have tried everything."

He's not about to cry is he? Kushi's curry can't be that nice, does she even cook for him?

"Do you want me to speak to her? Or better yet, ask Ntaba to speak to her. He can be very convincing." That's a funny recommendation, Hlabela chortles and stands from the chair.

"I appreciate it but no, Ntabezikude's way of talking involves kidnapping, followed by tormenting till the person has no choice but to

agree to his demands.” Hlabela continues laughing, he’s not sure what he’s talking about. However, they know their brother to be violent. He does own a gun and he unashamedly waves it around for the world to see.

“Ha! You’ve seen him doing that?” An observant question from Zakhe.

“He watches those documentaries where people kill each other, I’m sure he’s taken notes and waiting for an opportunity.” Hlabela, they share a cheerful moment.

“Give her space, let her breathe. Even if it takes time for her to come back, she will eventually come back. You are a Khanyile after all, handsome as hell.” Vukuzakhe adds.

Hlabela ogles at him for a minute... handsome as hell? Khanyile? What in the land of the sick happened to Vukuzakhe? He laughs it off, his brother does not talk like this. Oh well... it

doesn't matter. The advice has been given—he sits back down, crosses his leg over the other and fold his arms across his chest. He decides the position is uncomfortable because his legs are long, the chair was not built to accommodate his build.

“Look at you, you're a miracle, you even sound like a miracle.” Hlabela views.

“I know, I can't say what really happened. The night I woke up feeling lighter than I've felt in years, I saw our great-grandfather in a dream.”

“Khahlamba?” Hlabela asks, raising a brow in question. He leans forward, places his elbows on his knees and joins his hand together. Still uncomfortable, sheesh, maybe remaining standing is not such a bad thing.

“In the flesh.” Or spirit in this case. “He called me dirty, untainted and said I needed to be

bathed in water. I ran like a child that hates bathing, the old man chased me with a stick.” He laughs, it’s contagious that it affects Hlabela.

“That’s a scene I would love to see.” Hlabela teases.

“He was upset when he caught me, as tall and big as I am, he gave me a hiding. I felt every thrash, it wasn’t meant to punish me. It was more like a parent setting their child right, when he was done he dragged me by my ear to the nearest river. There were other people bathing there, unfamiliar faces. The water was white, as if milk had been added in it. Khahlamba scooped a hand full of mud from the river bank, scrubbed my body with it and pushed me into the river after. I was given a bath like a child, I can’t recall what happened after.”

“That is a strange dream to have, what do you

think it means?" Hlabela.

"I don't know, maybe it means just that. We've neglected our ancestors for far too long, I think it's time we go back to our roots." An uncomfortable conversation for Hlabela, this is not how Vumile raised him. They are devoted Christians who live for Jesus and keeping the 10 commandments.

NTABEZIKUDE-

It's only 1:07am, too early to be sleeping if you ask him. Perhaps he would be sleeping if it were not for Petros hovering over his mind, he's like that bad song that constantly plays in your head without your permission. Him and his wife were ousted from the premises, she pushed him out the same way she had pushed him in,

but hardly moving the second time.

He kicks the blanket aside, scampers off bed. A few things flash before his lashes for a while, he starts tapping his foot warily—counting each tap in his head. He's agitated, it happens to the best of us. A decision comes to mind, he sends a text to Styles who is sleeping in one of the rondavels. There is no answer, he knows though that Styles got the message and he's game for anything. Another message is sent to his men, telling them to go pick someone up. He changes into his usual attire, track pants, a black hoodie and black Chucks.

The wind screams in his face as he steps out, he hisses and curses and clicks his tongue. Perhaps he's in a bad mood, a lot happened the past week. One of the things was Khethiwe leaving, daring her to leave was a risk his vain mind took, she'll be back, is what his mind

keeps telling him.

Outside, he meets up with Styles. This one understands the assignment, his dress code matches the night. They don't exchange words, Ntaba jumps into his car. Styles gets into the passenger seat.

Less than 7 minutes later, they are outside Petros' house. The men he texted minutes ago are parked on the other side of the road, he knows they have his package or they wouldn't be here. Two of them dash out of the car, to join him and Styles.

Ntaba has always been sly, opening locked doors and breaking into houses, he does it so well. It's what Alfred taught him, a man of great skills.

"You belong in prison." It's a compliment from Styles actually.

"Asbonge ndoda, asbonge." (Thank you)

Ntaba rejoinders with a smirk, it's not every day he gets to be proud.

He enters the house as if his father built him a room in here, his first stop is the bedroom and to his luck, he finds Petros and his wife curled up in bed. A loud bang on the door startles them, Mam Julia is the one to sit up. The light is right at the door, where Ntaba is standing.

"I'm sorry, I should've knocked." He smiles, flashing a bright torch on their faces. He could use the light, but he chooses not to. They can't see his face, while he sees every feature on their scared faces.

"What is that smell?" The criminal... yes he's a criminal— spits on the ground and uses his hand to cover his nose.

"I'm sorry, I really don't intend to be rude. Moreover, this space is not suitable for anything work related. How about we go for a drive."

“Who... who are you?” Mam’Julia asks, her voice trembling like the last leaf on a tree in winter.

“Like I said, I’m here to work.” Ntaba gives an answer, slowly walking towards them. He loves the sounds of fear they are making, it’s a beautiful melody.

“I couldn’t sleep, the devil kept me up wanting me to go out there and do his work. You know, like how Jesus does every Saturday or Sunday morning. I’m team devil by the way.”

No sane human can proudly declare such an eerie declaration, Mam’Julia is so norm to screaming lately. Ntaba is by her side of the bed, a finger on her lips.

“No no, sweetheart. There will be time for that, we don’t want you to lose your voice before the actual fun begins. Do we?” It’s whispered close to her face, afraid for her life, Mam’Julia shakes

her head. This has Ntaba bursting into a hyena sound-like laughter, loud and creepy.

At this, two men walk in wearing masks. It's not that they want to keep their identity concealed, it's the foul smell in the house. Petros and his wife are taken by force, the lady is screaming for help and threatening to call the police and Petros... all he can do is groan in pain. She took him to the hospital after Mathonga practised martial arts on him, the doctor gave him an injection, and painkillers.

Ntaba walks out to find Styles waiting for him at the door, he observes the Khanyile man and snickers. Must be a proud moment to see his younger self in Ntaba, he's more like the son he never had.

"Where have you been all my lie?" Styles questions the man who turns around and stares

at him, the wolfish hunger in his eyes is insatiable. Styles recognises it, he's been here before, in this situation.

"Let's go." Ntaba says, leading the way.

Styles has not been told where they are going, he too is oblivious.

The road leads them to Port Shepstone Muslim Cemetery, a strange place to visit at night.

"We're here." An introduction from Ntaba, his accomplice loves it. He doesn't know the details yet, but he loves it. Breaking into a cemetery was not his plans for the night, but it works.

"What's the plan?" Styles probes as they step out of the car.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" A smug reply from Ntaba.

He lets his inquisitive gaze search the cemetery,

chills invade his skin. It's spine-tingling and borders on evil, his mouth welcomes a smile. Why are there no mansions at cemeteries?

"Do you think I can build here?" This one needs to be put in a straight jacket and locked up inside a room with white cushioned walls. Styles sniggers, plunging his hands in his pockets.

"You do know there are ghosts here, right?" Impossible.

"Don't patronize me, Styles. Ghosts don't exist, it's a myth white people tell to scare us, so we don't mingle with the dead."

Mingle with the dea... this is a red flag.

"You need help, ntwana." Styles throws back.

"Oksalayo, I'm building a house here. It's so peaceful, I like people when they are dead and buried six feet under. I'm not one for shallow

graves, the deeper the better.” Ntaba.

A smile familiarises with Styles, this is what he signed up for. Some Ted Bundy shit.

“Let’s get this party started baby.” Ntaba yells at the top of his voice.

They enter the graveyard, if it were not for the moon, they wouldn’t be able to see a bloody thing. It’s not as quiet as Ntaba predicted, birds of the night and crickets have claimed the place as their own.

His men are standing by the graves with their victims, Petros and his wife featuring the policeman who kidnapped Nala and delivered her to Petros.

“Juls, look at you. Fine woman, eyy.” He’s referring to Mam’ Julia, not caring that the woman looks like she’s about to have a heart attack.

“Sit down.” He points at a grave behind her, the kindness on his facial features is not fake. He is having one of those moments when he feels like he owns the world and life is the most beautiful gift.

“Ple... please, I want to go home.” Her words are slurred, syllables escaping her mouth like an earth quake.

“You will go home, Juls. Soon, I promise. Now sit down for me, right on that grave. I just want to have a word with you.”

Mam’ Julia is hesitant, her eyes are popping out, pleading on her behalf.

“I’m not a bad person Juls, I don’t hurt women, I promise.” His fist is up in the air, innocence found in his dark eyes. Mam Julia turns to her husband for validation or anything, one look at his disfigured face and almost lifeless body, she is reminded that he has become a useless

invalid who needs people to hold him up so he won't fall. He can't possibly see a thing with his battered face.

"Petros... please." She pleads for heaven knows what, argh poor Petros is equally helpless.

"Are you going to sit or should I make you?" Ntaba seethes.

Mam' Julia looks back at the grave, she is aware that she has no choice. Her body trembles vigorously as her butt kisses the cold gravestone, fear is a son of a bitch from hell.

Ntaba moves to crouch before her, he makes sure to look into her eyes.

"Are you comfortable, Juls?" He masks his voice with kindness, Mam' Julia ignores him. She would rather cry and pray for a saviour, Jesus, Mohammed... at this point, Petros would suffice.

"I hate talking to myself, Juls. What is the use of

the tongue if you are not going to use it? Do you want me to cut it?" The kindness is thrown over the graves.

"Now tell me that you're comfortable, Juls." It is an order. Mam' Julia wants to scream, somehow she knows it would be a mistake.

"I am... I am comfortable."

Okay she's said it, can she go home now? Ntaba is happy, he deserves a lollipop. He's grinning from ear to ear, looking at the men around him. They chuckle, accommodating his madness.

"I like you Juls, you're a very smart woman. You know what smart women do?"

He waits for a reply, but he is too impatient to wait another minute.

"Smart women would do anything on the face of the earth to protect the men they love, Juls for president." He murmurs.

“Your husband is like your god, am I right Mrs. Ngcobo? That’s why you kept his dirty secret, huh?” He stands up straight, stretches his body to his content.

“You see, I love digging, of course I had to after that stunt you pulled at my house. If you didn’t come to my house, then my brother would not have fought your husband and dirtied himself with his blood. That stunt angered me, I tried to forget muntu omdala. But my brain wouldn’t let me, this is why we are here at this moment.” A look laced with animosity and annoyance is sent her way. Mam’ Julia is too terrified to answer.

“You came to my premises, screaming that Nala saves your dear Petros. You lied in the presence of my brother that you knew nothing about Ngcobo’s perverted ways, why did you do that? Are you so desperate to save the life of this pest?”

“He’s my husband.” For better or worse is what Mam’ Julia is sticking with, she is not about to throw her husband to the wolves.

“I know, sweetheart.” Ntaba pats her cheek lightly and leans in for a quick kiss on her forehead.

“I know,” he repeats.

“Don’t hurt him, please. I wanted to protect Nala, I was going to protect her. Maybe I was afraid of what the world would say, Petros was a respectable policeman. Sometimes I lay in bed at night, thinking of how to expose him without ruining his image.”

She cries, eyeing her terrified husband. He didn’t think that she knew what he was doing to Nala.

“I wanted to confront Petros, tell him to stop but I couldn’t. I was a coward, I should’ve protected Nala. I’m sorry, please I don’t want to die, please.

I'm sorry." She pleads, hands joined together in hopes that her petitions will touch Ntaba's heart.

"Okay," That's all Ntaba gives in return for her statement.

"I don't really deal with women, but you have left me no choice. You brought that dirty man to my house and challenged me, and I love challenges Juls—another reason why we are here at this time of the night." He continues.

This is what happens when people dig their own graves, Mam' Julia thought she was smart—play the good foster mother to Nala and her siblings, and get to save the life of her husband.

"Look over there." Ntaba points to his left, all eyes turn there.

"That's your grave Juls, I paid a lot of money to have it dug for you." He says, sighing like he hates what's about to happen.

Julia scream-cries. "Please, my son..." There should be more after these words, but nothing.

"No," Ntaba shakes his head. "You can never be fortunate enough to birth a son like me, you don't have a heart sweetheart. That's why God didn't see it fit to bless you with a child, your womb is dry for a reason. You failed Nala and those boys, exposed them to that bastard."

Mam' Julia is not there anymore, the insults can come like a flood, that's okay. Her priority is to make it till morning, heck her next birthday. She's on her knees, grovelling and pleading for Ntaba to let her go. Her face bears evidence of a terrified human, snort, tears, fear and an ugly cry.

"Don't cry Juls, this hurts me more than it hurts you. Believe me, I could step back and let Karma be the bitch that it is. But I'm a jealous mother fucker, it's not your fault sweetheart. Don't ever think that, okay?"

Ntaba pauses to look at Petros.

“Nc, nc, nc.” He’s shaking his head, looking at Petros disgustedly.

“If you want to point fingers, blame Ngcobo, I want your death to eat him up slowly. I want the image imprinted in his mind until the day he takes his last breath, that’s if he is man enough to continue living after this.

This is the whole point, why he chooses to kill Mam’Julia and spare Petros. Death will free the bastard, his ancestors will probably throw him a welcome home party while the people he left behind have to push through life in pain and agony.

Ntaba kneels to reach her height and brings her in for a hug. Mam’Julia takes this opportunity to cry on his shoulder, she has finally gotten

through to him. In her mind are these thoughts, a tight grip on her hair flushes the thoughts out. She falls on her back screaming and kicking as Ntaba drags her across the ground.

“Petros, help me.” The piercing scream is spine chilling, any human would offer help. It’s a shame she is not surrounded by humans.

“Julia.” Petros mumbles, he’d fight the man imprisoning him had he been stronger and not injured. Right now, he’s only an over cooked spaghetti that absorbs too much oil—useless and unreliable, he’s squirming trying to escape the strong hands holding him. Petros can’t even scream to save his life.

Ntaba holds Mam'Julia's shoulders, and brings her to a standing position, making sure her back is facing the grave. He locks his eyes with hers, it’s what he does to feed off from the fear in his

victims. He will relive this moment many times until he is satisfied.

“Hamba juba, bayokuchutha phambili.” He proclaims. (You reap what you sow.)

A light kiss on her cheek and he gently pushes her into the grave, her screams don't last a second.

Ntaba turns to the man holding Petros' accomplice, “throw that piece of shit in the grave and bury them.”

Throw the piece of shit is what they do, sure he fights for his life till the last moment. They hear a revolting thud, he's fallen on top of Mam' Julia.

“Ngcobo, don't you just love me?” The Khanyile bull sings, laughing out loud. “My men will drive you back home, take care of yourself Ngcobo.”

Petros is on the floor, weeping. He wanted Mam' Julia gone, but that was before he fell ill. His wife had become beneficial to him, and

maybe just maybe, he was learning to love her again.

Ntaba tells Styles that they need to go back home, the man has been observing from a distance.

“You are the glory and scum of the universe, you know that right?” Styles exclaims.

“The world is mine for the taking, Styles.” An egocentric answer.

“What’s next?” Styles asks as they head back to the car. “Do you need to blow off some steam, I can organise a woman for you. Killing makes me feel inhuman, only in the arms of the woman I love do I find my way back to humanity. She strips my soul naked, cleans me until I feel renewed.”

That is so implausible, Ntaba frowns at it. He can’t imagine himself finding comfort in

another woman who is not...

“Shh!” Says Styles, stopping on his tracks. He is regarded with a frown.

“What?” Ntaba whispers.

“Do you hear that?” Styles looks around, eyes narrowed and brows raised. The sound of shovels mingling with the soil can be heard a distance now, that’s how far they have walked.

“Don’t play games with me, Styles.” His heart jerks a bit, he controls it by taking a deep breath. It’s just the two of them, standing in the middle of graves.

“Someone is here,” Styles whispers and that sets Ntaba off. There is no such thing as ghosts, he repeats in his head.

“Do you hear the footsteps?”

Of course he can hear the footsteps Styles, that’s why his heart is doing a number on him.

Ntaba's eyeballs are ready to jump out of his eyes, everyone is afraid of something they can't see.

"Fuck this, I'm out of here." Oh, Oh. His voice shook a little there.

"Are you afraid of dead people?" Styles is laughing at him. "This is classic, the man who kills people is terrified of their spirits. Wow!"

Send him back to Joburg, that's what Ntaba should do. His stomach swirls viciously, he can hear it grumbling with threats to send him to the toilet.

"Are you coming or not?" Ntaba snaps, he'd be in the car by now if Styles had not scared him like that.

"I'm coming princess," a tease, Styles has become. Ntaba huffs, showing him the middle finger.

The footsteps have not stopped, they match

their movements. Whoever is keeping them company is following them, Ntaba looks at Styles thinking he would see the same fear that's tormenting him. He sees nothing—the man is as cool as ice.

“Shit,” Khanyile picks up the pace, marching his way down the graves. So do the footsteps, Ntaba cusses and just when he's about to take off, a man's voice with a thick Indian accent stops them.

“Excuse me!”

They swivel on their heel, an old Indian man with a long beard is standing before them. His presence is disconcerting, it has them shivering.

“I'm looking for my wife, have you seen her?”
The man asks, he looks lost and confused.

“No, we haven't seen your wife. Now get out of here, we don't know you.” The brave Styles snaps, it's what he says that confirms Ntaba's

assumptions.

“Is he a... a... gho... ghost?” Ntaba’s voice betrays him, he’s never seen a ghost in real life. Damn, they don’t exist as far as he knows.

“Yes,” a quick answer from Styles. “He...”

Thud!!!

He turns at the loud sound and there lies Ntabezikude Khanyile face down and barely moving, Styles clicks his tongue. How is he going to carry this giant to the car? When he whips his head back, the old man is gone.

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Please like, comment and share. Tomorrow might be delayed because of load shedding.

MATHONGA-

Forty-Seven

Sponsored by Charmaigne

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MATHONGA-

The funeral went smoothly—well there were a little bumps here and there, but nothing dramatic and no one needing to be saved from enemies.

Last night, Thobani was made to lie face down on Thabani's coffin, he didn't put up a fight but held on to it as if his life depended on it. It was hard for Nala to watch her brother bidding the other goodbye, I wanted to be there but unfortunately could watch from a distance.

Things were different today, Nala said Thobani

wouldn't sit on the coffin, he plainly refused. The child knew it was going to go down the hole, the thought surely terrified him.

The boy fought a good fight until his muscles gave up on him, he went down wailing and came back calm. He has not said a word to anyone, Nala is drowning in dread. This is a part of their lives where they will need a hand to hold.

Formalities were done before they came back to the Khanyile household for the after tears, I waited impatiently for their return. Wondering if they were okay, being gifted is not something one should wish for. It's a blessing but can also be a curse.

Nala is sleeping with Thobani in her arms, I don't want to disturb her sleep but Styles says we're leaving tonight and Ntaba agrees with him. I don't know what the rush is and like always, I

have no say in it. The day is almost over, people ate and went back to their homes which is such a relief. We need the privacy and peace that comes with it.

Am I so weak to be smitten by this girl?

I still remember the first time I saw her, maybe it was love at sight and I did not know it that time.

“Nala,” I shake her awake only for her to jolt up, eyes stirring the spacious room. “It’s me.”

I see relief surge through her as her eyes meet mine, she considers me with a gentle smile.

“Mathonga?”

“We’re leaving tonight, you need to pack your things.”

Her gaze finds Thobani who is fast asleep, she looks back at me.

“I don’t have anything really, I lost my clothes that day I was...”

“It’s fine,” I interpose, not wanting her to ride back to the past. We’re done attracting negativity.

“We’ll make a plan when we get to Joburg, I need to have a word with my father. Will you be okay?”

I have to ask, her eyes are droopy and lips parched. She stands, offering to walk me out. My hand finds the small of her back, she eases under it and leans into me.

“I’m okay, you’ve done enough for me. How can I ever repay you?”

It's words like these that make me feel like she doesn't see me as her boyfriend. I'm not going to answer her, I don't want to say something I will regret. I kiss her on the cheek and tell her to be ready before dawn, and leave.

VUMILE-

Nandi opens the door to her room and lets him in, she always does, especially at night when everyone has gone to bed. Feeling lonely and needing some good loving, Vumile would leave his room to join her in bed.

No fornication has been committed yet, although a devoted Christian, he is aware of the wrath of the ancestors. He can't afford to put Nandi in that position.

He didn't go to her last night, people were here and there plus a dead body on the premises. It's been a long day for everyone, Nandi included who has been running up and down attending to visitors. There were questions of course, undertones and snoopy looks from the villagers. They wanted to know who she is, you can spot

a servant from a distance and Nandi looks nothing of the sort.

“Are you okay?”

She’s not okay, she does not look okay. Nandi sighs and shuts the door, she sits on the chair by the window and not on her bed, beside her potential husband. This is a sign, Vumile knows she’s upset with him. This one speaks with actions, she is a peaceful woman and does not like quarrelling.

“Why am I still here, Vumile?” Yeah, it’s one of those days when he’s not Ngwane but Vumile. His brows skyrocket and fall back in a split second, he sits forward, eyes intently on her. Her gaze does not waver, she plans on looking him in the eyes throughout.

“I did apologise for what happened last week, I don’t agree with how you were treated by...”

“The elders are never wrong, we can never question the things they do. Your grandfather’s anger is justified, your ancestors do not know me and it’s all on you, Vumile. You refuse to give me a place in your life.”

“That’s not true, MaShamase. You’re here, are you not?” Vumile argues his claim, perhaps he is blind... in a way.

“What difference does that make? My child and I are still outcasts, for years you refused to give me a place in your life. You hid us from the world, claiming that you needed to protect the boys. I understood that Ngwane and I stood by you, where has that gotten me? Nowhere.”

“Nandi...”

“How long am I going to carry the mistress title?” She interjects, standing up to her feet. Maybe a bad choice, he is still chief and protocol says do not stand while addressing the

chief.

“What do I really mean to you, Vumile?”

Argh, stuff it. She knows him horny, naked, and sweaty. Vumile stands, over sizing her, his hands get the pleasure of holding hers. Their eyes meet in an unmoving dance.

“Marry me, I love you and I want us to get married.” Hasty! Where is Dalisile? Nandi can't help but sigh, she's heard these empty promises before. Like last time, she is deterred. Vumile has never been a man of his word.

“I'm a grown woman Ngwane, don't play with me.” Nandi.

“I am not playing with you, I will send a letter to your uncles in three days. You will become my wife MaShamase, you and our daughter will be given your rightful place in this house.”

A man with a vision, or... a spur of the moment man. His brothers are back home, healthy and

moving on with life. They better be finishing their pap because they will need strength when Nandi's uncles come for him. Seventeen years with their daughter? The audacity... He hugs her in his tender arms, he loves this woman... he just has a weird way of showing it.

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Vumile is sitting alone in the lounge fighting demons and trying not to think of Dalisile, and how she will react to him marrying Nandi when a knock disturbs his peace, he opens the door to his cousin Qinisela. A smile spreads on the chief's face, it dies when he spots a Sangoma standing a distance behind Qinisela.

"What is he doing here?" He's not happy about this, or else he wouldn't be questioning his cousin who is way older than him.

"He is here to cleanse the premises, there was a

funeral Vumile, it has to be done.” Qinisela gives reason.

“I don’t want that man here, tell him to leave.” Vumile steps out, pushing Qinisela further out with him.

“We have to do the cleansing, I don’t want bad luck following your children.” Qinisela validates his reasons.

“You know that I don’t want those people in my premises.” Vumile argues.

“Yes, I know. I also know that you have failed to keep your children safe, have you seen them Vumile? Have you sat down and taken time to study your boys? They are lost, every one of them.”

Vumile does not appreciate this, cousin or not, Qinisela has no right. Not even Dalisile has bothered to tell him how to raise them, money talks when it comes to her. Qinisela is different,

he is an African man who still practices tradition.

“Are you judging my parenting skills, Qinisela?”
He’s not about to start a fight, it’s just a question that deserves an answer.

“You know I would never do that, all I’m saying is that put your children first. They don’t deser...”

“They are my children, not yours.” Vumile has become feisty, so defensive and boring. Qinisela frowns, he can’t recall a day his cousin spoke to him with such disrespect— it’s not like Vumile to spew cheeky covered shit when talking to elders.

“What about Mathonga?” This should bite.

“What about Mathonga?” Vumile interrogates like a detective out to solve a Jane Doe. Four pairs of angry eyes are locked on each other, nostrils flaring and breaths whiffing the mid-

summer air.

“He’s not your son, the least you can do is keep him safe for the sake of his father.”

“Qinisela?” Vumile roars grabbing him by his shirt, it’s too late, Qinisela has said what he said and he is not taking it back.

“Baba?” A voice calls from the side, they turn to Mathonga. The shock in his eyes says he heard every damn thing.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He’s never really given much thought to keeping a close eye on Zamangwane, and she has never given him a reason to doubt her. This is all Khahlamba’s fault, he planted doubt in his head, he’s the reason he’s here, checking up on Zamangwane.

He knocks once, the second time he grows impatient. If she is not in there, he will show her, her mother.

He's about to walk in when his phone beeps with a message from an unsaved number, his mind is not with him when he flips the screen open and is instantly on the green app. It's times like these he wishes he had a Nokia 3310, this cannot be happening to him. What in the world of X videos has come over Thethelela?

Ntaba is given an opportunity to laugh, something he does without faulting and something he does not do when one of his women send him nudes. Thethelela must have meant to send Bopha these nudes, then again, the old man is not up to date with technology. His old Alcatel serves him just right.

"Nonsense." He whispers to himself, an urge to forward the pictures to Khothama tickles him. Then again, he respects their brotherhood.

Things would be weird between those two if he shows him his stepmother's gold.

He deletes the pictures and locks his phone, he thinks of going to ask Nandi if she has seen Zamangwane. That one is always missing, you'd think she has a 9 to 5 job.

"Comrade."

One of the guards greets, Ntaba nods. He's not in the mood to utter a word today, he's planning on going mute throughout the day. If anyone dares to speak to him, he will shoot them point blank. It all has to do with what happened at the cemetery last night, fainting and stuff.

He can't recall how he got home, all he remembers is waking up in his bed and Styles standing by it.

The explanation was that the men helped him get Ntaba into the car because they had no wheelbarrow to push him.

Embarrassment showed up, Styles he can trust but not those baboons, he wants to find them and make sure they don't run their mouths around the village. However, he is on mute mode today, tomorrow should do.

“Bhuti Ntaba.” Or maybe not.

A smile finds a way to his sour face as Zamangwane runs to him, she looks different today. Too happy and too colourful—come on, a little boy died, it's his funeral today. Showing a little empathy wouldn't hurt. Wait a second...

“Hold it right there.”

He pushes his palm out, she freezes, eyeballs on display, face glazed with a frown, and hands on her back.

“Who are you and where is my sister who dresses like a little witch?” He's always hated the black clothes.

“Don’t be silly, bhuti.” Little Zamangwane sings, if only all seventeen year-olds were this jolly and free spirited. She throws herself in her brother’s arms, knowing he will spin her around, and that he does. As he puts her down, she holds a packet of chocolate flavoured Toppers. Unfortunately, her brother is not buying it.

“What’s the catch?” He asks, narrowing his eyes at her. She’s giggling like the chirpy birds this morning.

“It’s a new day bhuti, and I woke up and decided to choose you.” That makes sense in the world of a teenager, Ntaba is not getting it though.

“I see,” a head nod and condemning gaze. “So you need a day to choose your brother? Why can’t it be every day?” Yeah, Zamo. Why can’t it be every day, pray tell? She shrugs because well, she has no answer for him.

Ntaba snatches the biscuits, and feeds his

obsessed mouth.

“Tell me, where were you yesterday? Your mother tells me that you’re leaving the premises without any guards.” He’s talking with his mouth full, throwing one piece after another into his mouth.

Zamangwane clears her throat, she entangles herself from Ntaba’s hold.

“This place is boring bhuti, I can’t stay cooked up here the whole day. I have friends and I have a life.” She defends her actions.

“Friends?” Ntaba enwraps his hands on her shoulders, stopping her from going any further. “Do you mean boyfriends?”

His brows are raised, eyes digging and gaze accusing. Zamangwane breaks the eye contact, this brother of hers sees too much sometimes. If anything, he’s a pro in unravelling people’s secrets.

“I’m seventeen, going on eighteen.” Another justification from the teenager, she’s too young to be locked up while her peers are making memories.

“Are you sleeping with him?” Ntaba insists on her having a boyfriend, Khahlamba’s words have come to him.

“You let the Khanyile blood be consumed by our enemies.”

“Eww, bhuti.” Her face is resembling Mr. Bean’s. “You can’t ask me that, you are my brother... it’s weird.” Look who’s suddenly feeling awkward, little Ms “I’m seventeen.”

“Yes I am your brother, old enough to father you.” There is no lie in that. “Don’t hide things from me, Zamangwane. It won’t be nice for your little boyfriend when I find out what is going

on.”

Now, where does he get off? Pouting like a petulant child, Zamngwane folds her arms across her chest.

“Okay bhuti, I won’t.” A pinkie promise and spit swear might get him to back off, Ntaba can be a kid at heart. There’s an incoming call on his phone, Zamangwane frowns due to the ugly mzabalazo song blaring from the speaker. With a dramatic roll of the eyes, she springs away. It’s an unknown number, hence the frown on his face.

“He’s not breathing, I don’t know what to do.” A woman is crying over the phone, for a minute, he can’t recognise the voice. The owner comes to his head in slow motion.

“Thethelela?” Not mama, but Thethelela.
Progress!

“Something is wrong with Bopha, he’s won’t

wake up. Please come, I'm afraid. Khothama is not home, I don't know what to do."

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned... no, there are no scorns here, just a beautiful young woman with Jezebel's borrowed clit.

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A/N: The insert is short due to power outages, will make up for it tomorrow. Please like, share and comment.

MATHONGA

Forty-eight

Sponsored by Charmaine Kotoyi

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KHOTHAMA-

He is going to be a father soon, nothing else matters at this moment but that. It's really nothing new because word has it that he has fathered many kids in Umlazi and neighbouring towns, ask him about it and he will deny it and swear on his mother whose face is nothing but a distant memory.

He doesn't have a steady job, but he is the definition of a hustler. Going to bed with an empty stomach is foreign to him, poverty is something he does not like. Fake it till you make it, that's the moto he lives by.

You'd never find him in washed out clothes or hand-me-downs. Life outside his father's premises is what he mostly dreams of, he'd leave if his father were strong enough to bear

his absence.

Bopha means the world to him, that's why he abandoned his girlfriend Zilile at her mother's house after receiving a message from Ntaba telling him to check on his father. He walks around without protection, although he has Ongezwa Sangweni's blood on his hands. His raised eyebrow and poker face daring anyone to touch him.

He's driving Muphumuzi's old Nissan Langely, friends who borrow each other's cars die together.

Bopha is usually sitting on the veranda reading a paper or just watching people passing by, not today. Khothama's heart does a high jump, he doesn't want to think the worst. He shuts the door and runs through the gate shouting his father's name. Yeah, disrespectful.

Ringo and Cynthia must have heard the

commotion because they come running and barking at their master. Thethelela scurries out of the house dressed in nothing but a silky robe. Shock is very much evident on her face.

“Khothama, what... what are you doing here?” Her words run together, crashing between her lips.

“Where is my father?” He’s not the cheerful Khothama she knows, but a beast that would rip her head off if she makes one stupid mistakes.

Tears! Women learned this technique from the devil himself. Look at her wailing like she’s going to dress like a widow all her life.

“Thethelela, where is my father?” He barks because really, she’s wasting his time with her cries. He’d roll his eyes, but that’s too much work for a man like him.

Thethelela flinches and points towards the house, he doesn't ask anymore questions but runs into the house. Mrs. Khanyile is left alone, checking the gate for any expensive SUV driven by a giant whose surname is also Khanyile. Where is that idiot? She was sure he was going to come.

Inside the house, Bopha is laying on the kitchen floor, eyes closed and mouth ajar—he resembles a dead pig. Khothama discontinues his escapades, heart wanting to stop pumping.

“Baba!” Is first whispered, he takes a step closer— the second one makes him brave. He's kneeling before his father, checking his pulse point. There's a little pulse, weak but it's there, a sigh of relief plunges from his chest. Thethelela walks in while he's talking to the paramedics. She keeps her eyes on Bopha, biting her lower lip in anticipation.

“Is he dead?” The question comes after Khothama’s call, he frowns at her. Why would she ask like she’s expecting it?

“What happened here?” Now here’s a thing about Khothama Khanyile, he’s like the Mexican Chilli Simba chips, tasty but cuts your tongue like a razor. He’s not the right person to have on your bad side.

“I don’t know,” the tears return with a mission to impress, they brought snort this time. “We were talking and he suddenly fell, I thought he was having a heart attack.”

Meanwhile, he is as strong as a horse. Khothama stands, scrutinising her under his dark gaze.

“I’m going to ask you again,” there is something sinister about the eyes that are watching her. Thethelela is standing in silence, body shuddering, it must be the way Khothama is

glaring at her.

“What happened to my father?” He asks again, treading closer to her. With every step she takes away from him, he takes one towards her. Before she knows it, he’s standing so intimidatingly close. Caging her with his heated eyes.

“Khothama... I... my husband is...” She’s a good crier, this one.

“Your husband is not dead, now tell me what happened to him.”

“I told you, I don’t know. We were talking and the next thing he was on the floor unable to breathe.

A cold smirk stretches on Khothama’s mouth, he gives her space by stepping back. A loud whistle from him and Cynthia and Ringo hurtle into the house. Khothama bends as he grabs their collars, his gaze engrossed on Thethelela

who is now trembling with fear.

“Do you want me to do this the easy way or the hard way?” He continues patting the dogs.

There is a threat in his eyes and it has Thethelela crying out loud. Khothama can easily turn the dogs against her.

“Ple... please. I swear I don’t know what happened.”

“You know, Cynthia hasn’t had any meat this week. I’m sure she would love to taste some.” That’s it, it’s time to send the Khanyile brothers back to where they came from. The moon or something because wow...

Thethelela is good at this crying thing, more tears mean a salty meal for Cynthia. Who wants steak without salt anyway?

Khothama is not buying it, he waits for her to finish crying. It’s not happening, she will cry until Jesus knocks at her door.

Saved by the ambulance siren, she runs out of the house to welcome the paramedics. Khothama can't imagine what could've happened to his father, he sets his dogs free and checks on his father once again. Good, he's still alive—barely.

THE KHANYILES-

“Come with me,” says nandi pulling Mathonga by the hand. His feet protest against him, not wanting to move.

“Baba?” The question is there, right on his tongue. However getting it out is a mission and a half. Qinisela said Vumile is not his father, how is that possible?

“My boy, please come with me.” Nandi continues to pull his hand, where did she come from, anyway? When Mathonga doesn't spare

her a single glance, Nandi stands in front of him. Unfortunately, madam is a lot shorter than the Khanyile giant. Vumile's pale face is on full view, he looks as shocked as Mathonga.

Nandi cups his face, it's a gentle touch that gets her his attention. Does a mother's touch feel like this? It must— his heart is melting and breaking and drowning in sadness all at the same time.

“Ma!” His voice trembles from his chest, a lone tear escapes his eye. One swipe from Nandi and the tear is a thing of the past.

“Your father will tell you everything.” An assurance with a heavy eye contact, madam knows her man crush like her best side profile.

“He's a chief Mathonga, please show him the respect you've always shown him. There are strangers out here, come with me.”

Her soft voice breaks the wall to his heart,

strengthened by her resolve, he guides his feet where she is leading him. Not once does he turn to look at his father and uncle.

“Look at what you have done.” Vumile is out to blame the world as always.

“I did nothing wrong, don’t you think it’s time you take responsibility for your actions? That boy deserves answers, stop hiding behind the bible. Not even God can save you from this, my dear brother.” Oh Qinisela; his wise words get him the same results—a livid Vumile who turns towards the jungle of trees to calm himself.

At the feel of a tight grip on his shoulder, he glances over it, Qinisela and his apologetic look do nothing to take the fear away. He’s never been more scared of anything than losing Mathonga.

“He’s going to hate me.” The chief grants

permission for his shoulders to slouch, giving his focus back to his cousin. He can still see the sangoma waiting for Qinisela, there is no use in chasing him away. The truth he's worked so hard to keep hidden has been revealed.

Nandi has brought Mathonga to the throne room, they wait in silence for Vumile.

Mathonga's hands are trembling, he doesn't bother to clasp them together since it won't make much of a difference. His drumming heart wants to go on strike, take a bow for the day.

When he was a kid, there were never signs that he was an outcast. Vumile treated him the same way he treated the other kids, on second thought, he treated him better than the others. It can't be that that man out there is not his father.

"Did you know?"

It really doesn't matter if Nandi knew or not, he

can't hold anything against her. She owes him nothing, she is not the one who carried him in her womb.

"Yes, your father told me." Yep, Vumile tells her every... single... thing. She is his confidant after all. A shaky breath wallows out of Mathonga's trembling lips, more tears kiss the prince's chiselled face. What an honour!!!

"Who else knows?" Is what he wants to discern, if Nandi knows then his bothers must know.

"Your mother."

Oh wow, shocking!

Mathonga finds himself laughing, tears of pain swamp down his face.

"Of course she knows, she spits on the ground I walk on." He says this with dry sarcasm.

"Your father loves you, Mathonga." Nandi says, she knows nothing about Dalisile loving him or

not. Only Dalisile knows what's in her heart.

Mathonga closes his eyes, trying to block the train of frustration. What Nandi is saying makes no sense to him, you don't hide things from the people you love.

"Can we pray?" She asks; a solution for every tongue-speaking, washed in the blood, Jesus enthusiast.

His phone blinks with a welcomed distraction, he's thankful to Nala for texting him; she wants to know where he is.

He replies only to pass time, praying is the furthest thing from his mind.

Nandi sees nothing beyond his frustration, even that light that dwells at the end of a tunnel is not there.

Minutes later, Vumile and Qinisela walk in, the

chief takes a sit on his chair and Qinisela finds one next to Mathonga. The room is more like a lounge, without couches but benches. There's a table in the middle where the chief feasts with important guests.

"Ndodana." Vumile starts.

Mathonga shuts his eyes, holding back a sigh that would most probably offend Vumile.

"Are you okay?" The chief.

This question should be banned from the book of questions, no one is ever okay. Mathonga presses his answer down his throat, he'd be told how rude he is if he says what's on his mind.

"This is not how I wanted you to find out." It must be hard for Vumile; shame.

"So it's true?" Mathonga enquires, grumbling under his breath. "You are not my father?"

It hurts to ask this.

“I am your father.” Yhuuu! Such a misleading answer.

“Baba please,” Mathonga snaps, his eyes never showing light.

This is harder than Vumile thought, it’s the same as giving his son away.

“I’m not your biological father,”

That didn’t hurt now, did it? Who needs uTatakho when you have the Khanyiles?

Mathonga’s heart shatters to a million pieces, sure he heard the truth. Now that it’s confirmed, he is finding it hard to breathe.

“Who is my father? Where is he?”

He’d ask why the truth was kept from him, but what difference would that make? The truth was kept from him and no reasons given will reverse time.

There is a lengthy silence, Vumile refuses to open the can of worms. He can't tell his son that he is a product of rape, it will destroy him. Mathonga looks between his father and uncle, none of them are able to look him in the eye and that angers him. He waits them out and grows excessively impatient when nothing comes from either of them.

He tries to fight down the wrath gushing through his pulsing veins, and fails.

A second later he finds himself on his feet, an aggressive stance on display. It's against protocol to stand before the chief when he's seated on that particular chair. If he were a normal villager, Mathonga would be punished for the impudence.

"Who is my father?" Mathonga is boiling with a thousand pounds of anger, it has gone beyond

mere frustration in a snap of a finger.

“Mathonga, please...” Nandi and her holy hands touch him.

“Ma, you do not want to touch me right now.”

His warning stops Nandi from putting her hands on him, he’s a raging storm ready to unleash its dangerous waves. Nandi steps back, watery eyes cast on Vumile.

“His name is Phumlani, he was banished from the village.” Qinisela says, it’s not his place but what the heck.

“Where is he? Why is he not here?” The more questions Mathonga asks, the more they rip at Vumile’s heart. His son can’t find out what Phumlani did, he just can’t.

“You wanted to know who your biological father is, I have told you. I don’t want to discuss this anymore.” Selfish Vumile closes the case, it’s not his to close though.

Mathonga's nostrils flare as he glares at his father.

"What do you mean you don't want to discuss this anymore?"

He asks, eyes flashing angrily.

"Exactly that Mathonga, Phumlani is not a sane man. He was never fit to be your father and he never will. Forget about him, you are my son." Vumile shouts back, a wrong move.

"How is that your decision to make? He is my father, and I want to know where he is. I have the right to know why he is not in my life." His voice is slowly growing louder, his facial muscles have become stiff. Mathonga could feel his heart batter and his blood pressure rise, he's trying with all his power to push down the rage and not break.

"I said no, now cut it." Vumile is close to screaming, something he never does. Nandi

stands as her mind tells her to calm him down, she can't take a step further than a shift of the foot. There's tension in the room, too thick to slice and too heavy to bear.

"Who the hell do you think you are, Vumile?" Ehh!

Mathonga yells, eyes reflecting nothing but malice. He swaggers into the clearing, away from the bench.

"What did you say to me?" Vumile questions bitingly.

Battle lines have been drawn, they are like two bulls set to fight each other.

"Damn you Vumile, damn you. You think you can dictate my life, tell me what to do? Do you know who I am? Do you?" He's growling like an animal, more like a possessed man. It's not common, Mathonga has a slow burn— he doesn't get angry at the drop of a hat. The sudden short fuse is not something to be taken

lightly. Nandi spins around and runs to go get help, ithongo has been unleashed.

“Vumile you need to calm down, and tell him the whole truth.” Seeing what’s happening, Qinisela intervenes.

“Stay out of this Qinisela.” This is Vumile doing just about anything to protect his beloved son from the truth.

“You can’t protect him forever, he will find out eventually.” Qinisela contends.

“I want to know where my father is and I want to know now.” The displaying of the teeth and the beating of the chest are to intimidate the threat, which is Vumile.

“What has gotten into you?” Vumile asks, his ears are smoking.

Oh, he sees what has gotten into his son,

alright— it hasn't clicked in yet.

“Stop this nonsense now.” Vumile sizzles, eyes burning a hole in Mathonga's temple.

“Forget it, Vumile. It's not Mathonga you're dealing with now, but ithongo.” Qinisela warns.

Perhaps if Vumile didn't have his face dipped in the bible all the time, he would recognise that his son is not himself.

“I will not be controlled by you, Vumile. You will not tell me what to do, is that clear?”

Mathonga roars, as he stomps towards his father.

Grabbing him by his collar, he jerks Vumile close to his face, gritting his teeth as he mutters, “Enough with your scheming, take me to my father now.”

Mathonga's temples pound with rage, Qinisela wants to butt in. If only he were strong enough.

“Mathonga, please. Calm down.” Vumile pleads, eyes bursting with shock and terror.

Nandi plunges back in to a terrifying scene, she screams upon seeing Vumile manhandled by his son. She brought Ntaba and Ndleleni with, the sangoma is not around. Why didn't she bring the sangoma?

“Thonga lami!” Ntaba shouts, running up to them. He and Ndleleni are pulling Mathonga off their father, they can't seem to grasp why he's stronger today. Usually they would knock him down with one punch.

“Mathonga stop, he's your father.” Ndleleni begs.

Instead of calming down, Mathonga explodes with anger. Throwing his father to the ground, he pushes his brothers off of him. They slide across the floor, gasping in shock.

“Do not touch me, you filthy boy. You smell of

death and sin.” Mathonga sputters, dark gaze and an accusatory finger pointed at Ntaba.

He’s groaning and growling like a raging animal, shoulders rising and falling. He spins back to Vumile who is trying to pick himself up from the floor. As he charges at him, Ntaba and Ndleleni grab each of his arms, holding him back.

Mathonga struggles in their grip, his groans are becoming louder.

“Ahhh! Don’t touch me.” He screams like a mad man, they are shocked by his strength.

“Don’t let him go, he will kill your father if you do.” Qinisela alerts them, it’s easy to say when you’re only watching. He should be helping them.

Mathonga’s face is covered with snort and tears, he’s heaving like a dying man and screaming like he’s demon possessed. Nandi is

on her knees, praying. All Qinisela could do is tell the boys what and what not to do.

Mathonga swings his body back and forth, fighting his brothers. He's stronger than both of them, at this moment.

"We need to get him on his knees before he overpowers us." Yells Ndleleni through Mathonga's loudness, Ntaba gets the message and kicks Mathonga on his knee-pit. As he crashes knee first on the ground, Ntaba and Ndleleni lose their grip on his arms. They are ready to grab him again when he balls his fists and begins pounding the cemented floor like a deranged man.

His mouth is drooling with thick saliva, his nostrils releasing snort mixed with blood, his forehead bears evidence of bubbles of sweat and his eyes are more watery than a leaking tap.

Mathonga's heart-twisting screams affect

Ntaba in a bad way, he hisses under his breath as he helplessly watches his brother lose to a spirit. What kind of an ancestor has manifested? If he could, he'd shoot it and send it back to the underground.

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How about it fam? 300+ comments brings us back here at 9pm...

MATHONGA-

Forty-nine

KHETHIWE-

My mother was not happy about me quitting my job; me and my big mouth. I should have told her that I was fired. The company my father works for is retrenching, he was demoted

instead and his salary decreased.

So, the situation at home is bad.

It's a full house, every unemployed person is here; in my father's house. It's a Sassa house actually, my father's sister, aunt Rebecca moved in a month ago with her two 26 year-old daughters.

Sono and Amafu, those two along with their mother have occupied my room.

I have to sleep in the sitting room, on the floor. Every day I regret leaving the Khanyile homestead, life was better there. I had a room that had a shower and a toilet, my own toilet.

There's a heavy presence behind me, I immediately turn down the TV volume. Mom hates that I have become a potato couch, she's forever yelling and dictating what I can and cannot do in this house.

“Khethiwe!” Her cold voice reaches my ears, and causes me to flinch. Gradually, I turn my head to face her. I did say she was not pleased with me, I thought she’d be over it by now. Talk about holding a grudge.

“Here,” her face is unkind as she hands me a piece of paper.

“Kobus Moolman.” I read the name out loud in a questioning tone.

“He’s looking for a cook, I recommended you. If everything goes well, you will be employed by the end of the day.”

What? I don’t want to cook for some Kobus, her sister in-law is living rent free here and eating my father’s food. Why didn’t she recommend her?

“A friend already promised me a job at Spur, ma.” I lie, she doesn’t make it easy for me. This woman knows when her children are lying to

her.

“Khethiwe!” The folding of the arms is never a good sign, just know you have pissed her off. “You willingly left your job, no one forced you to. Now we have another mouth to feed, your father is the only person bringing in money in this house. Stop being selfish and go meet up with this man.”

And there she goes, marching back to her kitchen. This is the part where I swallow my pride and do what she says.

I should change out of these sweatpants and wear something presentable. But I’m not really out to impress Kobus, if he really wants a cook then, my looks should not matter to him.

I rush to the room that used to be mine and put on a pair of shoes. On my way out, I bump into my father. He greets me with a smile and asks where I’m headed, I’m trying not to sound like a

brat as I narrate the short story about me cooking for a Kobus.

“Here, buy yourself something to eat.” He hands me a R100 note, fresh from his pocket.

“Thank you baba,” I’m not about to say no to money. My salary will be in at the end of the month, I will spoil him with that little change.

“Don’t tell your mother,” he warns.

It’s funny to me, he’s always done this. Would cover up for me or give me something and say to keep it from his wife. She can be a dragon that one.

“Be safe, I don’t want to see another video of you fighting.” Geez! This father, why is he on Facebook to begin with?

My face is all over social media, a video of me and Thethelela fighting has been trending for a

week. Khothama has no shame, he didn't bother to use a fake account. I don't care what people have to say, what comforts me is that Ntaba is not on social media.

My father and cousins know about the video, I had to bribe the two sisters to keep their mouths shut. I have a mother who walks around breathing fire.

My destination is Nyamazane Game Ranch, it's a cottage. Kobus manages the place, he tells me that he knows my mother and interviews me without a CV. I'm starting on Monday, just great. I don't mind a job, it's the thought of feeding my aunt and her two kids I can't stomach.

I'm left with R40 and a few cents from the money my father gave me, it's enough to get me a pie from the garage. The taxi rank is a

distance away from the petrol station, I have to walk for at least ten minutes. Hopefully, I'll be home before dark.

“Khethiwe.”

I don't recognize the voice calling me, or the strange man crossing the busy road.

He's a black man, bald and chubby. I clench my bag like it carries gold, robberies happen in broad day light.

Afraid for my life, I turn and begin marching back where I came.

“Hey wait.”

He's running, I do the same.

“Leave me alone, I don't have any money.” I yell, hoping he'll listen but he's still running after me. It feels like the chase won't end, so I stop and pick up a brick from the pavement.

“I swear I will smash your head with this if you

do not leave me alone.”

Is this idiot laughing at me? I’m completely perplexed.

Screaming is my next option, these gated communities are a treasure hunt for criminals. I haven’t seen anyone around here.

“When did you become so fierce, Khethiwe Madonsela?”

Huh! He knows my name?

“How do you know my name?” I yell, brick on standby.

“I cannot believe you don’t remember me.” He’s still laughing.

“I don’t know you.” I backtrack, leaving no room for him to attack when he decides to attack.

“Ouch! I knew you’d forget about me,” the sir chuckles. I’m cracking my brain trying to remember a face I have never seen before.

“Bahlephambikwethu Sithebe. Ten years is not that long for you to forget your better half.”

Oh how can I not forget the guy with the longest name in the Zulu vocabulary, I still want to smack his mother for that.

“Bahle?” He looks so different, he was very small the last time I saw him.

I drop the brick and giggle at my own stupidity.

“I have never seen anyone run like that before, it felt like one of those scenes from uyajola 9/9.”

There is no reason to laugh at me, it’s his fault for changing over the years.

“Nawe you just came at me like a thug.” I defend my cowardice.

He laughs harder as he opens his arms for a hug, I hesitate a bit before accepting it.

It’s been long after all and we were so close back then. Bahle was the male bestie, we met in

primary school and went to the same high school. We were like the Ying-Yang twins. My father was never a fan of this man, he didn't like the idea of me having a guy friend.

The friendship ended in grade 11, I still remember the day like it was yesterday. Bahle insisted we go watch a movie Friday after school, I agreed.

I was young and stupid, the movie ended late and he dropped me at home using his father's car. His stubbornness led him to my doorstep all in the name of explaining where we were and why we were late. My father, being very traditional and not wanting his little girl to date, went crazy—while my mother threw a fit, talking about how I will end up pregnant and bring babies to her house.

According to her, I had a boyfriend...

I don't know how she convinced my father to transfer me to another school in mid-term. I cried, having to leave my friends and start over at a new school. He wanted to change his mind, but my mother wouldn't have it.

She said something about how I will never respect her if my father takes back his word.

"How are you?" Bahle breathes as his eyes catch mine, we exchange pleasantries and share another hug.

"Wow, Khethiwe, you are really standing in front of me right now. So, you change schools and leave me behind? I thought we were tight."

"We were kids and I had no choice, after that stupid stunt you pulled, thinking my father will listen to your explanation."

He graces me with a chuckle, it wasn't funny back then.

“He chased me with a sjambok, I thought I was going to die.” Bahle is on a role with these loud laughs of his, it’s actually a breeze, I can’t resist laughing too.

“Deep down I wanted him to catch you and whip the stupidity out of you.” Not really, he was my best friend and I was afraid for his life. Bahle was a mosquito back in the day, he had an S-curl and a little moustache. I’m not complaining about how he looks now, I’m loving the goatee beard and shiny head. Suits him.

“Do you want to grab some coffee and catch up?” His eyes seductively drag down my build, I don’t know what that little nod means.

“I can’t, I have to rush home. My father is counting the minutes.”

Plus, I’m not in the mood to entertain another man.

“Are they still as strict? I thought old age caught

up with them.” Bahle.

“Actually they are worse.” I’m lying, only my mother is still aspiring to be Cruella. My father has gotten soft, I love that side of him.

“Okay, when are you free then? There is so much I need to tell you, ten years is a long ass time.”

It is, he’s changed so much.

Bahlephambikwethu looks completely different, he’s not that skinny short boy I knew. He’s a man now, and I must admit a looker.

“I don’t know Bahle, besides, my boyfriend does not want me to have male friends.”

Did I say that out loud? I’m such a sucker for lies.

“Oh, I never took you for the type that is controlled by a man. What happened to being

miss independent? You're the girl who wouldn't stop bragging about how you will never let a man dominate you."

I was kidding about having a boyfriend, I won't tell him though.

"I was a girl, I'm a woman now." My eyes are too shifty, and he sees it. He used to read me like a book back then, things must have changed, right? It would be such a crime if he can still see through me.

"Okay woman," his smile is beautiful... a Colgate smile, his heady scent has me salivating a bit there.

"My car is parked at the garage, how about I give you a ride home?"

Well, manna comes in different forms. That will save me the trouble of taking a taxi.

"Sure." I manoeuvre past him as he gestures that I lead the way, I can feel the intensity of his

stare; burning holes on my back. Control your steps Khethiwe, it'd be embarrassing if you fall.

THE KHANYILES-

When all else failed, Qinisela sent Nandi to get the sangoma. He's currently burning some herbs that are not kind to the nostrils, the room is covered in smoke— they can barely see each other.

The family starts off hopeful because well, the man is a sangoma, he talks to the departed for a living. Their hope is consumed by the smoke and dies with each transparent cloud, Mathonga is not getting any better.

“It's not working,” shouts Ntaba as he roughly rubs his head in frustration.

His brother is running out of breath, heaving

and crying and groaning. He's curled on the cold floor in a foetus position, shuddering, and drooling.

"Why is it not working?" Ntaba shouts, grabbing the sangoma by his shawl. The man releases a sound of terror, he is afraid for his life. He too has no idea why it's not working.

"Answer me." Ntaba needs to calm down, he's angering Mathonga or the spirit in him rather.

"I don't know," Mr. Sangoma stutters, eyes wide and searching for help from the others.

"Let him go Ntabezikude," Yeah Vumile, see what you have done.

"Get that thing out of him, get it out of him now." He does not care about his father's reprimands, it's Mathonga he's worried about.

"I will try, please let me go." Ntaba seems to soften up, not really. The only reason he does the sangoma's bidding is because he said he

will try to help Mathonga. The man in traditional healer clothing touches Mathonga's head.

"The ancestors are very angry, the one that has come forth is the most aggressive one. I see an old woman, too old. She looks at me with eyes filled with anger, she wants blood. His blood." This he says pointing at Vumile.

All eyes turn to the chief, his are ready to leave his head. Why is he wanted dead?

"M... me?" Vumile asks, shakily.

"You are standing in her way, she's waited for too long to be recognised and that has instilled so much anger in her. She's stubborn, hard headed, she refuses to speak to me." The Sangoma elucidates.

"Then how are we going to know what the fuck she wants." Ntaba roars, grabbing the sangoma again.

Mathonga bursts into loud laughter, it's

condescending and egocentric.

“That’s her,” explains the sangoma as he tries to escape Ntaba’s grip. “She’s laughing at you, your bravery.”

“What?” He puckers his brows in confusion and wrath, what game is this spirit playing at? He’d tell her to reveal herself if he didn’t have phasmophobia (fear of ghosts.)

“You are just like me, Ntabezikude Khanyile. Fierce and daring.” The strange voice is coming from Mathonga, they were so focused on the sangoma that they missed Mathonga sitting up on his butt, an arrogant smirk lies on his face. It’s pride and pride and nothing but pride, that’s what they see. His head is tilted to the side, bowed a little, glaring eyeballs shooting daggers.

“Who are you? Let my brother go.” Ntaba gets

to the point as he releases the sangoma's collar. He is no time waster, he wants his brother back now.

"Before you, there was me and your forefathers. I am your great ancestor. Ithongo el'khulu, ugogo omkhulu. I am Khanyile to the bone, my blood runs in your veins. Not even Khahlamba and his father lived in my generation." Okay.

Mathonga's eyes run through every single person in the room, they land on Nandi right by the door. His mouth stretches into a creepy smirk.

"I see we have intruders," Nandi's blood runs cold at this declaration. Wrong time, right place as usual. "Your grandfather annoys me, ntombazane. He's watching over you like a hawk, standing in my way or else I would've killed you by now."

The spirit in Mathonga confesses, it

laughs—head thrown back, mouth wide open and hand clutched on the stomach. Ntaba’s jaw drops, this can’t be happening. It’s imitating him. Who on earth is this woman?

Nandi has staggered till her back hit the door, she’s a mess of trembles.

“What are you talking about?” Ndleleni is the one to ask.

“She is the only woman that will make your father happy, chosen by us and her ancestors. But because Vumile has turned on us, I cannot let him be happy. I have revoked my decision and turned my back on him.”

“But why? What did he do?” Qinisela and bravery, same WhatsApp group. He is asking a question that’s just been answered.

Mathonga is made to set his gaze on Vumile, the chief has not said a word.

“You, you turned your back on us. Your father lived according to tradition and honoured his ancestors. We watched over him and blessed his children only for them to spit on our faces.”
The spirit is a roaring lion.

Didn't Khahlamba cover this? What is this now?

“But we rectified our mistakes? We did the ceremony, and appeased the ancestors. Mathonga is ready to accept the gift.” Ntaba.

“You are still wet behind the ears mfana wami.”
A warning from the old woman, there suddenly seems to be a war happening between Mathonga and the spirit in him.

Mathonga is on all fours, groaning, and violently shaking his head.

“Bhuti,” Mathonga murmurs. His family immediately recognises his voice, he's back.

“Thonga lami.” Ntaba runs to his side, his face is pinched, jaw taut and eyes unwavering. He strips off his top and uses it to wipe Mathonga’s face after helping him sit.

Mathonga wipes his face with his hands, chasing his breath. He wants to ask for water, to quench the unbearable thirst. He is aware of his surroundings and what just happened, he saw her before she took over. The old woman from his dreams, that one who is always angry and wanting to kill Vumile. He knows now that she is the one who lives in him, not Khahlamba. This gift is too much for him, he’s not sure if he still wants it.

“Are you okay?” Ntaba is staring straight into Mathonga’s eyes, not wanting to miss a single shift.

“Does it hurt anywhere? Tell me if you are in

pain, I will take you to the hospital.” Ntaba.

Mathonga’s eyes are on the chief, as Ntaba’s hand caresses his face.

“Take me away from here, I don’t want to see that man.” Mathonga says thoughtlessly, breaking Vumile’s heart. This is what he was afraid of; losing his son.

“Ngwane, let’s talk about this. I’m ready to tell you everything, don’t go please.” Vumile implores, regret laced in his eyes.

“Thonga lami.” Ntaba cradles his cheeks, turning his head so he is looking at him.

“Listen to me,” his eyes pierce through Mathonga’s soul. He needs to get that eye contact right, it’s important that Mathonga understands what he is about to say.

“None of this is your fault, we’re brothers. You are my heart, Thonga lami. I love you, tell me you know that.”

He presses his forehead against Mathonga's forehead, eye contact solidified.

"You knew about this?" The younger's voice cracks, tears break free. Not Ntaba, not the brother who has stood by him through thick and thin.

"Everything I have done was to keep you safe, to protect your heart." Ntaba's voice is too rugged, his calmness does not deteriorate.

"Bhuti you knew," poor thing is crying. He is a man who is not afraid to shed a tear, mommy issues or not. Mathonga pushes himself back, away from Ntaba's hold. They are silent a while before Mathonga is having a break down.

"Who are you people?"

He doesn't know who he is, he's a stranger among strangers.

Ntaba sits flat on the floor, looking apologetic. Vumile kneels in front of his youngest son, he's an emotional clutter.

"Phumlani was my cousin, he wasn't a healthy man." This is harder than he thought, Vumile's heart is breaking. Life can't be so unkind. Dalisile should be here, helping him fight this battle. But what the heck? She doesn't give a flying cow.

"Somehow he lost his mind, and I couldn't send my brother to the psychiatric ward. He was my brother, I loved him. I didn't know that he was going to bite the hand that fed him..." Vumile hides his face in his hands and tears up, his shoulders convulsion. Nandi comforts him with her hands on the very same shoulders, it gives him the strength to continue; knowing that she's here supporting him.

Vumile lifts his head, "He raped your mother, Ngwane. He raped her and I wasn't there to

protect him.”

The confession is said through an ugly cry, Nandi wraps her arms around Vumile’s shoulders and brings his head to her bust.

Mathonga stares at him blankly, his eyes darken as they drift to Ntaba.

“If you want your father found, I will find him for you.” Ntaba stands, a frown knitting his already puckered brows. “I swear to you, Thonga lami. I will turn this world upside down for you and bring him to you.”

This is one secret Ntaba wishes he didn’t know, he didn’t mean to find out the truth. This one was by coincidence, like how he found out about Vumile’s affair with Nandi. He’d heard his parents arguing one night, Mathonga’s name was thrown around a lot, associated with the word rape and the name Phumlani.

Ntaba wanted to confront his parents, make

them tell Mathonga the truth. But he was too young back then, if only...

Mathonga shakes his head, he wants to scream and tell them how much he hates them. Then again, what good will that do? He's done being a burden, he doesn't want to be here anymore.

"Mathonga." Ndleleni shouts after him, but Mathonga refuses to turn around. He's walking away from his family and their lies, everyone but Ntaba beg him to stay. Mathonga continues to saunter away, shoulders slumped, arms hanging on his side and head dropped.

"Follow him," Ntaba tells Ndleleni. "Styles knows what to do, I want you to go with him. Don't leave his side Ndleleni, take care of our brother."

Ndleleni nods, and trails after Mathonga. He's

always followed his big brother's orders.

As they are left nursing their bleeding hearts, Ntaba's phone buzzes in his pocket, it hasn't made a sound since Thethelela's little stunt. He's frowning as he opens a message from Khothama, he has been waiting to hear news regarding Bopha.

My father has left us.

The message reads, the Khanyiles are having a second funeral.

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Please share, like and comment. We have a date tomorrow, let's make it happen.

MATHONGA-

Fifty

Sponsored by Charmaine Kotoyi

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*

KHETHIWE-

“You promised to bring me home before seven, it’s after 10pm Bahle.” My complaint goes to the man standing before me. I’m not interested in that look of apology, I want him to turn back time and bring me home before sunset.

“I’m sorry Khethi, we were having fun and lost track of time.”

He’s putting half the blame on me, fair enough. I

was enjoying his company too that when I blinked, it was already late. Serves me right for accepting the stupid coffee date, it turned to drinks when we got lost in the conversation.

“Breakfast tomorrow?” He asks.

The final nail to the coffin—this man came back to finish off what he started ten years ago, I know he did. That’s why I’m standing with him outside my father’s house at 10 in the evening.

He’s watching me in anticipation, I don’t know why he won’t keep his eyes to himself.

“I have a life,” that involves laying on the sofa and binge watching trash TV.

“Okay, it doesn’t have to be food, we can get frozen Mayo.” His eyes light bright with a smile.

“Frozen yoghurt?” I want to laugh at him, we did that in high school. It would be weird now.

“Need I remind you Khethiwe that you love

Mayo? You never went a day without having it back in the day, you'd be so grumpy when you didn't have money to buy Mayo, but your superman always came to the rescue."

Yeah that's because money favoured his family, not mine.

"I was obsessed, remember this one time I ate three cups and got sick." I accept the ride back to memory lane.

"You had pneumonia, I had never been so scared in my life than when I saw you with your head on the desk, your whole body trembling. I thought you were having seizures, I cried thinking you were going to die."

We share a laugh, his eyes are on me, exhibiting adoration. I clear my throat, sending my gaze away from him.

"My dad beat me up when I came home from the hospital, who does that?"

He took me to Milky Lane the next day without my mother's knowledge, he never said why, but I believe it was his way of apologising. He's a big teddy bear; my father, I wouldn't trade him for anything.

Bahle stands beside me, leaning against his car like I am. His hand brushes on mine, he keeps it there, fidgeting. He wants to hold my hand, I'm not letting that happen. He clears his throat when I shift a smidgeon away from him.

He breathes loud enough for me to hear it and distinguish the cause of it.

"Black parents are so abusive, and call it discipline. I was upset with him for hurting you, I wanted to confront him man to man." He's funny.

"KaMadonsela would've killed you, you weighed a cloud, remember?" I remind him and can't

help but laugh at him, he's giving me that look again. The look of adoration, I want him to stop. I don't want him to raise his hopes on me, I'm not that girl who will give him what he wants. He stands in front of me and takes my hand into his.

"I would've done anything for you Khethiwe, and that hasn't changed."

I don't say anything, simply because I have nothing sensible to say. We stand through the silence, his fingers sluggishly playing with mine. Finally, he sighs as if discharging a load of stress.

"What happened to us, Khethiwe? We were so close."

"My parents sent me away and we drifted, we grew up Bahle." My answer is hurried, I claim my hand back and cross my arms.

"We can still rekindle that friendship." He says

this with hope and expectation in his eyes.

“Things are different now, and we’re not kids anymore. I have someone in my life, he doesn’t like sharing.”

There’s a chariot of fire ready to transport me to hell for lying.

“I don’t see a ring on your finger,” he’s this type that observes too much. “I miss our friendship, I miss you and the way we were.”

“You said it Bahle, the way we were. It’s in the past now, we are not the same people.”

I have no choice but to push him away, life has not been kind to me when it comes to dealing with men. Bahle might be another Ntaba, a disaster waiting to unfold.

“I promise, I won’t be an ass. I want to be your friend, that’s all.” He persists, and he won’t stop,

I know.

“Okay, don’t kill yourself just yet.” Let me play hero and save him from grovelling. “Fine, but no random calls. If you want to talk to me rather send a text. Outings are limited to one a week, you’re not allowed to call them dates. We’re friends, not lovers.”

“We can be lovers and friends.”

He’s laughing, I don’t find it funny— I want nothing to do with love.

I need to Google how to smack a stupid grin off a man’s face.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help it when you said we are friends not lovers. I suddenly remembered the song Lovers and Friends. It was your favourite, little did I know that one day you’ll use it against me.”

Bahle seems to remember every single thing about me, I feel bad, having forgotten quite a

hand full about him. Perhaps my head was always filled with Ntaba... exhibit A; he's in my head presently.

I don't stop Bahle as he forces my arms apart and holds my hand once again.

*Sometime wanna be your lover,
Sometime wanna be your friend,
Sometime wanna hug you,
Hold hands, slow dance while the record spins.*

Oh no, he's singing and swaying me in a dance.
Jesus said he will never forsake me, what is this now?

*Opened up your heart 'cause you said I made you feel so comfortable

Used to play back then, now you all grown up
like Rudy Huxtable*

His hand is on the small of my back, resilient.
He's moving us in a slow dance under the
streetlight, in front of my father's house. His
eyes are a seductive shade— this man is stirring
up something we both won't be able to handle.

I open my mouth to protest, tell him to stop but
nothing emits. He takes it as a sign to continue,
a faint grin on his face.

*I could be your Bud, you could beat me up,
Play fight in the dark then we both make up,
I do, anything just to feel your butt....*

My body tenses at the feel of his hand gliding
down my butt, "Okay, okay, stop." I push back,

my cheeks are on fire. I don't blush, black girls don't blush.

"Don't you like the song anymore?" He snuggles my face, compelling me to make eye contact. His scent is all over me, intoxicating.

"You're not happy Khethiwe, you smile with empty eyes. Your laugh does not derive from your heart. You laugh for the sake of it, not because you want to."

Oh, I have a therapist now.

"You don't know me, Bahle." I blink repetitively, I'm not supposed to be crying, yet my eyes are watering. My chest feels tight, I chuck a long sigh to do away with the discomfort.

"If you allow me, I want to compete for your heart. The man you gave your heart to does not deserve you, you wouldn't be so broken if he appreciated you."

How does he know I'm broken? Am I that

obvious? He kisses me before I can gripe and tell him he's lying. He cups my cheek with one hand, the other tightens around me.

His soft lips harden against my mouth as he skilfully guides his tongue to my own, he tastes like my next mistake, and I'm a fool for not pushing him away. He deepens the kiss and a groan echoes in the back of his throat.

“KaMandonsela.”

My heart sinks at the familiar, nonaggressive voice, the stupid heart bounces back to its place with no warning and because of that, my head swims like gravity has snatched it from my neck.

I choke on my saliva and push away from Bahle like I've been caught sinning.

I probably look like I'm standing in the presence of a ghost with how I'm goggling at Ntabezikude. He's looking at me with those dark eyes of his, why the hell is he wearing that hoodie and standing in the dark like that? He looks like a serial killer who's hiding from the law.

"You're shaking." Bahle's thoughtful voice reminds me that he's still here and I'm still alive, I couldn't breathe for a while there while enthralled on Ntaba's dark frame. He's standing feet away from us but his aura seems to deliciously envelop me, making me ache for him.

"Khethiwe, are you okay? Do you know that man?" Bahle.

Jesus fix this! My mind keeps throwing Bahle out of it, it's how I forget that he's standing next to me. I cut my eyes off of Ntaba to give my

attention to Bahle, it must be a bad idea; there's an unexpected fear that Ntaba will be gone if I blink and I will never see him again.

"I'm fine," I tell Bahle and fixate my gaze back to the man with a daunting aura, he has not moved an inch nor removed his gaze from me.

"Do you know that man?" Bahle again, I think I should send him away. I don't like how Ntaba's face hardens with each word Bahle utters.

"I know him, thank you for dropping me home." He should get the message. I don't look at him, but feel his gaze on me. It takes a while for him to say something.

"I'll call you," a finger is on my chin, my face is turned back to Bahle.

Did this man just force me to look at him? Lord he's leaning in, I don't know what will happen if he kisses me. It feels like eons before his lips are touching my forehead, his gait is arrogant

as he ambles to his car.

The sound of feet slowly tapping on the ground shift my attention from Bahle, I look over and my whole body decides to tremble at the sight of Ntaba sauntering towards me.

There is no reason for him to come any closer, we don't share the same thoughts because he moves a step in front of me. He continues on until my back hits the fence, the look in his eyes is... what in God's name am I looking at?

There's absolutely no reason for me to feel guilty about the kiss I shared with Bahle, I mentally convince myself. It's not working, I feel like a slut. I don't know why I'm trembling, if it is fear or that he's too close to me.

"You better not touch me, Ntaba." I'm afraid I will give in to him if he does, yea I'm that weak.

The air around us has shifted, it suddenly feels

too sensual. No! No! No! This is not what I want. I ran from him for a reason, things have been okay in the land of know your worth. Ntaba can't come like a tornado and disturb my peace.

He's too close and I think he's going to kiss me forcefully but he makes himself short and buries his face on my chest; something that must have taken a lot of effort on his behalf.

The breath from his nostrils dances on my skin, and it burns from the contact. My fingers are itching, desperate to touch him, a light brush of my fingers on his skin. But I fear what touching him would do to me, casting my fear aside because I'm stupid and deserve to be burned along with trashy men, I grip his biceps; his hands stay on his sides.

My mind quickly goes to the gutter, a very dangerous place for it to be at. I tear the thought away, tear him away and stand straight and confident.

“Why?” I mumble, crossing my arms over my chest, isolating myself. I know he has no answer for me and he doesn’t know what I’m asking. His eyes wander, they disruptively fall on my body, boring down my frame.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

I thought I was stronger, I felt strong without him. Then what is this brittle pain I feel slitting through the entirety of my body, that it shatters the last ember in my soul? He’s not uttering a damn word, but staring with cold eyes.

For the first time I see through him, every drop of emotion that might be tormenting him. The man is drowning in sorrow, he looks almost dead. His hanging eyes tell a story of exhaustion, I want to ask but that would mean I’m letting him back into my life.

“You’ve done enough damage, please leave me alone.”

A smug smile plasters on his face at my rebuke, his eyes sweeping down my body. I know what it means, the bastard wants a fuck with no strings attached... as usual.

“Say something dammit.” I yap.

He has not said a word, but I can sense that he’s troubled. Ntaba is a talker, he always has something to say. Plus the Ntaba I know wouldn’t have come for me, this man is here because he wants something.

“Are you safe?”

What? That is such a random question for him to ask, as if he cares.

“Yes, I’m safe. I’m home, with the people who love me.” Overconfidence wants to be my friend and I’m willing to let it in. Like I expected, he snorts and retains his reply. Still so arrogant I

see.

“Why are you here, Ntabezikude?”

“Five hours, twenty seven minutes and sixteen seconds with him. What is it that you two were talking about?” He’s pointing towards the direction Bahle’s car went. My eyes widen and words leave me for a minute.

“How do you know about that? Were you following us?”

“You can’t answer a question with another question, Khethiwe.”

The arrogant bastard, may he bite his tongue and bleed to death.

“That’s none of your business.” I proclaim.

He imprisons my gaze, standing a safe distance from me.

“Don’t spread your wings too wide Khethi, someone might be envious and cut them off

when you at least expect it.”

“Did you come here to threaten me, Ntaba?” A disjointed mumble reaches my ears, I meant to shout that out loud. Damn him for reducing me to this timid person.

“It’s not a threat.”

The fool in me wants to believe him, but the look in his eyes won’t let me. I’m a stupid, thirsty whore that lusts after the devil.

“From where I’m standing, it sounds like you are dishing out threats.” I argue his response, I don’t like the tone he used.

Ntaba chortles, it’s not a pleasant one. I want to fade into extinction when my feelings for him urge me to grant him an apology. Why the hell would I do that? He’s the jerk, not me.

“Stay away from me, Ntabezikude and if you have me followed again, I will report you to the police.” I whisper shout, anger deforming my

face and all sense of composure gone from my system.

He moves in on me, holding the stare. I can't seem to look past the pain in his eyes, today he decided to come to me bare and transparent. Something happened, something terrible. I know Ntaba, he won't tell me if I ask. I'm nothing to him but sex on legs.

"Can we get in the car? It's cold out here." He says and I want to roll my eyes at how he makes his body shiver at the non-existent cold, and rams his hands inside the pockets of the hoodie.

"I'm not going anywhere with you." If I do, I might follow him wherever he leads me and I am not taking that risk. Ntaba will be the cause of my death one day.

"Two minutes, Peaches; sit with me."

Ntabezikude Khanyile is suppliant? Jesus must have announced his return. My stupid body turns on me by shivering at the softness of his voice.

“I don’t have two minutes, please leave, and don’t come back here.”

I want him to gasp and complain and maybe force me to go with him, but he disappoints. Nothing that could attest that he’s human shows on his features... there is no frown, no body language or a drop of the lip. He’s showing me nothing but cold showers.

It annoys me so much that I turn my back on him, and enter my father’s premises.

Khethiwe Madonsela will never learn, why am I stopping to look back at him? He’s gone, suddenly our encounter feels like it happened centuries ago, like time was ruptured and I was robbed of it.

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The light on the porch flashes bright, as I near the door. Unless my father installed a sensor light, I am in deep shit. I swallow, walking faster and praying that God softens my mother's heart. I know it's her opening that door, her face appears first then her purple night robe, draped body.

She is not pleased with me, I see it in her face; in her expression that turns from sour to rage.

"Ma!" I mumble, afraid.

She places her hands on her hips for effect, her gaze stabbing me.

"Come here," she pulls my arm, not giving me a chance to decide whether I want to obey her request or deny it. She lifts her hand so fast and lands it on my cheek. The sound echoes into the night air, and rings in my ears.

“Two men, Khethiwe? Sies! When did you become a certified prostitute?”

“Ma?” I try to say more, but I don’t understand what just happened. My cheek is on fire, I want to cry and call my father but she’s wearing the man’s pants in the house tonight.

“Is this why you’re home late? You were busy serving your vagina to anyone interested.”

“Why would you say that to me, ma? I would never...”

She lifts her hand, shutting me up and walks back into the house. I follow, ready to go and cry beneath the covers. I don’t make it in, like lightning, she’s standing in the doorway, a blanket in hand.

“There’s the veranda, make yourself comfortable.” The light blanket is thrown at me. “You will not promote prostitution in my house, uyeyisa wengane.” (You are disrespectful.)

With that, she turns back and slams the door on my face.

*

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A/N: Please like, comment, and share.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-one

NALA-

I knew that I would find him in his room, he's sitting on the edge of the bed. His head buried in his hands, I stand in the door way and stare, thinking he'll look up, but he doesn't so I stroll

towards him and not once does he raise his head.

I know he heard the door open, something is bothering him and I don't like it, I don't like seeing him troubled.

"Thonga lami!" I'm sitting next to him now, my hand resting on his lap. "I've been trying to get a hold of you, we're ready to go."

"He died." He murmurs, terrifying the life out of me.

"Who?" My head is all over the place, we just buried Thabani. We can't have another funeral. We're only human, we can only take so much. Mathonga keeps quiet, his head still bowed.

"Mathonga, who died?" My tears are here, he's scaring me, honestly. Could he be talking about one of his brothers, the one at the hospital? That's impossible though, he said he's made progress and will be coming back home soon.

My heart is performing, Mathonga is too quiet. I have to control my breathing. I can't afford to freak him out, not when he's worried like this.

He lifts his head, and trains his crimson eyes at me. I don't know what to make of the glower on his face, the furrowed brow and trembling lower lip.

"My father."

My jaw falls and I cover my mouth in total incredulity, I just saw his father earlier today. What could have happened?

Dismay punches me across the face, I pull him into a tight hug, burying my face on his neck,

"I'm sorry, Thonga. I'm here for you if you need anything. I promise, I won't leave your side."

He's not holding me back, I'm confused by his tense body, hence I let go and look into his enflamed eyes. That is all there is now, red eyes

and nothing more. My confusion escalates, how he shows no emotion after losing his father. He angles his eyebrows, his confusion matches mine.

“Babomncane Bopha died today.”

I feel like an idiot but mostly so bad for assuming he was talking about the chief, I’ve heard about his uncle Bopha. They must have been close for him to be this devastated.

“I’m sorry...” It’s all I can offer, a second-rate apology.

“Another thing, I just found out that my father is not my father. He’s been lying to me, all of them have been lying to me.”

He’s telling this story but there’s no emotion in his voice, I can’t see his eyes anymore because he has lowered his gaze again.

I don’t know whether to comfort him or sit here and let him finish. The latter seems like a better

option.

“My real father is a rapist, he raped my mother. Now I understand why she hates me, I remind her of the man who violated her.”

I feel a stabbing in my heart at the pain laced in his voice, I want to tell him that things are going to be okay and that he will heal. But I’m not an expert at this, I myself am a victim who is struggling with forgiveness. The only thing I can do at this point is place my hand on his shoulder, this way he knows that I’m here.

“She doesn’t hate you, Thonga. She’s probably traumatised by what happened.” I don’t know what I’m talking about, really. Mathonga’s gaze sweeps over to me, there’s a diverting puckered pleat on his forehead.

“She hates me, trust me I know.” He sighs and that just breaks my heart even further, everything is too much to take in.

I'm struggling to come to terms with the fact that he's hurting, I feel useless as well because I don't know how to comfort him, my mind is not in its rightful place.

"Where is your biological father?" I ask.

My heart escapes its home and leaps to my throat as he burns me with his sharp gaze, this time I see need and desperation assorted with rage.

He looks at my lips before his eyes lustfully lower to my body and that is enough to quicken my breathing, my heart loses its normal beat as it races against the many thoughts in my head.

He stands up, eyes still fixated on me, reaches out his hand and I take it without any thought to it.

"I want to see you." His voice is a blank paper, a disconsolate smile drags on his face.

He pulls my dress up, I'm letting him, confused as I am—I'm letting him undress me.

This whole time my eyes haven't left his, maybe that's why I haven't panicked yet. I see something in his eyes as they scan my half naked body; praises, as clear as they come. Tears find a way out of my eyes at the message of love relayed behind his determined gaze, no one has ever looked at me like that. He takes a step forward letting his arms snake around my waist and pins me to his body, I can plainly hear his heart beat.

"You disentangle me, Nala and surround me with warmth." His statement comes with a trigger of expectation, the look in his eyes ignites something so strong in me. I know now that life without him would be impossible, I don't want to lose him.

"Mathonga!" The call isn't much more than a rush of air, his name is delicious in my tongue

and leaves my lips yearning to take his name again and that I do, leaning into him. His arms encircle around me, his hands are warm on my bare skin.

“Will you give me permission to hide in your arms?” Mathonga.

He’s staring back, his eyes find my mouth before he runs his thumb on my lower lip, and they quake at his touch.

He leans down hunching his back, he’s too lofty. I have to accommodate his tree-self by standing on the tips of my toes, his lips touch mine... it’s the first time that I shiver at the feel of their coolness. This is not the right time or place, my body should not be reacting this way. Or I should blame my mind for failing to do its job. Dear Lord, why is my body trembling with desire for him?

He pulls back from the kiss, his gaze is doting.

“I need you Nala.” His voice has softened, completely free of anger nor sorrow. At this moment, I toss everything away, every negative thought, every misgiving and let his lips meet mine.

Nothing compares to this, my lips against his. In response to the foreign feeling, my heart is thudding widely in my chest.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He stands on the porch, staring down at her curled up body hidden beneath a blanket. She’s folded the blanket in half and fitted her body in between, for a jiffy there, his jaw ticks. It’s how susceptible she looks, the sight pokes him in all the wrong places.

He bends over and shakes her awake, she doesn’t flinch and that has him trying again.

“Peaches!” There goes her sleep with the last drop of his gruff voice, her eyes are widely staring at him, clearly taken aback by his presence. He smiles, showcasing all his teeth, there is nothing arrogant about it; the pompous bastard goes all out for this one. Maybe playing nice will get him noticed, it sucks being rejected. That’s why he is the way he is, forces things and treats people like they are nothing but gum under his shoe.

“I thought you left.” Khethiwe drags herself up, bringing the blanket with her. He won’t stop grinning like a kid, this is the same man who looked like the angel of death was after him a while ago.

“I’m always here, Khethi.”

Sometimes his head and mouth conspire against him and say things he doesn’t expect. It’s too late to change his statement, he can’t take the words back, not with how her eyes just

lit up.

Clearing his throat, Ntaba folds his arms and shifts closer to her.

“My car is warm, you don’t have to sleep here. Or we can go back to the homestead.” He continues when nothing proceeds from her, he was rejected minutes ago, asking her to go with him is another risk he’s taking. If he could, he’d take her by force and drive her back to the ranch.

“Why are you here, Ntaba?”

He’s not really sure why he’s here, but seeing her again makes him feel a little alive. Of course it’s something he’s finding hard to confess, maybe this is the right time to tell her that he’s drowning and the only person he could run to was her.

“My father will come out and find you here, please leave.” Argh, always so polite when

talking to him. He wants to laugh because he is not afraid of her parents, but that would be offensive. He's trying to gain scores here, he is currently at 0.0.

"Your father is warm in your mother's arms while you're here trembling like my existence has depleted." Ntaba.

Disgusting! That's not a good thing to say to a daughter who does not want to think about her parents getting it on. The picture has been painted, Khethiwe has seen it hence the look of repulsion on her face.

"You're not going anywhere are you?" She ignores his outrageous sully. "Do you want to see me dead?"

Khethiwe is glaring, she's half past to crying. He feels an urge to bring her into his arms, like that day when she fought with Thethelela. He didn't like to see that, it annoys him till this day.

“Khethi!” Just as he touches her shoulder, the door handle twists. Someone is coming out. Ntaba thinks he’s invisible, pressing his body against the wall like he’s a chameleon. He’s literally in plain sight and whoever will come out of there will see him the moment they step out of the house. That’s the look Khethiwe gives him anyway, she wants to tell him to run or hide behind the house. The chance is snatched from her by her father’s worried face materialising through the open door.

“Here,” he hands her a key, thank heavens he doesn’t step out. “Use your brother’s backroom, he’s not coming home tonight.”

Why not in the house? Ntaba wants to reveal himself and ask the old man, it takes an arm and a leg to stop himself.

“Ngiyabonga baba.” A simple smile pulls at her lips, it’s really not something to be happy about. She’s their responsibility, the girl is unemployed

and has nothing to her name.

“Go to bed, it’s late.” Dad’s eyes linger on her, before giving her a short hug. “Next time let me know when you’ll be home late, I worry about you Khethiwe.”

He doesn’t wait for her reply, but quickly goes back into the house.

“I too worry about you, Khethi and I agree with your father. Your disappearing acts must stop.” That’s not what he really wants to say, the man has no clue how to express himself.

Ntaba wraps an arm around her, it’s normal for him to touch her without permission, and she loves it when he touches her, that’s something no one will ever take away from him, not even that Morris Chestnut wanna-be. It’s shocking to Ntaba when Khethiwe pushes him away instead of leaning into his touch like she usually does.

He lets her walk away when she gathers the blanket in one fold and takes a turn around the corner, he lets her go but follows her. She can hear his footsteps treading behind her, his eyes burning her back. Ntaba stands a distance, waiting for Khethiwe to unlock the door. She deprives him an opportunity to look into her eyes by shutting the door, but he's just as fast. His foot is on the crack of the door, stopping it from closing shut.

"Really?" Khethiwe is annoyed.

"Do you want me to sleep outside?" His question is stupid, his father has numerous rooms, many enough to accommodate an army

"Get out of here, Ntaba, go." She pushes him, he won't move, he's a brick.

"I said go." No need to scream, but she can't help it. Idols would surely add her on the

wooded mic list with how she's talking and crying and mumbling. She mentions something his cold heart, she tells him how much she's broken and somewhere between snorting, sobbing and hiccupping, she tells him she has come to hate herself because of him. A slap on his cheek should get him moving, he's not put off though.

"Please." Her face is on his chest, hands gripped on his shoulders. She's emptying the Nile River down her face, it's not crocodile tears. Every tear has a painful story to tell.

"I'm tired Ntaba, I don't want to fight for you anymore. Leave me alone, please."

"Peaches!" That name came to him randomly, maybe she reminded him of peaches or smells like them, or maybe he just wanted someone for himself—someone he doesn't have to fight hard for. The name sounded fitting for her, it would be weird to call anyone else that.

Surprisingly, his arms are around her, tightening every second. He pushes them inside the room, and flips his leg back to shut the door.

“I hate you, I hate you so much.” Anger engulfs her, every single ounce of it.

“I know.” His lips brush against her ear, the softness of his voice invading her audible range.

“You have ruined me, you know that? Why did you come looking for me? I don’t want you here. You’ve constantly pushed me away, every encounter with you left me feeling like trash.” Khethiwe cries.

Making her cry was not part of the plan, it’s not why he’s here. These tears, they evoke something in him.

“It was never my intension,” it’s better than nothing. This man never lets his heart leak. He cups her cheeks, his forehead held on hers. His eyes are closed, hers aren’t, she’s studying his

tight features at close range.

“Stop crying now Peaches. What am I supposed to do when you’re crying like this?” He purrs, lips teasingly sweeping against hers. His lucid voice travels to her belly and gives birth to butterflies, things might start to happen, things that should not happen. Khethiwe pulls away, her eyes on the ground, she’s avoiding looking into his eyes.

Ntaba is carefully watching her as she takes something from the trunk and disappears into the bathroom. Normally, he would make himself comfortable on the bed. Tonight he chooses peace, he stands where she left him, eyes scanning the one room.

There’s a bed in the middle of the room, a small brown couch at the foot of the bed and a 32 inch TV facing the couch, it’s placed on a pile of

bricks covered with shredded newspaper. He can't really relate to this lifestyle, bearing in mind he grew up with a silver spoon in his mouth.

His eyes trail to the bathroom door at the sound of it opening, Khethiwe has changed into a dress shirt. She ignores the fact that he's standing there and climbs into bed after turning off the light.

It's hard to sleep when someone is watching you, she sits up and switches the light back on.

"I'm listening," she tells him. Surely there is something he needs to say.

"You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?" She is not about to make anything easy for him, a blank stare from her has him clearing his throat.

“I’m not used to this khethi, speaking my heart out.” It’s not a lie, he is always pushing people away and avoiding deep conversations. He exhales sharply and shifts a foot closer, it’s not close enough to smell her.

“Your heart?” Khethiwe scoffs because really, this man does not have a heart.

“I deserve that, I was unfair and treated you like trash.” Finally, the devil admits that he’s not a saint.

“And?” She wants more.

“You scared me with your feelings for me, you came at me too hard that I panicked.” He’s a man, feelings terrify him. Khethiwe shakes her head, a message lies behind that. It piques him when he can’t read people, this woman before him has always been decipherable, and that made life easy for him.

This is the part where she should be saying

something, it's not a close conversation— he left space for her to add anything. But Khethiwe is staring, waiting for Ntaba to continue. Where does he begin? If he could, he'd pay someone to speak on his behalf. He's a man who is not familiar with this... whatever this is.

“Peaches.” That name again, it makes her weak and needy.

“If you're not going to open up, leave. I don't need you here, Ntaba.” It's lies, she has never needed anyone so much in her life. Ntaba lets out a useless sigh that does not speak on his behalf because Khethiwe is still quiet, glaring with eyes of expectancy.

“I'm not sure if you know this,” He scratches his head, eyes never leaving her. “The first time I saw you, I got so nervous that I couldn't speak.” People that keep such secrets and act like everything is okay are capable of committing the perfect murder.

This can't be Ntabezikude opening his heart— it was such a long time ago, she might not remember.

She was fresh from high school, he was a rebel who thought the world owed him a kiss on his ass. It didn't make sense to him that he found the new cook attractive, being the son of a chief and crazy rich. No way was it attraction, it had to be something but that. That's how he succeeded in pretending she didn't exist, plus the fact that humans are failures when it comes to this thing called love.

“What?” Khethiwe cocks her eyebrows, it's not possible. For as long as she remembers, this man has always been proud, pretending like she was a fly on the wall. His brothers would testify to that and seal it with one of Ntaba's lethal kisses.

“You don't have to lie to make me feel better.”
Khethiwe.

“You’re right, I don’t have to.” He shrugs. “Can I lay next to you?” That is a big ask, he sees the hesitation in her eyes.

“I’m not having sex with you Ntaba, not today, not ever.”

The chuckle is different today, it has no undertones of arrogance. He didn’t come here for that, yes sex makes him forget his troubles like alcohol does to others. But today is different, he wants to forget, but he also wants to be cradled. His mother is not here, she hasn’t been there for thirty one years. The topic of his father shall not be touched.

“I don’t want to have sex with you.” Eish! That came out wrong. He cusses under his breath.

“I mean I do want to have sex with you, not today though.” He bites his tongue. “That’s another lie, I want to have sex with you tonight...

right now... it's all I've been thinking about. But I'm not here to have sex with you... Dammit." He swears seeing the confusion on Khethiwe's face.

Everything feels weird for him, speaking his heart out or is it loneliness making him think he's desperate for a woman's touch; her touch. Time slows, moving at a pace of a snail.

"I don't know how to express myself, all I want is to lay in your arms. Am I asking for a lot?" Talking is tiring, he wants it to stop.

"You're not." She tells him, patting the empty space on the bed. He doesn't have to say much, she knows what he means. A grin is on his face as he kicks his shoes off, strips off his pants and hoodie. He's like a child after getting a star for good marks, a smile finds Khethiwe's mouth.

"Make space for me." He tells her so he can fit his giant self, Khethiwe lets her eyes rattle till

they almost reach her brain. He lays his head on her chest, arm over her waist. Khethiwe wants to hold him back, the only thing stopping her is her mind working the double shift to convince her that this is not real. It must be a dream.

“Can I ask for one more thing, Peaches?”

She wants to know what he wants now, but what if it's extreme. She's given too much of herself, this is all she has left. Ntaba feels he has waited for too long for her answer.

“Hold me,” he murmurs so openly. His wish is her command, it feels good to have her arms tight around him... weird but good.

*

*

Let's do this again at 9pm... Over 300 comments, don't forget to like and share. Thank you in advance.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-two

KHETHIWE-

I didn't think that he would ask me to come to his uncle's funeral, two weeks have gone by since then and he still looks broken, shredded to pieces.

No one knows what happened to Bopha, his wife can't explain it either. Her story is that they were talking and he suddenly fell, some think it was a heart attack and others say witchcraft. It's the theories black people come up with when doctors fail.

He wasn't in bed when I woke up that morning, somehow I kind of knew that he wouldn't be around. I haven't seen him in a week, he keeps

contact though, checking up on me.

“Mzala, did you order breakfast? There’s a full meal standing at our door step.” I hear Sono shout, she’s lucky my mother is not home. That woman does not take nonsense, I want to respond but I’d rather converse with these dishes, they are not going to wash themselves.

“He’s looking at me, Mzala. What should I do?”

Is she serious? What kind of a question is that?

“Eat him I guess, you stupid whore.” I tease, and she knows it. That’s why she’s laughing like her clit is being tickled, I have to abandon my plates and scurry out of the kitchen to see what the commotion is about or she will never stop. On the corridor, I bump into Amafu, she’s also headed to the door. I don’t remember her sister calling her, she said mzala not wele. (Cousin not twin.)

The corridor is not vast enough to accommodate me and Amafu, this tall giant pushes me aside and dashes before me. Amafu is auditioning to be the devil's bitch, her bitterness reminds me of my mother. Her mother Rebecca is nice though, like Sono. Sono and Amafu are fraternal twins, Sono is short and thick, Amafu is a giraffe with a long neck that always pushes her head into businesses.

My legs have made it to the end of the house, Amafu is standing against the wall, arms folded across her chest. And her sister looks like she's buying a vibrator from a sells person with how she is smiling at the man I have not seen in a week.

What is he doing here? I didn't think I would be seeing him again.

He diverts his attention to me at my arrival, a ghost of a smile on his face. I'm used to the stupid grins, I'm thinking he's not better yet.

“Ntaba?”

“I brought breakfast.” He holds up a FKC package, I’m grateful, I’m not about to deny food. It’s better than the porridge we had.

“Nice, thank you.” Sono grabs the package and sends her big eyes inside, Ntaba didn’t say he bought it for her. She does not even know him for crying out loud.

“Thank you, Ntaba.” I grab the package from Sono, no way is she eating my food and I am not about to act like a girlfriend by denying food. He’s looking at me, I think he wants to be invited in.

“Come in,” he shakes his head. What is wrong with him?

“Your father lives here.” He says. Did he not sleep in my brother’s room the other day?

“I’m here to see you, Peaches.” There’s a small fire in his eyes, it burns my sorrows away.

“Peaches?” Sono squeals, doing a little jump that embarrasses me. “Oh my God, are you her boyfriend?”

I quickly avert my gaze towards Ntaba to find nothing on his face, Sono is ruining my life. I might as well find Osama bin Laden’s hiding place and seek refuge there.

“No,” I would deny this with my palm placed on the bible, Ntaba does not do relationships, that’s one thing I have learned about him and I am learning to accept it. I’m learning to accept that nothing will ever be between us. We can be friends though, if he’s offering. Friends who cuddle.

“Khethiwe can’t go out, aunt said to clean the house.” Where does Amafu enter in my business? I’m expecting an invoice from her, seeing she’s appointed herself as my lawyer. I

give her a reprimanding look that sends her rolling her eyes. I don't know what her problem is.

"I'm sorry I can't come out." I flash Ntaba a warm smile, and get a nod from him.

"I will see you around." He says.

I don't think he owes my cousins a goodbye, why is he entertaining them? I offer to walk him to the car, it's the least I can do after he went all out to get me breakfast.

He's walking too close, and that has me slanting closer into him.

"You're gaining weight." He's observing my body from head to toe, I want to shy away but also smack him across the face for calling me fat.

"I know." Admitting it stings, I went from a size

34 to a 36 in a week, of course I know I'm gaining weight, I have a mirror at home. I blame my father, he watches every move I make and makes sure I have food to eat when he's not home. I'm the child that's called aside when he gets home from work and given goodies, like pies or whatever pastries he brings home from work. I've resorted to sharing with Lethiwe's kids and Sono, Amafu would tell on me had she known that I get special treatment from her uncle.

"Keep eating, it looks good on you."

The people we choose to let into our lives, I can't believe he just said that. Keep eating, really?

"Can I see you later?" I want to say yes, but I can't. It will take a while for me to trust him with my heart. It's torn to pieces.

"I can't, I'm meeting up with

Bahlephambikwethu.” He has this little smile, almost a smirk like he doesn’t want to smile.

“What’s that” He’s suddenly broody.

“He’s my friend, Ntaba.” His chuckle is stoical, he jumps into his car with no goodbye whatsoever. I don’t wait for him to drive off, but walk back to the house. Did we just have a fight?

“Haibo Khethiwe, you didn’t tell me that you have a hot boyfriend.”

Well, she didn’t tell me that she has a big mouth. She snatches the KFC bag from me and digs her hand inside, Sono can be taxing.

“He looks familiar, I think I’ve seen him somewhere. Is it that guy from Facebook? The one you fought that beautiful for?” Sono again, chewing my food like a cow. Is she saying Thethelela is more beautiful than me? She has a big mouth, I snatch the food back and rush to

the lounge. The twins are trailing behind me.

“Yena muhle shame, what’s his deal anyway?”

These ones are model Cs, they were born and raised in Johannesburg. They’ve heard about the Khanyiles but have never seen any of them.

“What do you mean?” I ask Amafu, she’s glaring across the coffee table.

“He doesn’t look like the type that would take any relationship seriously. If he didn’t look like a man, I’d say he’s a fuck boy. Man whore suits him better.” I would call her a bitch if she wasn’t my cousin, putting her up for sale sounds better.

“Don’t call him that.”

“Sorry mzala, don’t take me seriously hao kodwa nawe. But be careful, men like him have a type and it’s not girls like us.” Amafu is being dramatic because of a man? Seriously though! I’m not an expert in reading people’s faces, but that jealous look on her face will turn her heart

black. It's already greyish in colour.

"Girls like us?" I want to call her out on her stupidity, it's not a lie that I have always wanted something more than sex from Ntaba while he wanted only sex. Maybe Amafu is right, besides, it's hard for me to trust Ntaba's words.

"Yes, girls who smell like atcher and amagwinya or yesterday's soup." Sono laughs at her sister's reply, it's an innocent laugh. Sono is that girl, I guess I judged her wrong at first sight. Spending more time with her, I have come to know that she is a softie.

"Don't pay attention to Amafu, she's jealous." Sono intervenes, I have to agree with her. That look Amafu is sporting is of nothing but jealousy. She's annoying me, and that has me grabbing my KFC from the table, I dig in and come out with a small wing. Sono appreciates it with a smile.

“What about me?” Amafu shouts after me as I saunter out of the lounge. I don’t answer her, she will eat amagwinya and yesterday’s soup.

FUNOKUHLE-

Temptation can be a leech, I’ve lost count of the number of times I have stopped myself from calling my father. Something is wrong, I’ve it felt for days now. I dream of him, seated with my mother. They never say anything to me, the dreams are repetitive.

I’ve been feeling under the weather and Bulelwa was kind enough to give me a few days off. I am an employed citizen now, Bulelwa came through with that job he promised me. Data capturing is not that bad, it’s tiring and challenging but better than herding cows and goats. I’m a trainee at the moment, I will be

permanently employed in two weeks.

“What’s wrong Funo? You haven’t touched your drink.” Zithobile breaks me out of my thoughts, she is keeping me company at the pool side. She looks hot in a bikini, I’m so in love with her skin. I throw a glance over at her when she starts pulling her pool lounge towards mine, it’s funny how clingy and caring she is.

“It’s nothing I promise.” I haven’t told her that I ran away from my father’s dictatorship and now I’m worried that something bad might have happened to him.

“Your face says otherwise, you look like you lost all your investments at Betway.” Her face is serious by the way, while I can’t stop myself from giggling.

“You know he’s not going to be happy when he sees you down like this?” She adds and

immediately smacks her mouth to shut herself up.

“Who?” I’m more keen than ever and give her my undivided attention.

Her eyeballs almost jerk from their sockets, I think she just realized that she said something she shouldn’t have.

“Do you want something to eat?” Changing the topic is a clever move.

“Are you seriously going to ignore my question?” I ask.

I know she wasn’t talking about Kenneth, there’s someone behind every good luck in my life. From meeting that man at the bus stop to living with Zitha and her family.

“Well, since you won’t tell me why you’re so gloomy, I won’t tell you anything either.” She’s smart. “Let’s go swim.” She proposes, pulling me up with her. Bad idea, I can’t swim. My feet

refuse to move any further and that earns me a look from Zitha.

“I can’t swim.” My eyes are shifty, I bite my lip out of embarrassment.

“I’ll teach you.” Did I mention that she can be persistent? It’s true that I can’t swim, but I don’t want to either.

“I don’t really feel like swimming Zitha, maybe next time. Let’s just sit here and eat.” That’s all I want to do, stress eat, fill my brain with junk and alcohol.

“Okay, let’s dance.” She rushes into the lounge, it’s not long before a heavy pulse blasts from the house. Zitha materialises dancing seamlessly, however, her moves have a clumsiness to it. I think she’s drunk, she looks drunk actually. Fabulousness is fickle and fades too when your drunk, but not with Zithobile. The girl knows how to handle herself, well a little.

“Dance with me, Funo.” Is said through loud music, the beat vibrates in my chest, that’s how loud it is. I move a leg, tapping it continuously on the floor. I probably look like a duck that’s lost its way. I’m the guy with two left feet, dancing is art and not everyone is gifted.

“Come on dance.” She’s twirling and giggling and she looks happy, and free. My heart pounds with the music, urging me to dance with her, share in her joy and maybe the gloomy feeling will depart from me.

Zitha takes my hand and tells me to imitate her moves, I capture the music with my body, moving to the beat—giggles proudly leave my mouth.

I have never done anything like this before, it’s therapeutic and I love it. The energy oozing from every part of my being, I haven’t laughed

this much in a long time.

“You’re doing it Funo,” she says, half shouting into my ear. We dance and goof around, making as much noise for the neighbours as possible.

There’s a sudden heavy presence behind me, so heavy that I freeze on the spot. Chills invade my spine, forcing my body to spasm. I look to Zitha for heads up, her wide eyed gaze is over my shoulder.

I know it’s Kenneth, he carries that heavy aura, I wouldn’t want him to think I’m corrupting his wife. I’m afraid to turn around, the best thing to do will be to stand like a statue until Zitha takes him away. Lord, I’m half naked, in his house. My cheeks flash, I’m blushing with embarrassment.

Where is Zitha going? She can’t leave me alone with him.

The music stops, it's dead quiet now.
Something is compelling me to turn around, I
can't fight it anymore.

My heart jumps to my throat, he's standing near
the pool. Hands tucked in his pockets, wearing
casual jeans and a fitting round neck, grey t-
shirt.

He's tall, very tall and brawny. He looks different
from the last time I saw him, his hair is thick
and his beard is full. He would pass off as a
cave man, I love the look. I love that he's here,
looking at me. It would be easy to say
something if he was not scrutinising me under
his gaze, I can't look at him anymore so I drop
my gaze and cover my chest. A useless attempt,
honestly.

"Kenny, you're back?" Zitha sings, throwing
herself in Kenneth's arms. I didn't notice her
coming in with how my eyes were trained on the
man before me.

The two engage in a tight hug, they never forget to share a kiss. With her arms around Kenneth, she turns to the man who has been staring at me without blinking.

“Hey, you look great.” She tells him, I happen to think so too. He’s never looked more appealing in my eyes than he does now. There’s silence, he’s not saying anything. I can still feel his eyes on me. Had I been brave, I would’ve snatched him in a heartbeat only to nibble on those lush lips.

“I didn’t know you were coming this early.” She’s talking to Kenneth now.

“I’ll be heading out soon, there is an emergency at the rank. I came to drop my friend here.”

Kenneth says, pointing at him with his head.

Vukuzakhe! I want to address him by his name and tell him how much I missed him, I want to tell him that I have been going crazy with worry.

I want to tell him that life without him has been nothing but grief.

I raise my eyes to see his reaction, he's frowning — he doesn't have a friendly face. His demeanour is standoffish but there's something gentle about him. Something soft and homey.

“Stop staring Vukuzakhe, you're scaring my friend.” Zitha says, giving him a shake of her head.

Vukuzakhe clears his throat, finally something from him.

Why am I still naked? I need to find my shirt, my skin is covered with goose bumps. I'm a nervous wreck, twisting my head from left to right in search of something that was here not so long ago.

“Relax Funo, your shirt is right in front of you.”

Zitha's tone is teasing, I'm going to strangle her for this. With the way she's going, I'm convinced she knows about Vukuzakhe and me. It's also startling that he's friends with Kenneth.

"Kenny, there's something I need to show you." Zitha states, her arms are all over him, it's so like her to let her body gel with his in front of people— it almost looks sexual. Scratch that, those two need to get a room.

Zitha takes Kenneth's hand and lugs him away with her, I'm left with Vukuzakhe and a thudding heart.

"Where have you been? Do you know how much I've been wanting to see you? Why did you torture me like this?" I didn't expect this from me, maybe I should have let the silence speak in favour of me.

Vukuzakhe frowns, his eyes are searching my

soul.

“Funokuhle!”

He remembers my name, he remembers me. He inches closer and flicks my nose with his index finger, a smile on his face. Strange! I think he notices how nervous I am. I’m literally frozen.

“I have missed you, my Minion.” He says.

I missed him too, I haven’t been able to banish him out of my thoughts. He’s a pleasant itch I love to scratch.

His arms tighten around me, he smells the way he did the last time I saw him.

“Are you okay? How have you been?” He’s asking me questions I should be asking him, it is him who was injured.

“Are you okay?” I enquire, pulling away from his tight embrace.

“I am,” his answer is far too quick. “I came back

to take you home.”

Why would he do that? “I’m not going back there.” I dispute, unexpectedly stomping my foot. Why would I want to go back to a place where I’m not wanted?

“I know what happened, and I support your decision to start over. But you can’t do that without visiting your father’s grave, I don’t want bad luck to follow you.”

My father’s grave? My throat clogs, before I can help it my feet are sending me backwards. I didn’t hear right, my father cannot be dead.

“What did you say to me?” The question is squeezed out of my throat, worsening the pain hovering on it.

“Your father died.”

Vukuzakhe repeats, breaking my heart with how cold he is as he tells me that I am officially an orphan. I disowned my father, but that didn’t

mean I hated him.

“I need you to breathe, Funokuhle.” I hear Vukuzakhe’s instruction.

I’m on the floor, light-headed and wheezing, I don’t know how I got here. It happened so fast, my heart was thumping hard against my chest, I took a step to sit down but everything became fuzzy. The next thing he was catching me before I hit the ground.

Now I’m looking at him panicking, I can’t speak, the only thing I can provide are tears and my weakness. What have I done? How will I ever live with myself?

DALISILE-

CHIEF'S BROTHER DIES FROM MYSTERIOUS DEATH!

The devil in a dress sways her hips around the spacious hotel room, champagne glass in hand filled to the brim. There's a smile on her face, occasional laughs of mockery deriving from the deepest pit of her charcoal heart.

"Just when I thought life was turning on us," she takes a sip and tosses the two week-old newspaper on the bed. She's going to frame this one and keep it on the wall in her house.

"And they say evil never prevails." Mgobhozi laughs.

Dalisile has had enough, her face warps with irritation. Today like every day for the past seven days, her sister's presence pricks at her skin. Perhaps it has to do with stress of losing it

all. She's away from home, away from Vukuzakhe, things are falling apart. She knows if she is too comfortable hiding here at High Flyers guest house in East Rand, Vukuzakhe will lose it all.

"I don't see anything funny with that." She says with a roll of the eyes, Mgobhozi's face crumples into a frown.

"I don't care, I want them all dead. Every single one of them."

"What happened Mgobhozi? Why do you sound like you're on the losing end of the line."

"That's because we are, Dalisile. The curse has been broken, don't you get it? It makes us vulnerable and weak."

She's shouting, and for a while there, Dalisile flinches.

"You said you had it under control, didn't you get the soil from the grave?"

“I did, but I can’t reach them. There’s a barrier, and guess who’s the cause.” Dalisile looks at her, awaiting a reply.

“Let me guess,” A roll of the eyes. “Mathonga?”

Good guess, but why is Mgobhozi practising how to click her tongue.

She does it until she’s satisfied.

“Is it not that loose cannon, Nandi?” Mgobhozi states, settling down on a chair.

“What person in their right mind prays for people who died a long time ago? I hate that woman, she’s ruining my plans.”

“That’s impossible, Nandi has never met Vimbela and Sakhile. Why would she include them in her prayers?”

“She’s stupid that’s why.”

“Okay, you said you were going to kill her. What is it sister? Are your powers dying out?”

That's an insult, Mgobhozi stands to face her sister.

"Sometimes I underestimate prayer, I can't see her when she starts praying. And once she's done, there's this wall of fire surrounding her."

She would say Holy Ghost fire if she were powerful enough.

"There has to be a solution, you can't tell me that you are giving up." Dalisile is on her feet, ready to throw a tantrum. She wants her life back, at any cost.

"There is a way, we instil fear in her. The only way is by having her distracted. Bring ruin to her life, keep her on her toes that when she kneels to pray, she won't be fully there. There's nothing more fun than lukewarm prayers. Her prayers will hit the ceiling and bounce back to her."

Mgobhozi stands and almost falls back on the

seat.

“And then?” Must be a muscle spasm.

“My foot feels numb, it’s been happening frequently.” Mgebhozi explains, reaching over to massage the affected foot. Of course Dalisile would worry, they are sisters.

“Let me see that.” Dalisile lifts the hem of her sister’s dress, she’s wearing sandals today. That is definitely a first, the foot in question is a bit swollen.

“What happened to you?” Dalisile.

“Don’t worry about me, you need to worry about the explanation you will give your husband as to why you didn’t attend his brother’s funeral.” Well, not that Vumile cares.

“You said to lay low, Mgebhozi. I can’t show up not knowing what fate has in store for me, and this Nyoni woman you were talking about. Why hasn’t she been able to do anything?”

“Argh!” Mgebhozi sits back, her foot is on strike. There is no point in getting up.

“I told you that Nandi is making things difficult for us, her God and ancestors are making sure she is not touched. How do I fight that? I will need physical contact to get to her. I have a plan for Nandi, what I need right now is her underwear and used pad.” Mgebhozi laughs, the painful foot is forgotten.

Dalisile cringes, it’s disgusting. Her heart is crossed, hoping that her sister will not turn her into G.I Jane and send her on this mission.

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A/N: Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-three

Sponsored by Charmaigne Kotoyi

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KHETHIWE-

“You’re leaving mzala?” Haibo! Since when does she ask me this question whenever I leave the house? I’m upset with her because Sono and I ended up doing all the chores while she opted to be a potato couch.

Why is she talking to me? I don’t answer her, another thing, I don’t want my mother to know where I have gone. I can’t trust radio Amafu, everything she touches does not turn into gold.

I fish for my phone in my handbag and pretend to be on a call, so she doesn’t have to repeat her question. A loud tongue click accompanies

me as I step outside, she'll be strong.

The blasting sun reminds me that my underwear and bath towel are still hanging on the washing line, I'll probably be home late, so I need to take them. The neighbours have easy access to our yard, our fence is definitely neighbour friendly and due to that, I always make sure to take my things before sunset.

Wait, there's nothing on the washing line. I don't recall taking them, there is no need to panic. I'm sure Sono must've taken them.

"Hey, have you seen my blue underwear? It was on the line." Amafu side eyes me, and shrugs her shoulders. What does that mean?

"Amafu, I'm talking to you." Why is she so childish?

"Now you want to talk to me?" She snaps, this girl is so rude.

“Can you not start please? I’m running late and I need to know if you were the one who took my things from the washing line.” I’m getting agitated, especially because she’s increasing the volume of the television.

“Why do you have to be like this, Amafu?” I yell, a waste of time. Feeling extremely upset, I gasp a bit of air in my lungs and try to remind myself that she is this person and nothing I say or do will change that.

“Fine, I’ll check when I come back.” These are my last words to her before I run to catch the Uber outside, Bahle requested one for me. He said something about being held up at work, we’re meeting at the restaurant. The ride is quiet, thank God. It’s not long before we arrive at the destination, the driver tells me the ride has been paid for. Well, free rides are nice.

NALA-

The Sishis are treating us well, Styles and his wife I mean. I thought we would be an inconvenience and crowd their space, but their house is big enough to accommodate us. We moved in about a week ago, two days after Bopha's funeral.

Mathonga is taking things one step at a time, I wish him nothing but good will in life. It pains me though that he is not talking to his brother Ntabezikude, Vukuzakhe comes to visit quite a lot and spends hours with Mathonga, so much so that I end up feeling neglected and craving for his presence. I'm not complaining, Mathonga needs the time with his brothers.

Ndleleni is around as well, he booked a hotel room. Like Vukuzakhe, we see more of him around here.

“Baby get off, I need to make the bed.” I don’t remember when I adopted the baby endearment, it must also have everything to do with him acting like a big baby lately. He’s clingy, needy and demands attention. He would ask for my attention without shame.

“Nala, I feel lonely. Give me attention.” His words, while locking me in his arms.

“Mathonga get up, please.” I’m talking to myself here, this man is smiling, back against the headboard. Just when I think he will adhere to my command and move, he folds his hands behind his head and continues to stare at me with that smile.

“Mathonga!” I whine, pulling the blanket off him, he is testing my patience. He decided on it when he jumped on the bed after he came out

of the shower and found me making the bed. It's the child in him, I have been seeing a lot of it lately. I don't know if it's part of a defence mechanism, his way of coping with what's happening in his life.

"I'm not moving." A grin pulls at his lips, I shall mention again that he looks like a child when does he that.

"So will you stay in bed the whole day?" He nods, I give up. 11am is approaching, what will the people of the house say?

"Okay, let me make the bed, then you can lay on it after." This is a good compromise, it should work.

"No I want you next to me." That's it, I'm having him adopted. He chooses not to see the condemning look I'm giving him as he shuffles to the side, making space for me. I'm starving, cuddling won't put food in my stomach.

“Stop being silly Mathonga, I’m hungry.”

“Come.” He continues, extending his hand for me to take. How can I resist? I can’t help the smile on my face as I throw myself on the bed next to him, a strange feeling bursts into my stomach, only he could make me feel like this.

“Today I want to look at you, I won’t take my eyes off you.” He says, laying on his side to face me. His stare is intent, burns bridges and making me feel like a high schooler with a teenage crush. My only escape from the penetrating stare is to hide my face on his chest.

“That’s ridiculous, is that even possible?” I mumble against the fabric of his t-shirt.

“How can a person miss someone so much?” It’s a whisper into my ear, his arms tightening around me. “I didn’t see you in my dreams, I

missed you Nala.”

I have never heard of anything like that, I giggle because well, I don't have an answer for him.

“Swear you'll always be mine, Nala. Don't ever distance yourself from me, I don't think I'll make it.” Mathonga.

I have come to know that he never hides his feelings from me. Every single thing he feels he makes sure I know it.

“I won't, you are the only one in my heart.” There can never be anyone else, but him.

“I know,” he replies softly, hugging the life out of me—it's bone crushing and I couldn't have it any other way.

“How about I go make us breakfast and you make the bed?” I'm actually getting good at this compromise thingy... sigh! Why are his arms tightening around me?

“No, this is perfect. Can’t we stay here the whole day?” That’s not how it works, and I need to check on Thobani. He’s forever in his appointed room, I wish he would mingle with everyone. He has started his therapy, his therapist has not given me anything I can stand on. I’m always worried that one day Thobani will crumble and I won’t be able to bring him back.

“We had a lot of these last night,” I remind Mathonga of the endless cuddles I was subjected to.

“But I can’t get enough of you.” He cradles my face and dabs my lips with soft kisses, if he continues like this, he’ll end up wanting more than I can give him. Like that night back in Izingolweni, nothing happened. One minute we were kissing and the next he was a frozen chicken, I don’t know what happened. He looked into my eyes and asked that I hold him, our trip

to Joburg had been cancelled because of his uncle's death. We made it a week later, a few days after the funeral.

"Okay, it's time to get out of bed."

"Later, right now I want to have you all to myself." Oh my God, doesn't he get enough of these?

"Mathonga come on, I know you're hungry. Besides, you've showered already, and I still have to take mine." I whinge, my hand is on his chest, he takes it to kiss my knuckles.

I forgot to mention that he is clingy lately, and who would blame him? There is so much going on in his life.

"Okay one more kiss then you can do whatever you want." He says with a silly smile on his face, I'm falling hard for this man and I am never coming back.

He sits himself up, his lips cage mine... his arms

gradually enwrapping around me. I love how he kisses me to forgetfulness, the world suddenly becomes colour and it's only found here, in his arms. His kisses are always different from the last ones, like it's the first time he's kissing me and because of that, I can't get enough of them. There is nowhere else I would rather be than here in his arms.

NTABEZIKUDE-

The plan was that she finds him waiting for her and not that big head she calls a friend and here she is, standing before him with big eyes and a dropped jaw.

“Sit down Khethi,” he orders as he holds a grin on his face, showing off his pearly white teeth.

“What are you doing here?” Not in her craziest imagination did she think she would find him

here. His mouth opens, ready to give an explanation when a chubby man with a shiny head, and wet armpits runs into the eatery, wheezing like a police siren. His eyes search the place, meeting every judgemental eyes staring back at him. He sighs in relief when they land on Khethiwe and a familiar face he must have seen a while back.

“Khethiwe!” Bahle shouts, whiffing his way to the table.

“What happened to you?” Khethiwe.

“This man stopped my car on the highway and slashed my tyres.” Bahle snitches, pointing an accusatory finger at Ntaba.

“What? No you must be mistaken, Ntaba wouldn’t do that.”

“Well he did,” Bahle is losing his grip. “Ask him if you don’t believe me.”

Curious eyes turn to Ntaba, he looks bored as

fuck. He raises a hand to signal for a waiter, in the meanwhile, Khethiwe is sporting a frown.

“Do you have mageu? Banana flavour please.” His eyes don’t leave Khethiwe’s figure and so he misses the waiter’s confused expression.

“We don’t have mageu sir, but you can order from our wide range of milkshakes.” What language is this one speaking? There’s a look in Ntaba’s eyes, boredom.

“What’s going on Ntaba? What did you do?” The light bulb flicks on in her head, it explains why she found him here and not Bahlephambikwethu.

Seeing no one is paying him any attention, the waiter decides to give them time, it looks like there’s about to be a crime scene in this place.

“Sit down Khethi, please.” Ntaba says casually, leaning back on the chair. He’s not blind to how

these two never remove their eyes from him, he can almost hear what's going through their heads. He just doesn't care, he breathes an unaffected breathe before nicely asking Khethiwe to join him, all innocent eyes on exhibition.

"Listen here, bro." Oops, Bahle is coming in like a hunter. Blood eyes and flaring nose, it would be nice if Ntaba was affected by it.

"I just bought that car, you have to pay for my tyres." Oh come on, they are just tyres.

Ntaba is stingy with his glance, to him this man is not here, standing close to his Peaches and annoying him.

"Khethi, what will you have?" He pushes a menu across the table, eyes never leaving a lost looking Khethiwe.

"Yeyi, ing'jwayela amasimba lendoda," Bahle sneers, trying not to raise his voice.

“Yeyi, fokof msunu.” Ntaba calmly says.

This is a warning and Khethiwe feels it, so does Bahle—he’s not intimidated though. Ntaba is a man like he is, and if they were to fight man to man, they will both walk away with fair bruises.

He’s trying to compose himself, act like the man Khethiwe expects him to be. His eyes are on her when a harsh blow lands on his jaw.

“Bahle!” That’s a loud warning from Khethiwe, she’s evaluating the damage. He looks fine but it hurts like a bitch and lights a flame inside Ntaba, he’s on his feet, grabbing Bahle by the collar.

“I don’t fight with little boys, I will squash you mfana.” Ntaba warns, if Bahle was small in weight, he would be hanging mid-air with how Ntaba’s pulling him up by his clothes.

“I’m not afraid of you.” It’s entirely a lie, Ntaba sees it... in his eyes. And to prove that he is not

afraid, Bahle knees Ntaba on his groin. The giant groans in pain, and releases the man.

“Bahle what is wrong with you?” Khethiwe.

Ntaba is what’s wrong with him, Khethiwe’s arms are gentle around Ntaba’s waist.

“Are you okay?” She queries, Ntaba’s response is a heartily chuckle. The bastard looks as good as new, he shoves the pain somewhere in his brain and straightens his body. Khethiwe sees it, a fight. It’s the last thing she wants.

“Please it go.” She’s asking Ntaba. She must know how it feels to be kicked on the groin, that’s why she’s asking him to let it go. Sis with balls... Sigh!

Ntaba would not be who he is if he listens to her, he lands a hard slap on Bahle’s cheek. The second one is a back hand that comes before Bahle can access the first one. The slapped

man attacks with a punch, Ntaba sees it coming and misses it. He lands two blows on Bahle's nose, there is chaos in the eatery. Some people run for their lives

Khethiwe's shrill screams are ignored.

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave." A chubby white man in a pink shirt and red tie says, the name tag stuck on his shirt screams 'manager.'

No one pays attention to him, Ntaba is towering over Bahle, throwing punch after punch.

Khethiwe is too busy screaming, asking him to stop.

"You're going to kill him, please stop." There's so much blood, that's why Khethiwe is losing her mind. It's nothing to Ntaba, the smell is heavenly actually. He wants more, when he starts, it's hard to stop. His thirst for blood, the urge to kill... it has taken over. Perhaps he has

anger issues, perhaps the man he's pounding like meat at a butcher is Dalisile... perhaps the blood he's smelling belongs to his father. He wants to punish the world, every single one of them. There's something in his heart, twisting and his stomach is churning. He can't understand the feeling, it's not supposed to be there. He banished it a long time ago when he lost hope in people, why is it coming back now. Why is he starting to feel human again, he can't let that happen, he just can't.

"Sir, stop him please, he's going to kill that man."

She grabs the manager's arm, crying uncontrollably. Her cries reach him; Ntaba. He steps away from the injured boy. This girl is surely losing her mind, that's how he's looking at her at least.

“Ukhalelani?” He raises an eyebrow, she must have a good explanation.

“You’re going to kill him.” She swipes her tears away using her back hand.

“That’s why you’re crying? For this fool who lacks respect.” Yes, he is disappointed. What a waste of tears... Ntaba seems to think so.

“What is wrong with you Ntaba? Look what you did to him.” She points at the bleeding man on the floor, he’s unable to get up. The police have been called, yep, this is a white man’s place. Bahle is gathering himself up, and wiping the blood off of his face.

“Let me help you,” Khethiwe offers a hand, but the kicked dog is not having it. Anger has him pushing her away.

“Don’t touch me!” He’s up and limping his way out of the eatery.

“The police are on the way, I suggest you two leave now.”

Weeh! Such a nice manager, if they leave now, they won't be spending the night in jail.

“Peaches,” Ntaba calls to get her attention, why in the world was she looking at that sore loser anyway?

“I told you not touch him, but you let your anger control you, he's my friend, Ntaba.”

As if that makes a difference.

“He needed to be taught a lesson.” He forgets to add that he started it, Khethiwe's face is warping with anger. She's feeling so many emotions at the speed of light.

Me: “What lesson Ntabezikude? You slashed his tyres and beat him up. He's my friend, don't you get that? How would you feel if someone did that to Mathonga” That should get him thinking... he would kill the person without

giving it a second thought, but he conceals that from her.

“I did it for you Khethi, I would do anything to keep you safe”

Eyy! He’s revealing too much man... “Look, it’s not a big deal. He walked out of here alive.”

The nonchalant shrug agrees with him, humans are too emotional it’s boring.

“Normal people don’t do that, Ntaba. It scares me that you would do that. When did I ask you to do this for me? Why? Why do you have to do such things for me?”

When anger comes, it stays until you face it ‘eye ball to eye ball.’

Ntaba grabs her arm and pulls her outside with him, they have performed enough for the customers.

“Let go of my arm.” Khethiwe snaps, yanking it

away.

She wants to get away from here, he's getting on her last nerve and she can't stand to look at him anymore.

"Where are you going?" He yells after her as she turns to walk away, she doesn't care to turn around.

"Khethiwe!"

Nope, she's done. He pressed the wrong button.

On second thought, she is dealing with a maniac who never gives up. His hand is tight around her arm, he's so frustrating she wants to smack him across the face. She would if it were not for the raging look on his features. It scares her, and her face fails to hide it.

"Do I terrify you, Peaches?"

He's so funny, it must be a rhetorical question.

Khethiwe blinks away from his gaze, lashes flapping away tears.

“Do you really think I would ever hurt you?”
Well... he’s done it before, so...

“Let go of my arm and if you follow me, I swear, it will be the last time you ever see me.”

Women! He’ll try again tomorrow, slowly, his grip loosens. He steps back with hands raised and an innocent look on his face. This Ntaba would never hurt a fly.

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A/N: Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-four

VUMILE-

He never saw this day coming, where his children would be scattered everywhere like a drunkard's vomit. It's the loneliest he's ever been, yes Nandi and Zamangwane are there but his sons are not. It's out of his control, this morning, at the breakfast table; it was the two of them. Him and Nandi, Zamangwane is forever sleeping at a friend's house much to Vumile's annoyance.

Her friend, Cebolakhe can be very convincing with her bambi eyes and a natural smile that's accompanied by dimples. She is a family-friend, they've known her since the girls were in primary school and so they trust her like a blind man trusts his loyal dog.

A smile finds Vumile's mouth when Nandi walks in the living room with a glass of orange juice in

hand. She is easy to the eye, she carries herself with respect and humility, that's how she was able to bag herself respect around here. Apart from that, her demeanour demands it.

"You know there are people assigned to do that." He never wants her to overwork herself, that's what she's always doing around here. They rarely spend time together, it's either she's cooking, cleaning or ordering the staff around.

"I know, I just like doing things for you. Serving you makes me happy."

Yes she's a submissive, but she's also her own person. Vumile loves what his ears are hearing, he touches her back as he places the glass on the table.

"Thank you, MaShamase."

She returns a smile and finds her place beside him, nothing beats being alone with this man. It would be nice if they were married already and

watching their children grow.

“We haven’t been to church in a while, I was thinking we could go this weekend.” Doing church together is asking for too much; arriving at the same time, hands locked is asking for trouble.

He hasn’t told outsiders yet that he is taking a second wife. Heck he is not even sure if it is allowed in the Sabbath.

“We can do church, but can we fix our problems first? I’d hate to have to explain things to the church, why my children are scattered everywhere and why I’m holding the hand of a woman who is not my wife.”

That’s not how it sounded in his head, he cringes with regret when she stands to leave.

“MaShamase, I’m sorry.” He’s holding her and pulling her to him, Nandi keeps her gaze away. Vumile can be insensitive sometimes, she didn’t

ask to be in this situation... to fall in love with a married man and bearing him a child.

While pregnant with Zamangwane, her cheeks grew fuller, and her waist, hips and thighs grew plump. It was a drastic change for someone who wore a small size her whole life.

Her figure changed after she gave birth to Zamangwane, it made her insecure. Vumile was there to assure her that he still loved her the same, that was enough for her.

“Please stay.” His eyes assist in pleading for mercy, Vumile is her weakness. She would sell her soul to the devil for him, he is the only man that has ever truly loved her— he is her future.

Vumile grabs her by the hips and sits her on his lap, her cheeks turn red and lashes flutter. This man is looking into her eyes, like nothing else

matters but her.

“Someone might walk in.” She tells him, it would be a sight for gossipers if someone catches the chief and his mistress with their fingers reaching for the cookie jar.

“Then let them,” he kisses the crook of her neck.

“That tickles,” Nandi’s giggle softens the room as if her gentle sound could make the weather warmer and the sun kinder to melanin skin.”

Vumile’s lips twitch into a smug grin, her smile strikes him the most. After his sons, it’s the most beautiful thing he has ever laid his eyes on.

“Your uncles must have received the letter by now.” He dives into the topic, arms clasping around her waist. Nandi lays her head on his shoulder, her arms find comfort around his neck.

“You know they are going to give you a hard

time, right?" He knows, it's been long overdue, he's kept their daughter for too long without their consent.

"Do you have to remind me?" He would rather not think about it.

"It's a reality we can't run away from, Ngwane."

Not wanting to make him uncomfortable, Nandi had held back from talking about this but the day is approaching. They have to be prepared for when her uncles come knocking.

"What about Dalisile?" Nandi questions, her voice guarded.

"She's not answering her phone, I've been trying to get in touch with her." Vumile says.

Nandi swallows, making a small noise to show that she is listening.

"I have to tell her about the lobola, I owe it to her at least."

Nandi begs to differ, the chief owes that woman nothing. The cuddling session is over, he has made her upset by saying things without thinking.

“Don’t go, please.” He nuzzles his face on her neck, locking his arms around her. “Don’t deprive me of my right to hold you, MaShamase.”

How can she leave when he’s making her heart dancing like David danced before God?

“You know I’m not good with words, sometimes I say things without thinking. Maybe that’s why we are where we are today, stagnant with no idea how to move forward.”

Actually, it’s because of the life choices he’s made over the years. Maybe if he left Dalisile a long time ago, they would be Mr. and Mrs.

“I think she has a hold on you, I don’t know if it

is muthi or you're blinded by the fact that she is the mother of your children." Nandi starts, it's not like her to talk about her sister wife. Dalisile is one woman whose name she would never spit out of her mouth.

"I don't understand why you have kept her in your life when you don't love her anymore, why is she still your wife, Ngwane?"

Vumile shifts on the leather chair feeling on edge, he lets go of Nandi so he can look her straight in the eye.

Today he looks more like a businessman than a chief, the crisp blue shirt is tight around his body. Sleeves half folded and a tie hangs loosely around the perfectly ironed shirt, he smells like he did when he left for work this morning.

Nandi loves it, his scent and the look of a man

who's been hard at work throughout the day. She loves having him come home to her after work, taking his briefcase, and giving him a glass of water to quench a day's thirst.

This is her husband, traditions and law aside, this is the man she has chosen to love for as long as she lives. She had friends before, that was before she met Vumile and fell in love with him. It was imperative that she distances herself from people, all in the name of keeping their secret safe.

"I think she had something to do with Vimbela and Sakhile's death, that's what I want to prove. I can't do that when she's away." Vumile justifies.

"But she's always away Ngwane, and what plans have you made to prove that she was responsible for the fire? Can't you take the

matter to the police or hire a private investigator, consult a traditional healer or something. Time is not on our side, I'm..."

Vumile shifts, pushing Nandi off his lap, he's no longer desperate for a cuddle now.

"A traditional healer Nandi?" He didn't expect this from her.

Really, what's the point of running away from this? The truth is out, Mathonga knows everything now.

Nandi looks up, gaze flicking up the outlines of dark skin and a defined jaw, a centimetre at a time. She is a church woman, hence the urge to explain herself hitting her across the face. She sighs, her small hand hides into his gorilla hand.

"Being a Christian does not mean I'm blind to customs and traditions, my father was a traditional man. I understand that ancestors are an important part of my life."

Vumile sighs, feeling overwhelmed. They have never spoken about this matter, maybe he never gave her a chance. He just assumed that she is a diehard Jesus fan.

“This is why I support Mathonga in being a sangoma.” What the hell?

“Mathonga is not a sangoma.” Vumile argues, his son can’t be a sangoma. Anything but that, he’s too young and has his whole life ahead of him.

“Whatever his ancestors want him to be, ithubunywa, isangoma or a prophet. I support him and I need you to do the same, you two have a long road ahead of you, Vumile. You both need to heal and sort out your differences. If you can, find his biological father and bring him to him.”

Hee! She’s crossing limits now, Vumile gently takes his hand from her.

“My son will never meet that man,” the syllables are heavy on his tongue.

“Mathonga deserves closure, don’t let him go through life wondering what if...”

“Nandi, I said no. Phumlani will destroy my son’s life, as long as I live, I will protect Mathonga from that monster.” Nandi drops her gaze at the authority dripping from the chief, he’s not Vumile right now but the chief of the people. He has a frown on his face as he storms out in anger.

HLABELA-

Kushi is still angry but wants to see him. Everything in his body screams at him to go, however, he has a father who ordered him to stay put. His father’s approval is treasure to him and going against Vumile would mean

disappointing him, that's something he can't have. Dear Kushi will have to wait, he's regretful about it, but right now, impressing Vumile is the most important thing.

There's a church meeting tomorrow at the homestead, the church pastor wants to have a word with him. He doesn't mind, as long as he gets to fly down to Mpumalanga after that and see Kushi.

He's still at the office, finishing up a few things when Ntaba walks in. This one is not serious about life, he's showing up at the office after hours, dressed in black sweats and a grey turtle neck. Perks of being the son of a wealthy man. Hlabela's chuckle rolls about the room like a basketball, it hovers around his younger brother laying casually on the two seater couch.

"Where have you been?" Hlabela asks, serving

his brother with a frown. "And why are you dressed like you've been out doing the devil's work?"

He looks back at the notes in front of him, there's so much signing to do.

Ntaba's laying on his back, facing the ceiling, his arm covering his face. He's in deep thought, releasing sigh after sigh. Hlabela shakes his head, his brother is taking too long to answer.

"I'm thirsty," Ntaba's statement is said absentmindedly.

"There's water over there and a whisky if you can stomach it." If he can stomach it because he only drinks amageu. Another sigh from Ntaba.

"I'm thirsty for blood ndoda." Ntaba says in a deep accented Zulu, it's enough for Hlabela to pause his work and look over at his brother. Seeing that the other is lost in his own world, a

frown breaks on his face.

“Igazi? Hawu, ndoda! Are you a vampire now?”

It’s not really a meaningful question from Hlabela, he’s only entertaining the younger man.

“Have you ever thirsted for blood?” Ntaba ignores the shock in his brother’s voice and continues to speak as if Hlabela never uttered a word.

“There’s this mampara challenging me, I want to strangle him to death. Do you think I should do that, or shoot him execution style?”

“Haibo!” The word shoots through Hlabela’s chest like a bullet from a rifle, his ears must be high on drugs. “What are you saying to me, Ntabezikude?”

His brother’s thoughts are completely unholy, the all-seeing and all-knowing God will punish him.

“Angizenzi ndoda,” Ntaba replies, playfully

flapping his feet on the brown couch. He casts a quick look Hlabela's way, whose lips thin in a way they do when he's thinking too hard.

"Then what is it? Did something happen to you?" Hlabela leaves his chair, he unbuttons at least two knobs on his shirt as he walks around the big table and sits on its edge.

"Khethiwe left the house." Ntaba shares, he does not look dejected or troubled, everything looks fine from Hlabela's view.

"I know she left," Hlabela shrugs. He's getting tired of this maze race, Ntaba needs to get to the point. It's been a long day, he needs to go home and rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long day with the pastor and his father.

"Khethiwe's body is changing," Ntaba smiles contently. "Her cheeks are round, she has love handles and thick thighs that rub together when she walks. She looks so meaty, and appetising."

I want to poke her and bite her all over.”

Hlabela frowns, this is very awkward. He wants to tell Ntaba that Khethiwe is not a meal, but then again, what a waste of breath that would be.

“I want her to come back, but she doesn’t get it. Now she’s mingling with a man who looks like a ballooned Vienna. She takes his side and thinks he’s a gift from the gods. I think she’s forgotten that I’m her god, I want to remind her so bad. I want to bend her over and fuck her until she forgets every existing thing in this world, but me. When I’m done with her, she will be worshiping the ground I walk on.”

Hlabela is done, how is this brother like this? He’s not normal like his other brothers, and when did he start sleeping with the cook? His relationship with Khethiwe has always been

professional, and he thought Ntaba was on the same boat as him. Now he's talking about fucking the poor child to amnesia.

"You're not God, Ntaba. I'm sorry to break it to you, if Khethiwe does not want you, there's nothing you can do to change her mind."

Hlabela says, he walks back around his desk to clear it. It's been a long ass day, he still has to call Kushi, and apologize like he's always been doing.

"I'm going to bring her back home, where she belongs." Ntaba continues to be absentminded, and ignorant. This is a one man session.

"I want to kill that short shit, before he starts dreaming of a life with my Khethi." That's too much offloading, Hlabela freezes with papers in his hand, looking back up at his brother. Can he just get off from that couch and stop talking nonsense?

“She’s not yours ndoda, stop being delusional.”
He has his own problems, dealing with kinder garden squabbles is getting on his nerves because... what the hell is Ntaba talking about anyway?

The noise that bursts forth is like a cross between a snort and a drunken laugh, Ntaba always knows when to breathe between his loud chuckles. It rolls about the room like an onion falling from the food rake, animated and gratifying as it spins around Hlabela in its chaotic way.

Gradually, Ntaba props himself up, holding the armrests of the couch and slides from it.

“It was a nice talk, see you at home.” He grins and swivels on his heel. So he’s going to leave, just like that?

With eyes full of shock and a frown on his face,

Hlabela's gaze follows him to the door. Eyes narrowed and brows knitted in worry more than confusion, the frown grows when Ntaba stops and turns back to him.

"About your mother, I have chosen a coffin for her. White suits her best, she will be buried like the queen she is." The grin on his face remains, it's hell-a confusing for Hlabela. Ntaba must be smoking nyaope, he's talking like someone who has lost touch with reality.

"You killed our mother?" An unemotional question from Hlabela, he can't understand why his brother speaks like someone who is not fine in the head.

"Only in my dreams, every night. 28 stab wounds, her blood smells funny though. I don't like it, I don't like how it feels in my hands." Ntaba explains and sighs.

“So all of this happened in your dreams?”

Hlabela.

“Yes.” Ntaba nods, confidently.

“You had a dream where you killed our mother and decided to buy her a coffin?” He’s trying to make sense of all this, it’s really not normal.

Ntaba’s second chuckle comes in fits and bursts, loud to soft, to nothing at all and back to loud again. He shakes and raises his shoulders almost hiding his neck, only a child can laugh so freely.

“Yes, it eases the guilt.” Ntaba finishes with a shrug and walks out. Hlabela is left in total hysteria, what just happened? Ntaba having dreams where he is killing his mother is not normal, and he goes on and buys a coffin for poor Dalisile. Hlabela can’t make sense of what’s going on with his brother.

PETROS NGCOBO-

Curse midnight and every dark thing it comes with. People have locked themselves in their respective homes, sounds of life outside are swapped by sounds of children giggling out loud and repeatedly singing the same song.

*Ring-a-ring-a-rosies

A pocket full of poises

A tissue, a tissue...

We all fall down*

In his rightful mind he knows they are not earthly. He's curled up under the coffee table, paralysed by fear. His eyes are flicking from wall to wall, catching dark shadows prowling in the still air. There's a pungent smell of death

and any nauseating smell on the face of the earth. He smells like sickly excrements, his house is cluttered, there are piles of trash, stains on the wall and carpet.

Fear is hanging in the chilled darkness of the night, the air in the house is hot and stale, burning his lungs like brimstone. There are no lights, prepaid electricity does not recharge itself. He would've asked the neighbours for help if he weren't smelling like a dead animal.

His heart sinks when he hears what sounds like four footsteps coming down the passageway, a key drops on the counter in the kitchen. The footsteps are nearing him, heavy and loud. He's shaking like satin against the wind, his heart is a drum of a thousand loud beats.

"Ple... please... stop... please stop." It must be a sin for a man to cry like this, God himself would

surely dismiss it.

There is no help for him outside these doors, his wife is dead.

Ntabezikude Khanyile killed his wife, he has no one to take care of him now. Shame won't let him ask for help outside, a man who was highly esteemed by his family and community has become an invalid who smells like he works at a dog mortuary.

“Maluuume!” Every hair on his body is up, he recognises the sound of the ghost— Thabani. His voice was a little scratchy compared to Thobani's. Petros would call his name but fear won't let him.

“Leave me alone.” He cries, teeth shattering and eyes tightly shut lest he sees what no human eye can stand.

He's crying out loud, he can't walk, nor can he

crawl himself out of the house and it's dark out, what eerie being will he come across out there.

“Maluumeeeee!” The voice of a boy whispers his name in a spine chilling tempo, Petros covers his ears and a shrill scream takes over his mouth. Hiding under the table is not helping, evil lurks around and has enveloped him with a thick blanket of fear.

“Stop... stop... please stop.”

Okay, it's not right that he's crying helplessly.

“I'm... so... sorry. I'm sorry, just make it stop... please.”

His eyes shoot a glance at the kitchen entrance as he hears the water running, someone is in kitchen, and they are washing dishes. It can't be, he's alone in the house. The curtains in the sitting room shake as if they are laughing at him, he places a sweaty hand on his forehead

to wipe away the dampness on his face. All the hairs on his arm and the back of his neck stand on end.

Lately Petros is afraid of his own existence, he feels hyper aware of everything, and regular everyday things seem strange to him, as if he was just dropped on an alien planet.

Thoughts of survival parade his mind, staying under the table won't help him. He hits his head on the edge of the table and grumbles when he goes on all fours, he crawls towards the corner of the room to pin himself against the wall.

Then everything stops, the house is silent; that thick, heavy silence—ears straining for any noises.

He's afraid to move a muscle, what if Thabani comes back? He can't take another trip of torture, it's too much to bear. He hears the

sound of the door banging and think it's part of the illusion he's trapped in, there's a male voice outside. Someone is calling his name, the voice is not as scary as the little boy's.

"Uncle Petros." This one calls him uncle in English, it's also a voice he recognises. It could be a trick though and answering to it might be the last time he utters a word.

"Uncle Petros, I'm going to break this door down." The male voice shouts, and break the door down, he does.

Fresh tears fill Petros' eyes at the sight of his sister's son standing in the doorway, his face is clear due to the light eliminating from the street lights, that's how Petros is able to recognise the young man.

Petros tries to speak, he wants to tell his nephew everything. He wants to tell him how he

got here and how much he has suffered, before he passes out from fear. The nephew kneels before him and asks, “Malume, we have been trying to get a hold of you for weeks. What happened to you?”

Petros lifts his shaking hand to touch his nephew’s face, he wants to make sure that he is really here. The last time he heard, his sister and her kids had relocated to Cape Town.

“Ntabezikude Khanyile.” Petros says, before he blacks out.

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Let’s unlock tonight’s insert with at least 400+ comments.

MATHONGA

Fifty-five

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng.

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THE KHANYILES-

Nandi wakes up wrapped in warm arms, she's naked under the sheets, body pressed against the man whose arms are around her. She yawns herself back to life, and looks up at him. Vumile always insists on cuddling, in the night she would slip away and lay on the far end of the bed. Her freedom would last for a few minutes before he senses she's no longer in his embrace. He has panda tendencies and she doesn't, it doesn't mean that she loves him less.

His eyes are closed, but she knows he's half asleep and half awake, he probably feels her

stare.

Last night they couldn't resist it anymore, and gave in to lust. Vumile was in her room to apologise for his big mouth, and one thing led to another.

"I love you too." Says Vumile with his eyes still closed, she knew he wasn't in a deep sleep. Nandi's morning face is replaced by a garish smile, her cheeks bunching up, almost reaching her eyes.

"I don't remember saying I loved you."

"You don't have to, I feel it." Vumile says, reaching down to press a quick kiss on her forehead. His hands roam on her body, squeezing every squishable part.

Nandi stiffens, she understands that he loves her the way she is but being reminded that she has flabs here and there is not what she wants.

“Are you going to church today?” Nandi asks, to do away with the tension in the room.

“I’ll attend the first service, pastor Khuzwayo wants to have a word with Hlabela. The meeting will be held here.” He tells her, slowly rubbing her back. This, she can take. Sure there are bumps here and there, but it’s okay.

“Should I cook a meal or prepare finger foods?” The real house wife of Izingolweni.

“It will be a brief meeting, don’t strain yourself. Plus, we can’t have cooked food, I don’t want to give pastor Khuzwayo something to preach about next week.” His light chuckle is an auditory hug, it envelops Nandi and brings a smile to her face.

“You should get ready for church then, we don’t want to give pastor Khuzwayo something to preach about.” She leaves his arms, covering

herself with a bed sheet. She's staring into space, her back turned to him. Something is in her mind, she wants to ask, although she has the answers.

"Do I have to keep myself hidden?" Lest pastor Khuzwayo comes wearing his holier than thou coat, yes.

A frown finds its way to Vumile's face. He hates that he has to put Nandi through this, if he could he would do things differently. His silence answers her question, she leaves the bed to go prepare him a bath. His clothes are in his bedroom, she will have to go there and get them. They were ironed yesterday before 6pm, they are trying by all means to continue keeping the Sabbath day holy.

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Zamangwane didn't come home last night like she said she would, her bed is made and her room empty. These sleepovers are getting out of hand, the child is having her way around here.

In the kitchen, Nandi bumps into a girl wearing tight blue jeans and a crop top that only covers her boobs. The red lipstick painted on her lips is too bright to miss, she's chewing chappies like she traded her numbers for it with the Pakistani tuckshop owner.

"Who are you?" Nandi asks, eyes dropping and picking the young girl. This is a royal house, people don't dress like trash around here.

"My name is Zondiwe ma, I'm the new help. I was referred by Sis'Nandipha." Sis'Nandipha is the lady in charge of the washing and ironing, Nandi remembers mentioning someone to take over Khethiwe's spot. She meant a respectable

girl, not a bad version of a black Barbie.

“We have boys around here, you shouldn’t be walking around dressed like that.” It’s too much really, Nandi is not happy whatsoever and she’s not hiding how she feels from her.

“I understand ma, I just got here from KwaMashu. I will change into something decent.”

Like she has a choice.

“Did Nandipha tell you we keep the Sabbath here?” Zondiwe is confused, she pops her gum and quickly offers Nandi an apology.

“Go back to Nandipha, she will fill you in.” Nandi tells her and walks away, she has a potential husband to tend to.

VUKUZAKHE-

A call comes in from his wife, days of ignoring her are long gone. That smash he received on the head has changed him, he's grateful for life and the things he has. He's grateful for Bongiwe and he's grateful for Funokuhle. They both mean something to him, he wouldn't trade them for anything.

"Mabuza." He'd smile if his heart was not heavy.

"When are you coming home? You said we'll do the cleansing ceremony this weekend."

He hasn't forgotten about that. How can he forget about his first child? He didn't want children, and nothing will ever change that. It's how it has always been, but that doesn't change the fact that he made a baby with Bongiwe.

They did make a baby, that's growing in the spiritual world. They owe it a peaceful sleep.

"Mathonga still needs me, but I will make time."

His eyes chase the young petite man sleeping

on his bed, he came here with a mission to take him back home so he can visit his father's grave.

The prolonged silence creates an awkward ambiance between him and his wife, she's upset, he can easily tell.

"I need you too, our baby needs you. You've been away for a week, you left me alone to deal with your father's girlfriend. I can't stand her, she controls everything around here. I feel like I have lost my place in this house..."

The complaining is one of the reasons he stays away for too long. Zakhe has met Nandi and Zamangwane, he hasn't had time to sit and talk to them. That placed aside, he has no problem with his father taking a second wife. Like he had no problem with Nandi the first time they found her at the homestead, perhaps having Nandi around will soften Vumile's heart. It will give Zakhe a chance to introduce Funokuhle and let

his family know that he has fallen in love with the boy and wants him to be part of his life.

“Try not to see things that way, Bongiwe. Nandi is not there to take your place.”

Yeah, that’s not how Bongiwe sees it.

“What about your mother? What will she say when she comes back?”

Zakhe doesn’t care, and he is not going to discuss other people behind their backs.

“Listen, I have to go. I will talk to you soon.” The line goes dead, he tosses the phone on the bed. Funokuhle is awake, staring back with droopy eyes.

“How are you?”

Zakhe had brought him to his house in Northcliff after that fainting incident, the two had burdened Kenneth enough. Nothing comes

from Funokuhle.

“I won’t know how you’re doing if you don’t tell me.” Zakhe declares.

He’s worried, that’s why he insists on knowing.

“When are we leaving for KZN?”

“Whenever you’re ready.” Zakhe.

“What am I going to say to my brothers? They must be looking for me.”

If they were, they would have found him. It was so easy for them to find Vukuzakhe and panel beat him to a death bed.

“Don’t think too much about it, you’ll deal with everything when we get there.” Does this mean he’s going with?

“You’re coming with me?” Funokuhle asks, hope evident in his wide eyes.

“If you want me to.”

Death must be calling him, has he forgotten that Funokuhle's brothers are behind his attack.

Ntaba told him everything when he came home from Johannesburg, he told him how he went and punished the people involved in his ambush, he didn't say how it was done. Zakhe knows though that Funokuhle's brothers are next on Ntaba's list, whatever that list is. He also knows that his cousin Khothama killed the father of Funokuhle.

Zakhe crowds him, feeling a need to comfort him, it's out of guilt. He presses a kiss to his forehead, Funokuhle responds by releasing a breathless whimper.

"A stranger gave me a ride the day I left KZN, he took me to Kenneth's house." He's been wanting to know who the man is.

"Alfred Madi, that's his name." The revelation is

a murmur to Funokuhle's perking ears, his lips quirk into a subtle smile.

"So you were behind that?"

"No, Ntabezikude was. He took care of you while I was in the hospital, he made sure that you were safe." This Ntabezikude he speaks of must be a godsend. Funokuhle's memory of him is vague.

"And the incident with Pule?" It's all connected, it has to be. Zakhe didn't want to discuss anything regarding this, wanting to keep Funokuhle pure.

"He's behind Pule's capture too." Vukuzakhe is on his feet, rolling the sleeves of his t-shirt. He runs his hand on his forehead, nerves have gotten the better of him. If Funokuhle keeps throwing questions at him, he will have no choice but to conform.

"Where is he?"

Zakhe fixes him with a soft glance, he can tell that the question is not thought of. It sounds forced, hesitant and lacks any emotion.

“He’s alive, that’s all you have to know.” The tone he uses says it’s non-negotiable, he won’t talk about it anymore. “Go shower, I’ll see if there’s anything in the fridge.”

THE KHANYILES-

Poor Vumile is grey and not getting any younger, yet his third born son continues to stress him. If his heart ever stops, then all accusatory fingers should point at Ntaba. What is he doing in a meeting that has nothing to do with him?

He walked in here, tailing Hlabela, settled down beside his father, and crossed one leg over the other.

“Ntabezikude,” Pastor Khuzwayo greets with a friendly smile, he’s sitting on the opposite couch.

“Mfundisi.” Ntaba returns the smile, submitting a hand that the pastor grabs without hesitation. The handshake feels tense and frightening, it has Khuzwayo pulling back and bashfully rubbing the back of his neck. He clears his throat as he feels the hairs on his nape stand, while Ntaba shows no emotion but a clear, bottomless grin.

“I almost didn’t recognise you when you walked in here, it’s been long son.” It’s time he finds God, he’s a lost soul that needs deliverance.

“Yebo mfundisi.” Ntaba nods, gaze fixed on Khuzwayo.

Time is standing on its toes, no one is saying anything. Vumile wants to jump in, and rescue

an uncomfortable looking pastor.

“Have you forgotten the address to God’s house?” Khuzwayo breaks the ice after letting out a gasp of air he didn’t know he was withholding.

“How can I forget that place? I know it like my left butt cheek knows my right butt cheek.”

Maybe Vumile should have said something, what the hell is this?

“Ntabezikude, behave.” Vumile chides, gritted teeth on show. Talking to Ntaba is the same as talking to a wall.

“Don’t scold the child, Vumile. Kids will always be kids.” Khuzwayo says, voice echoing uneasily. He loosens his tie when he catches Ntaba staring holes into his face, it’s the kind of stare that makes the man of God sweat under his black oversized suit.

“I’m not a kid, Khuzwayo.” He’s not, he’s a 31

year-old child.

Khuzwayo's lips work into a nervous smile, "You are right, you are a man."

No apology comes with that, it's not like Ntaba expects one.

"You're not part of the meeting, Ntabezikude. You may leave." Vumile may dismiss him till the next Saturday, Ntaba will not exercise his muscles.

"It's okay baba, I don't mind that he's here."
Bless Hlabela's heart.

The twinkle from Ntaba's sadistic face is divergent, he won't remove his penetrating gaze from Khuzwayo.

"You know pastor Khuzwayo has no sons and he will be stepping down from his position next year." Vumile starts, he'd rather pretend that

Ntaba is not here, trying to get him to leave will take up their time.

“Yebo baba, I’m aware of that.” Hlabela returns Khuzwayo’s wide smile.

A laugh fills the room, it’s Ntaba. He curbs it by covering his mouth, and doesn’t spare a second to acknowledge Vumile’s astounded stare.

“I’m sorry, continue.” Just to clear things, they didn’t need his permission.

“My son, not only have I watched you grow into a strong young man. I have had the honour to watch you grow into a God-fearing man. A man any father would be proud of.” Khuzwayo takes over from Vumile, pride tugging at his heart. Ntaba chuckles, this time he’s respectful enough to keep it down.

“Ndoda, phuma if you’re not going to show any respect.” Maybe not...

Like the big brother he is, Hlabela sizzles. Ntaba

should be recoiling from the authority dripping like syrup from this young man of God, if he was tameable, yes.

“Are you kidding? And miss the fun part? Angiyindawo ndoda.” (I’m not going anywhere.)

Ntaba grabs a scone from the pastor’s plate, and sits back as he takes a bite. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, so he puts it back on the plate. Couldn’t they serve them toppers and Mageu? Whoever is running this household is burning it to the ground.

“Why are we eating funeral food?” His mumbled question leaves everyone bemused.

Just in time, as if on cue, Zondiwe walks in with a tray of refreshments. Nothing hot or Khuzwayo would call them heathens and tell the entire church that the Khanyiles turn their stoves on, on a Sabbath day.

“Sisi wami, I don’t eat scones.” Ntaba tells the new girl, everyone’s attention has moved to him.

Zondiwe’s face crinkles up, so what if he doesn’t eat scones. She was told to serve scones and juice.

“There are toppers biscuits in the pantry, and Mageu in the fridge.” He expects her to know what to do with that information, Khethiwe would. Zondiwe nods, she saw the biscuits this morning while going through the kitchen cabinets.

The new girl bumps her foot on the corner of the couch as she turns to walk back to the kitchen.

“Ouch.” She grunts, she would have fallen if it were not for the same couch blocking her way. She removes the sandal from her foot to rub off the excruciating pain.

“Be careful?” Ntaba asks.

A reticent smile is what he gets, it reminds him of Khethiwe when she was a caterpillar that wouldn't shade out of its skin and spread its wings. Zondiwe hums, and leaves to nurse her pain in the kitchen.

“As I was saying Hlabela, I would love for you to take over from me.” The pastor announces, he is growing impatient from all this interruption from Ntaba. Taking over from him is news to Hlabela, he's not sure if this is what he really wants, dammit this can't be what he wants.

There's a standing ovation that surprises everyone, it's the Khanyile giant and his dramatics.

“Ntabezikude, we're not playing here. What the hell is wrong with you?” Vumile will lose his mind chiding this boy.

“Except that you're selling your son off to the

highest bidder, nothing is wrong with me baba.”
Ntaba sneers, taking his seat back.

“What?” Hlabela chokes, this must be a sick
joke.

“Don’t look at me like that baba, I know you are
trying to marry my brother off to Lukhanyo
Khuzwayo.”

“Baba? Mfundisi?” Shock paralyses a man,
Hlabela is finding it hard to place his words
together.

“Tell him bab’mfundisi, tell my brother that this
offer of yours comes with a catch.” Ntaba
nudges them for an answer.

Vumile and Khuzwayo share a look, it’s not
possible that Ntaba suddenly knows about this.
It was Khuzwayo’s idea, he approached Vumile
last month with this good news that Vumile
couldn’t say no to. Hlabela has always been a
good example of Jesus on earth, he’s good with

the youth and the church loves him.

“How do you know this Ntaba?” Hlabela enquires, glaring daggers at his brother. Ntaba snorts with a subtle roll of the eyes.

“It’s not so hard to guess, bhuti. I knew the second your father said you know Khuzwayo has no sons.” Oh! Okaaay! This smart bastard, no wonder vumile wanted him out of the room.

“Baba is it true?” Hlabela.

Vumile is the only one who can confirm this, he trusts this man more than anyone.

“Yes.” The father agrees. “You’re thirty three Hlabela, you’re a bachelor and the youth loves you. They understand you, you understand them. This will be good for you ndodana, and you love God. Lukhanyo is a good girl, she’s intelligent, comes from a good Christian home. She will make a good wife.”

All this while Vumile is talking, Ntaba has

collapsed on his father's lap, laughing his lungs out.

"Ntabezikude!" Vumile shouts, pushing him off of him. His son sits up straight, only to continue laughing with his head on Vumile's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, it's just... are we talking about the representative of Izingolweni fertility clinic or..."

"Ntaba stop." Hlabela scolds him, sternly. His brother must know that he is in the presence of the man of God, he can't be acting a fool. A puckered brow finds a way to Ntaba's face.

"Tell them you're not interested ndoda, what about Ku..."

"Can I think about it?" Hlabela intrudes.

Ntaba can see the look of exasperation on his face and wants to save him from this mess these people want to put him in.

“You’re kidding me, right?” He’s shaken by Hlabela’s decision, why is he so bent on getting Vumile’s approval.

“Please do think about it, it’s a lifetime opportunity. There are a lot of young man who would kill to be in your position.” Pastor Khuzwayo is annoying, his church has a rain of men wanting to marry his daughter. Can’t he choose from them?

“Then let them fuck your daughter, just leave my brother alone.” He’s calm, raising his voice is not a thing he does. Be that as it may, Ntaba can be intimidating and authoritative.

Hlabela is giving his life up for their father, he wants him to be his own person and stop living under Vumile’s shadow.

“I will not tolerate any disrespect from you Ntabezikude.” Vumile roars, jolting to his feet.

Oops the pastor is around, now is not the time to show off his human side.

Son spews a snort, "I don't care baba. Will you stop controlling my brother's life? He's not interested in this man's daughter, or anybody who is not Ku..."

"Ntaba stop it." It's Hlabela's turn to explode with anger, he tries though to keep his voice down. There's a man who walks with God in their midst...

"Hlabela?" The younger brother's jaw drops, he cannot believe his ears.

Hlabela says nothing, it doesn't matter what Ntaba says, the only person who can convince him otherwise is Vumile and from where they are standing, Vumile is on the pastor's side.

"What about Kushi's Rajah and Tikka masala?"
Ntaba.

Uh, okay. A frown visits Hlabela's face, the

statement has drained all the strength in him.

“Let it go, Ntaba. I know what I’m doing.”

“Uyislima ndoda,” a click of the tongue from Ntaba. “Don’t call me when you’re tired of eating uphuthu namasi, why don’t you just marry Khuzwayo once? Niyafanelana, you’re both full of shit.”

Why is no one saying anything?

Ntaba jumps over Khuzwayo’s feet, nailing the man of God with a glare.

“Sdididi.” (Idiot)

That’s Ntaba cursing the pastor, he clicks his tongue for the last time and disappears to the kitchen. If he remembers correctly, he had asked the new girl to bring him some biscuits and Mageu.

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Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-six

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng...

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KHETHIWE-

I was woken up at 5am today, my mom is out to get me. If I didn't know better, I'd think she hates that I'm back home.

I can count a number of times I've wished that I didn't quit my job, and that old man Kobus refuses to give me more days. Rumor has it that someone was demoted so I can be squeezed in. I work 3 days a week, from 7am to 4pm. He cut

my hours, talking about how he's doing me a favor because he knows my mother.

My salary is peanuts compared to what I got at the royal house, I'm an idiot, stupid to the core—it's been proven.

"Khethiwe." That cold voice startles me. I whip my head around to see her standing in the bathroom doorway, all dressed up and ready to go. I wonder where she's going, I thought she said there are people coming, that's why I was woken up before MamNgadi's chickens next door.

"You look beautiful ma," everyone likes to be complimented, see that twitch on the corner of her mouth. It's not a full smile, but it's something and I'll take it.

"Thank you," her face won't soften up, she runs her eyes down her pink two pieces suit, ironing

it with her hands. Then, like a flash of lightning, she trains her stern gaze at me.

“The Ndimandes are on their way, please wash the pots with steel wool. Take a bath when you’re done.” Her gaze rises and falls on my crusty looking body.

“Dress well, first impressions last longer.” What? First impressions my foot and why do I have to dress up for them? They’ll be coming to see her, not me.

“Ma, I won’t be around. I have to be somewhere.” Bahlephambikwethu wants to meet up, apparently, he has a an apology drafted. I’m upset with him for what he did to Ntaba. Putting his hands on him like that, and I didn’t think Ntaba would retaliate the way he did. I have never seen his violent side.

“Khethiwe!” Someone snaps their fingers, I zoned out for a minute there.

“Ma!” She’s an angry bird, this mother of mine.

“Did you hear what I said?” I’d remember if I did, nothing is coming to me. I’m looking at her grimaced expression, is this mother getting some?

I’m getting the feeling that my father starves his wife, her frustrations are high.

“You are not going anywhere, I will need you to cook and serve the guests.” That’s it, I don’t want to be her daughter anymore. “Finish up, time does not wait for anyone.”

Nxa! I get a chance to roll my eyes when she turns her back to me, oh no she’s stopping. Fear taps me on the shoulder when I meet her stern gaze, I don’t like how she’s looking at me.

“You’re gaining weight, you need to watch what you eat. The next thing you’ll be looking twice your age.” That was definitely a mic drop, I cannot believe this woman. Is it my fault that

my father loves to feed me? Gha!

I'm done scrubbing the bathroom wall, I had to scrub all the walls in this house, by myself. The twins are not around, they went to visit their paternal family in Eshowe. I should've gone with, and saved my self from hard work.

Four pots? Really? Time is of the essence, I work faster when I time myself. Fifteen minutes should do.

Rebecca Malope is playing in the background. Her music has a way of inspiring a person to work hard when it comes to house chores, if it's not her, it's that IPCC church group. .

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I'm more comfortable in track pants than tight jeans, my corn rows are tight already, adding a bra and skinny jeans would be torture to my poor body. Yep, I walk around braless in this

house.

“KaMandonsela!” My father’s voice calls behind me, he knows I don’t like that name. He’s opening my pots before I turn to face him.

“Smells nice.” I love it when he compliments my food.

“What did you expect? I worked as a cook at the royal house.” The smile on his face dissipates, I know what he’s thinking. I’m thinking the same. I don’t want to talk about it, so I take a different route.

“Baba,” his eyes shoot up in response. “Who are the Ndimandes?”

They must be special people for my mother to go all out, she even took out her special Christmas plates and those glasses that look like we’re made in 1960.

“Ndimande is my brother, not by blood. Our fathers were best friends, who did everything

together. They even had kids around the same time, people thought we were twins because our mothers dressed us the same.”

Never heard of him, how come I never heard him?

“Do I know him?” It’s possible, I don’t make it an effort to remember people, especially my parent’s acquaintances.

“He was there when you were born.” He’s laughing softly, I’m missing the joke.

“You were best of friends.” He continues.

Yeah no! I was a baby, it was not consensual.

“He was like a second father to you, he’d spoil you rotten. You were light skinned when you were born, and he nicknamed you Snowie. Only for you to loose that complexion two years later. He was there for all your birthdays.”

“He sounds like a present father.” I throw a

giggle in there, just for control. Ndimande was too much in my business, sheesh.

“You could say that, he loved you like his own. It was a sad day when he relocated to Swaziland, you were four years old. I’m sure the memory is somewhere in your head. You’ll remember him when you see him. He moved back about ten years ago, met a well off woman and got married.”

He leans back on the counter, this Ndimande person must be a really special friend. My father is smiling with pride.

“Please don’t tell me he’s coming here to see me, I don’t even know him baba.” I don’t want to meet him, I appreciate whatever it is he did for me as a child but I don’t remember the man and that’s where things should stay.

“He’s a friend, he’s harmless.”

Just great, there's no escaping this one. There's a presence at the door, my father is married to a ghost. How is it possible that she carries the aura of the devil?

"I just spoke to Nomsa, they are ten minutes away." She waves her phone as a gesture, her soft gaze hardens as it leaves her husband and lands on me.

"What are you wearing?" She asks and it feels like she's spitting on my comfort attire. "Go change." Non-negotiable. She's gone before I can blink and tell her no.

"Listen to your mother, she knows what she's doing." My father says, and goes after his wife. What the...

The food is ready, now I have to go find something decent to wear. As I walk to my room, yes my room; I hear loud hooting outside.

It's dramatic, like someone is getting married dramatic. It's expected, it's how black people celebrate, the neighbors must know that someone is sentencing themselves to life imprisonment.

"They are here," my mother yelps with excitement. Hao, so she does get excited.

Decent according to my mother, is a long dress. Dresses remind me of Ntaba, what I went through with him. I hate them, this mother and her dictatorship.

"Muzikambambo Mandonsela." A cheerful hoarse voice shouts my father's second name, we hardly hear that name around here. His sister calls him bhuti, his wife and children call him baba and his grandkids call him mkhulu.

"Muziwendlovu Ndimande." Jesus Christ of Nazareth, he did not just call him Muziwendlovu.

Their father's took it too far, they were playing house those people. Sounds of laughter erupt through the house, it's a reunion alright.

"Where is she? Where is my baby?" That's Ndimande shouting yet again, he's asking for me.

"Khethi, baby." Did my mother just lovingly call me Khethi baby? What in God's holy name is going on?

Time to pretend, and act like a saint. We live to impress in this place.

Okay, his voice and that body don't mix. He is maybe my height, his weight is that of a sick person who has days left on this earth. I expected the bald head, old people don't do hair. There's a rich looking woman standing with my mother, must be his wife. She looks familiar though, I can't put the puzzle of her face together. The two piece suit must be their thing,

look at them looking like an African version of the Olsen twins. My parents are embarrassing, I have concluded. We're not even well off, yet they are dressed to impress the queen of England.

"Snowie, come to daddy." Ndimande sings, opening his arms for me to sink into them and nope... I will not be doing that. I'm lying, my mother is giving me the look. His arms crash every bone in me, looks can be deceiving. He's stronger than he looks.

"Look at you," he's cupping my cheeks with his long fingers and a wide smile on his face. I need to be rescued. "I knew you were going to be this beautiful, a heart breaker."

"Let me look at her too, Ndimande." His wife says, crashing me in a brief hug.

"How are you?" She asks, my smile is as fake as

Sono's Jockey panties. That D' that replaced the J kills me till today. What the hell is Dockey? Speaking of panties, I found mine lying on the ground next to the washing line, strange.

"You two are all over her, can I get a chance too?"

I know that voice, it can't be him. Unless there's someone with the same voice as him. Nomsa steps back, clearing my view. I can taste bile in my mouth. What is Bahlephambikwethu doing here?

NDLELENI-

A black SUV parks outside the Sishi mansion, he's here to see Mathonga. It's part of his daily routine, as he steps out of the car, he sees Nala

approaching. Dread is on her face, something has happened. She nears him, looking distressed and out of breath.

“What’s going on?” Is his question to her.

“I can’t find Mathonga, I was with him this morning and he just disappeared.”

That’s insane, people don’t just disappear.

“Where is my brother, little girl?” It’s no secret that she’s not his favorite person in the world. She’s crying, out of the blue. It’s frustrating as hell, he has to hold back a snort and a grumble.

“I don’t know,” Nala cries louder. “I left him in bed when I went to take a shower and... he... he wasn’t there when I got back. Styles and Sethu are not around. They left before we woke up.”

That we is getting on Ndleleni’s nerves, the mere thought of his brother sleeping with this woman is irking.

“Did you try his phone?” He fights back the urge

to snap at her.

“His phone is in the house, I called the Sishis too, they don’t know where he is. Styles says he sent some people to look for him.”

This can’t be good, Mathonga was brought here to keep him safe. If the Sangwenis have his brother, he will kill them. He might not be as impulsive as Ntaba but no one touches his brothers.

Ndleleni runs past Nala to get to the house, he ignores Thobani seated on the couch and lost in his own world.

“Mathonga.” What kind of he’s not around does he not understand? He goes through every door in the house, calling Mathonga’s name. Ntaba said look after him, he’s going to explode with anger when he finds out that he has lost Mathonga.

Ndleleni comes back to the lounge, where he started. Nala is holding Thobani in her arms, her lower lip quavering and eyes puffy with tears.

Ndleleni gives her one good dirty stare and scurries back out, he makes a trip around the house twice and there's no Mathonga. It's time he makes that call to Ntaba, tell him there's a possibility the Sangwenis have abducted their little brother.

As he digs into his pocket, back against the car, his eyes catch a glimpse of a figure slowly walking through the gate. He has to shield his eyes from the sun to see properly, he's far sighted and yes that person looks familiar. His body is draped in nothing but a red sarong, with a touch of black and white on it. His walk is different, hunched back, hands on his back. The figure has a walk of an old person. Ndleleni welcomes a deep frown, questions flying around his head.

"Mathonga?" He calls, unsure if he's really seeing Mathonga or an old man that looks like him. Bravery has him nearing the person, it is Mathonga, he just looks different. His brows are furrowed, face crumpled.

"Oh mfana wami." Mathonga says, his voice is that of an old woman. Ndleleni recognizes it from that night back home, he crosses his heart, hoping that the ancestor has not come back to torment his brother.

"What are you wearing? Where did you get that? And where have you been?" Ndleleni questions, eyes inspecting Mathonga's half naked body. The chuckle Mathonga emits is soft, he sounds humble and calm.

"My son, I'm thirsty and tired." Mathonga says, walking past him. He still has that old person walk, Ndleleni is drowning in confusion. If that old woman is back, he won't know what to do.

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400+ comments unlocks tonight's chapter.
Thank you in advance...

MATHONGA

Fifty- seven

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng

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KHETHIWE-

Bahlephambikwethu has not explained why he is here with my father's best friend and his wife, I'm in the dark about everything.

Everyone is in the living room, making noise and annoying me to the last degree.

Why is my life a movie? Is it not bad enough that I was born without my permission, now I'm serving my former best friend lunch, disposing his leftovers, and washing his dishes. I need to get to the bottom of this, either that or I escape this place.

Where is Lethiwe when I need him? Men are always gallivanting, probably looking for the next skirt he'll sink his hands into.

Khethiwe." Curses and lightning, why is it I never hear her coming? She's planning my murder, I just know it... this is her practicing how to catch me off guard.

"Ma!" The smile is not there, she's that cold stone again.

"Hurry up and join us in the living room." And... like a ghost, she's gone. I have to close the windows and curtains in the other rooms first,

the mosquitos that lurk around here are not kind.

I start with the master bedroom, before attending the other rooms. Lethiwe's backroom is my last stop.

And then? My eyes are deceiving me. Why is Ntaba standing outside my fence, looking like a thug? He's peeping, eyes zoomed out and head moving from side to side. If the neighbors see him, they will think he's here to rob us and with that James Bond dark look, he won't get off easily.

I hurry to the gate, praying he won't resist when I pull him behind the tree next door. My mother is a curtain woman, she likes peeping through curtains and smacking whoever she sees at her gate. Okay, just me...

Ntaba regards me with a frown when our eyes meet, I'm the only one with the right to frown.

"Why are you here?" I pull him aside, out of sight, thank God he allowed me. We're standing too close, his back pinned on the tree trunk and hands around my middle. Not a good position to be in with someone who makes your world spin.

"I came to you, I didn't know you have visitors." He's looking over my shoulder, I follow his line of vision to Bahle's car. That one owes me an explanation, as to why he is in my house.

"They are not my visitors, they came to see my parents."

"That expired sausage is your father's friend?" His questions comes through gritted seams and furrowed brows.

"Who?" I don't know anyone who's a sausage. I'm pissing him off, his eyes narrow and hands

tighten on my sides.

Wait a minute, is he...

“Stop squeezing my love handles Ntaba.” I tell him, I should be moving from him but this is the only way to keep him hidden from sight.

“Why is he here, Khethiwe?” He ignores me, do I need to use a mic for him to hear me?

“He came with his parents, please go. You’ll get me in trouble with my parents.”

“Let’s go to KFC, they have those hot wings you like so much. I’ll buy you 20 of them, and I promise not to ask for one.” He’s still squeezing my flesh, just an update... it’s doing things to me, this man has such a big effect on me.

“I can’t go to KFC or anywhere with you, I’m helping my mom with the guests.” I should ask what he means by saying he’ll buy me 20 wings. Okay, okay... I appreciate it. I love it when people

spend their money on me. But this one has bad timing.

“Why not Khethi? I came here to see you.” He implores, and makes it hard for me to say no to him. But I have to fight it, my mother is a... oh shit! She’s going to kill me, I’ve been out here for too long.

“I have to go, my mother is expecting me. Please leave, and stop peeking through my fence. If people see you, they’ll think you’re looking to steal from us”

Not that there’s anything valuable to steal. Ntaba won’t let go of me, and what’s with him and squashing my flabby flesh? It’s making my body hot. He bends his knees to reach my height, it’s not happening, he’s too tall.

“Please Peaches,” He’s looking into my eyes, intently. My knees should not be responding like

this, I'm trying to get over him hao.

"Come with me. I'll bring you home before the witches get to your door." Haha! Funny.

"What do you want from me, Ntaba?" I ask because I'm expecting the impossible. He breathes in, pressing his forehead on mine. This position is too intimate, something I only see in my dreams.

"I want you with me, Peaches. I want you looking at me, not that sausage. I want you to think about me, not him. I want you caring for me, not him." The whisper is too much that I shudder against him, my clit and heart jolt when he brushes his lips on mine, teasing me to ecstasy and erotica.

"Be mine again," he says, I want to rub off the word 'again.' I made myself his, he didn't accept me. I fell hard for him and he let me hit the ground.

“Let me be the one to taste your kisses and feel your body.”

Another squeeze on my handles, I should be offended. Why am I not?

His lips decide to overtake mine, taking them into a sensual dance. The kiss is fast and wolfish, I’m losing myself in him once again. God I knew you haven’t forsaken me, Ntaba wants me. He wants me...

“Khethiwe!!!” Jeer, why didn’t my father marry a blind mute? I have 99 problems and one of them is my mother. I pull away from Ntaba, he releases a grumble, pressing his wet lips on my forehead. I didn’t want to stop either.

“We’ll talk, I have to go. Please go home.” I escape his touch, wheezing and trying to curb my overly excited heart. “Go home.”

Another order from me, he won’t go anywhere.

All he is doing is stare at me. Ntaba needs to leave, my mother won't care that he's the chief's son.

Her voice calls me again, I run through the gate just as she turns to face me. I need a good excuse, bless me with an excuse Lord.

"Where did you go? I told you to come to the living room."

Stone cold woman... Her arms are folded across her chest, back straitened and nose in the air. I won't be shocked if she starts saying "like" like the Kardashians do.

"I went to buy Grandpa for my headache." Ha! See the devil coming through for God's child. My eyes are too shifty, I keep them to myself. She's a detective...

"You've kept the guests waiting, wipe that oily face and follow me."

EISH! Ponds always disappoints, I knew I

should've spent my money on Gentle Magic products. I use the back door again to get to my room and apply ponds on my nose and forehead. My cheeks are still puffy...

"Khethiwe, come sit next to me." That's my father, smiling suspiciously. They are all ogling at me, and Bahle has this smile I can't pin.

"Baba, can I go out for a bit? I'll be back before 9pm, there's a party at the royal house." I'm swimming in lies and taking advantage of the visitors, my mother cannot go against her husband in front of people.

I'll deal with her tantrums later, after my talk with Ntaba.

"Don't be rude, we have visitors." My mother jumps before my dad, yeah hey, African mothers.

I turn to my father for deliverance, he pats the

space beside him. I hate my life.

“Sit down ntombazane, you can’t be talking to us while standing.” My mother barks, she has no shame, shouting at me in front of people. Respectfully, I position myself beside my father. I need to move out, first salary and I’m gone.

“They are here for you, my child. Don’t be disheartened, parties are always there.” My father.

Like Ntaba, he’s always around. I know he’s still out there.

“I’m sure you remember Ndimande,” that’s mom’s introduction, hand pointing at the scrawny looking man.

“I don’t, but baba told me about him.” I really don’t care about this man.

“That’s Nomsa, his wife and Bahle his stepson.” Stepson? How? So this Nomsa woman is Bahle’s mom, I’ve never met his parents. I’m

pretty sure I've seen a picture of her, no wonder she looked familiar. It was a long time ago.

“Oh!” My eyes are on Bahle, did he set this up? He clears his throat as he shifts on the sofa, yes the stare I'm giving him is meant to make him uncomfortable.

“My parents got divorced, mom met Muzi and they got married.” He shrugs like he doesn't give a shit, I know I don't give one. How is it my business that his parents are divorced? The real question is, why are they telling me this?

“I believe you two know each other,” Nomsa talks, her smile is too much. “Bahle has told me so much about you.”

Irrelevant, I'm bored. My mind is on Ntaba, he's out there.

“Bahle has just started his own company, it's going well actually. He owns property in Zimbali

and...”

Blah! Blah! Blah! I want to scream how much I don't care about Bahle's achievements, they have nothing to do with me.

Nomsa must get to the point, I just saw Ntaba jump the gate. Tall people should be expelled from doing anything but walking, it looked weird honestly. My focus has shifted to him, the curtains are closed but because they are white and the light is on, I can see everything from here.

“My son has achieved everything, he needs a wife to complete his dreams.” Nomsa again, her husband has been smiling at me. How am I uncomfortable in my father's house? His smile, his eyes, they look familiar. Perhaps I'm starting to remember him.

“You're getting married?” I ask Bahle,

congratulations are in order.

“Yes, to you.” The stepdad finally speaks, which ‘you’ is he talking about? Can’t be me, can it?

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.” I need to breathe, it’s not what I think it is. My father’s hand lands on mine, he sees my panic. I wish he wouldn’t touch me, it’s making me upset.

“My baby, Ndimande is here with a wedding proposal. They want your hand in marriage, they have chosen you for their son.” My father explains, I’m still lost.

These people are not talking about me.

“No.” The word is quick and firm, my denial creates heavy silence. They are all staring at me, I’m not affected. What did they expect? That I’d gladly say yes?

“I think Ndimande didn’t put it clearly, Khethiwe you are going to marry Bahle. The lobola has been paid, it’s done.” My mom says, shattering

my entire world. I refuse, they better have another daughter by this name. This Khethiwe is not marrying Bahle.

“That’s not even possible ma, it can’t be done without my permission. I’m not going to marry Bahle, never.” My voice peaks, I have never felt so betrayed in my life. My mother is expressionless, eyes scolding me. I know what she’s think. “You better agree you damn child.” That’s what’s going through her mind.

I turn to my father, tears pooling behind my pupils.

“Baba, you gave me away without asking me? Am I too much of a burden to you?”

“No, I love you Khethiwe and I want the best for you. Bahle is well off, he will give you a comfortable life. Look at your brother Lethiwe, his life is stagnant. I don’t want the same for you.”

“I don’t want him.” Tears stream down my face as I shout, I wipe them away and stand to leave, but my trip is short lived. My mother grabs my hand and serves me a hot slap, dammit... I need to slap-proof my cheeks.

“Sit your ass back down, you’re embarrassing us.” She whisper shouts, poking my forehead with her finger.

I can only turn to my father to save me, his eyes flick away from me at first glance. He agrees with his wife, I’m embarrassing them.

“You will not tarnish your father’s imagine, you silly girl.”

“What wrong did I do, ma?” My voice trembles from my chest, I don’t want to cry. I’ve done enough of that in my life.

“Khethiwe, we are simply asking you to listen to us and do as we say. How old are you? Twenty eight? You have nothing, absolutely nothing.

You completed Matric with just a useless certificate, and went on to work as a maid. Don't you think you have embarrassed us enough?" Mom.

"I didn't know I was an embarrassment," I tell my mother. I don't want to talk about this here, with those people as spectators. It's a family matter, they need to leave.

"Nkosikazi, that's enough." My father is on his feet, staring daggers at his wife.

"No baba, we will not be disrespected by this child, ngeke sizwe ngaye."

"But I'm not a child ma, and this is not the stone ages. Arranged marriages are a thing of the past, I have rights."

"Not in this house, you don't." She's shouting at me. "We gave you life Khethiwe, the least you can do is pay us back."

That does not make sense, I didn't even ask to

be born.

Betrayal is a bitch and that's what these people have done to me and Bahle... How can he do this to me? He approached me, claiming friendship, and some bull about how he missed me.

I turn to him, the idiot can't even look at me.

"Bahle!" I notice how his jaw clenches, his parents look normal as if we're having a normal conversation.

"You knew about this?" I ask, my voice cracking. He opens his mouth to speak, I see lies and nothing but that.

"I had an idea, I didn't know it was you until a month ago." He says, rubbing his hands together. A month is too long a time to keep a secret.

“And you agree with this?” Please let him say no.

“He does.” His mother takes over, she reminds me of my mother. Her strictness and authority.

“But why do I have to marry him? He can choose any girl he wants, why me?”

“I love you Khethiwe.” Bahle says, standing to meet my height. How dare he tell me this nonsense, I want to slap him across the face and spit at his feet.

“You don’t know me, Bahle.”

“That’s not an issue, you’ll date once you’re married.” Can Nomsa shut her big mouth? Why is she talking to me? I don’t know her.

“Khethiwe, please understand my child.” My father says, placing a hand on my shoulder. “I owe Ndimande so much. He saved my life once upon a time, he’s the reason we’re here today.” He continues.

“So why am I paying your debt?” I ask, shifting away from his hand.

“I kind of promised that I will marry my daughter to his son, he came up with the idea. That’s how much he loves you Khethiwe, he wants you as his daughter in-law.”

“Baba do you hear yourself? You’re not making Sense,” I scream, and give myself to tears. Holding them back has become a struggle.

“Lower your voice wena.” My mother again, I’m getting tired of this woman.

“No, I will not lower my voice. I don’t owe Ndimande anything, he’s nothing to me. I don’t know the man, why do I have to give my life up to pay a debt I know nothing about?”

And this Ndimande person is quiet, he creates havoc and sits back like he’s done nothing wrong.

“I told you to lower your voice Khethiwe, you do

not want to piss me off.”

My mother yells, grabbing my arm with vicious force. “We are your parents.”

“I wish you weren’t,” the shouting earns me another slap on the face. She went all out with this one, I stumble back and land against my father.

“Will you stop hitting the child? What is wrong with you?” Dad is chiding his wife, it makes no difference because he’s on her side not mine.

I turn to leave, but my mother won’t let me go. “Sit down Khethiwe, we’re going to talk about this like adults.”

Adults? Well then they are the most childish adults I know. I want to dispute but something crashes outside, everyone is startled. My mother is the first to run out, I run behind her, knowing it’s Ntaba out there. Of course everyone follows.

My jaw drops when I see his giant self wincing on the ground, right under our tree. There are leaves around him, God, I think he fell from the tree. When I saw him jumping the gate, I didn't think he'd climb our tree. He probably couldn't see inside the house that he thought he'll get a better view at the top.

Handsome and stupid is Ntabezikude Khanyile.

“Hey, who are you?” My mother yells, her voice carrying threat. Ntaba stands, rubbing his hip. This man was blessed with tallness, so he won't have to climb trees.

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A/N: I had to keep the insert short to save the little battery percentage left on the phone. We have power outage. We're continuing tomorrow, please give me a boost with likes, comments and shares.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-eight

Sponsored by Charmaigne Kotoyi

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AMANDLA-

The sun has set, again I'm alone in this huge house. Sabusiswa is always out, doing God-knows what. Woman is too old to be partying, I

have asked about her whereabouts and have been left hanging and answering my own questions with assumptions.

After emptying my plate, I dispose of it in the sink and head back to the lounge to wait for mom. Every room in this house is cold, the kitchen, although we cook in it is the coldest.

An hour oozes to another one, I decide to try her phone—it sends me straight to voice mail.

I need to find friends, I would have one or two if she allowed me to go out. We stay in Waterfall, I'm not familiar with the place yet.

The heaviness on my eyelids tells me that it's time to call it a night, the thought of sleeping in that room drains me blood dry.

I don't want to sleep in my room today,

Sabusiswa is against me sharing a bed with her for a reason I don't know. How does she not care that that room scares the shit out of me? There's a negative presence in there, I sleep with an open bible under my pillow and it's sad to say it has not made a difference.

My grandmother comes to me in my dreams, I see her from the moment she opens my bedroom door to the time she climbs into my bed. Then it starts, where she's touching me inappropriately. Sometimes she looks like a man, and has man parts.

I hate that I never fight her, I lie on my bed unable to move as she penetrates me with... I don't know what. Sabusiswa says it must be stress, I don't agree with her. My grandmother is raping me in my dreams, why is she not taking me seriously?

Those dreams drain my strength, so much so that I wake up feeling weak, and wanting to take my own life. Some days I cry for hours, some days, I'm a walking zombie and Sabusiswa would say it's just dreams.

The hairs on my body stand as I open the door to my bedroom, the light switch is about five feet away. I take a step in and freeze in the middle of the door. Yes the room is dark save for the streetlight, there... there's a figure on my bed, under the covers.

My knees are rickety, giving me no chance to run. I don't listen to them, but speed out of the room screaming.

"Amandla." My mother's home?

I see her, climbing those stairs I hate so much.

"What's wrong?"

“Ma, there’s someone in my room.” I’m screaming, tears playing down my face. She hates it when I cry, it annoys her. She doesn’t have to say it, I see it in her actions.

Sabusiswa sighs and swooshes past me without a word, heading to my room. My feet won’t cooperate as I tiptoe behind her, I can hear my heart beating against my chest. Without any hesitation, she opens the door. Three seconds later, the light is on.

“Come see for yourself.” She says, with a tint of irritation.

I don’t want to go in there, I have seen enough to scare me till I turn grey.

“There’s no one in here, Amandla. Stop being foolish.”

What? That’s not possible, I know what I saw. I rush to check and she’s right, there’s no one. My bed is still neatly made.

“You need to stop this, or else I will start thinking you are not normal.” She says, putting me to order with just a look.

“I’m not sleeping in here tonight,” I quip and rush out of the bedroom. If she won’t let me sleep on her bed, the guest room will do. I will have to sleep with the light on.

NTABEZIKUDE-

“Who are you?”

What kind of a question is that?

He carries the Khanyile legacy, he emerges from Khahlamba’s bloodline that continues to live on. He is a warrior of a king, his brother’s keeper—he is a spark that starts a fire. He walks

with a royal stride, his rippling muscles echoing the strength of his forefathers and he has a stare that commands respect. He is Ntabezikude Khanyile, a lion and a lamb.

“You better answer before I call the police.” Just who the hell does she think she is?

He’s really not in the mood for squabbles, his fingers are slippery as of note— everything is slipping out of them. He hates not having control over things, every night he is taken back to when he was a child, when he didn’t matter in the eyes of his parents.

The rejection, the feeling of loneliness—it visits him when he’s alone. Now he finds himself chasing after Khethiwe like she said he would.

He couldn’t stay at the house, not with pastor Khuzwayo there. Finding Khethiwe felt like a

good thing to do, he's here every night anyway. Sometimes he avails himself, and sometimes he lurks in the darkness, watching from a distance.

"Call the police." That's Muzikambambo barking like a man with authority, Ntaba steps out of the shadows, a frown on his face.

Khethiwe is there, standing behind her father. His eyes are on her and he sees the tears rolling down her face. He scowls, eyes chasing every suspect standing with his Peaches.

"Khethiwe." He takes a step closer, something akin to rage flashes in Ntaba's eyes.

Peaches weaves through the crowd, and runs to throw herself in Ntaba's arms. Everyone can hear her cries, they are loud and uncontrollable.

"Why are you crying?" Ntaba leisurely pushes Khethiwe back to get a look at her. He's only granted a second before someone is pulling

Khethiwe from him. The woman has the nerve, he would strike if she were not Khethiwe's mother.

"Ma, let me go." Khethiwe's cries reverberate, calling neighbors to come and witness what is unfolding under a dark blanket coated with stars. A game of tug and war is easy to play, Ntaba thinks as he pulls Khethiwe from her mother whose strike back is a frown. He feels that she is vulnerable

"Ma, please. This is Ntabezikude Khanyile." Khethiwe shouts just as her mother grabs her hand for the second time. They should be on their knees, heads bowed in respect of the chief's son. That's not happening though, Ntaba is surrounded by scowls and a bunch of flaring nostrils.

"So?" Khethiwe's mother shrugs, showing off cold eyes under a deep frown.

“He’s my boyfriend.” Well, that’s what Ntaba wants, to be her boyfriend.

“You must be insane to think this boy loves you.” Her mother snorts, sneering over at Ntaba. Perhaps she missed the part where her daughter said the man towering over everyone here is the chief’s son.

“Why not ma? Am I not lovable?”

“You are a peasants compared to royalty,” her mother cackles mockingly, tickling her own laugh bone. It’s short lived, her grin transforms into a frown when Ntaba’s arm circles on Khethiwe’s waist.

“What’s so funny about me dating your daughter?” His face is blank, but his eyes... oh his eyes say a bucket full.

Khethiwe’s mother sighs, snapping her head back to her husband and guests.

“It’s funny because she’s a married woman.” The pride on her face is garish, she folds her arms across her chest, eyebrows snapped skyward.

It is shocking news to Ntaba, Khethiwe never mentioned any of this to him. They were locking lips not so long ago, right under the tree. He can still feel the wetness of her lips on his.

“It’s not true, Ntaba.” Khethiwe says and adds a short pause filled with wavering restraints before she continues, “They want me to marry this man, and I don’t want to.”

“Then you’re not going to marry him.” Ntaba says, pulling her closer to him. His protective side has come to life, he’s willing to do just about anything to stop whatever nonsense is happening here.

“Respectfully sir, this has nothing to do with you.” Muzikambambo says, nodding a greeting

as well.

“You’re wrong, I have everything to do with KaMadonsela.” Ntaba is staking his claim, ignoring the consequences that will come thereafter.

A weary glance sent his way by Khethiwe reveals her worries, she might as well be throwing herself into the lions den. It’s not too late for her to take a turn and ask him to leave, but Ntaba is her only way out of this fire.

“What is that supposed to mean?” The father questions, letting loose a steadying breath.

“I’m carrying his seed.” Whoa! Mother Nature say what?

Gasps vibrate around as the exclamation lands with a gut-punch.

Ntaba glowers towards Khethiwe, the silence

skulking around giving him a second to decide how to approach this matter.

He wants to tell her to look at him, to confirm what she just said. His stare goes unanswered, Khethiwe's gaze is on her mother. The others step closer, shock visible on their expressions.

"Khethiwe?" Her mother sounds exasperated, as well she might be.

"That's the guy that attacked me."

Now's not the time Bahlepha... sigh!

No one pays attention to him, Khethiwe has some explaining to do and right now, all eyes are on her.

"Ntabezikude is my boyfriend, and I'm carrying his baby." Khethiwe repeats before her mother has time to truly get annoyed, it's pointless really, she is forever annoyed.

"You're carrying my... baby?" Ntaba, far more

sensitive and sensible than people give him credit for, took his time before asking this question.

He wants to drop on his knees, swear on his grandmother's grandmother that he is not the father. That he would never impregnate a woman because he is a cautious man, he plans his future and creates his own destiny.

"I'm sorry baba, it wasn't planned I swear."
She's chosen to give her father an explanation and not the alleged seed planter.

Muzikambambo is showing disappointment in his eyes, more than that, he's embarrassed. Why wouldn't he be when his best friend Muziwendlovu is scrutinizing him with a deadly glare?

"I saw this day coming, I've always known you will amount to nothing in life. You ungrateful

brat, after everything we've sacrificed for you to have a normal life. This is the thanks we get?"

Any mother would react this way, right? Her words cut deeper than a knife.

"I'm sorry ma."

"Your sorry does not cut it, Khethiwe." Mom chops up syllables, nothing but scissors that split her daughter in half.

Khethiwe squeals when she grips her hand, pushing her back towards Bahle. Sure Bahle catches her, locking his arms around her waist.

"I'm not sure what's going on here, but I wouldn't do that if I were you." Ntaba says, talking to Bahle. Mr. Bald sneers, bold as brass. The punches he received last time have been forgotten, although his face carries evidence of the assault.

“You don’t belong here, please leave.”

Ndimande is the one to chase the Khanyile giant away, the audacity of this man.

Ntaba sighs, he’s losing his patience.

The worst thing anyone could do is not listen to him, he has a side that no one would like to see. It’s there, present with him at this very moment. Yes, the urge to kill and he does it so well it almost looks like a God given gift.

“Are you going to let her go, or you’d rather I make you?” Calm, cool and collected. It is how Ntaba communicates, shouting does not gain one respect and he is not about to stoop to that level.

“Fuck off, you son of a bitch.” Bahle shouts, his eyes flashing angrily. He’s restraining a squirming Khethiwe.

“I see,” Ntaba breathes. Blood flashes before his eyes, it’s all in his imagination, yet the

crimson scent hovers in the air. Things could go wrong if he pulls out a weapon and starts slashing throats. His tactics to win Khethiwe would be wasted, she's never seen him dressed in a devil's costume. He sucks in a long breath, ordering himself back to submission.

"Let go of me, Bahle." Khethiwe screams and that sets Ntaba off, a gun is in his hand in just a blink, aimed at Bahle. Nomsa screams, while Muzikambambo and his best friend excrete incredulous gasps. Her mother does not appear daunted, a definition of imbokodo.

Ntaba does have to say anything more, Khethiwe runs back to his side.

"Are you really pregnant with my baby?" A question, he sees how Khethiwe flaps her eyelashes, but won't look at him. She gives him a single nod that answers nothing really, this girl just told her parents that she is having a Khanyile baby. Does she know what that means?

“Peaches!” Ntaba places a finger on her chin, turning her head so she’s looking at him. The dark brooding eyebrows, the slight downward tilt of the head, the strong nose, and all those angles on his chiseled face—it’s all fixed on her.

“You’re pregnant with my baby?” He stutters the second time, heart swimming in the acidic pool in his stomach. A nod from Khethiwe places him on a fiery seat. When? How?

“Are you sure?” The guy just wants to be certain.

These prolonged silent communications are perfect in the sense that they give him time to think, yet agonizing as they come with threats of changing his entire life. Ntaba despises change.

“Yes...” Khethiwe.

“You’re getting rid of it.” That’s her mother slicing through their moment with her bitter

voice.

“Tomorrow morning you are going to the clinic and you are going to get rid of that thing inside you.”

Her mother is a no nonsense type of woman, not only does her face say it, her strides are in on it too.

“No ma, I’m not going to kill my baby.” Khethiwe yells, not deliberately.

“You are not killing a Khanyile, over my dead body. Are you going to answer to my ancestors?” Ntaba.

The Khanyile ancestors can be pretty dramatic, and no one knows them better this man representing the Khanyiles.

“That’s funny, what right do they have over the baby?” That’s right, Ndimande is the supposed uncle, and that probably gives him the right to butt in.

“Baba, please tell your friend to stay out of this.”
Aw, they grow up so fast. Muzikambambo
scowls at his daughter. To say he is let down
would be an understatement.

“Ndimande is right, and I am disappointed in
you Khethiwe. How could you be so careless?”
Her dad objects.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but I would like to steal
your daughter for a while.” Ntaba introduces,
the weapon has been lowered but the threat
remains in his eyes.

“That’s not happening, Khethiwe go inside.” Ah,
moms!!!

This is a challenge, Ntaba loves them. His lips
stretch into a grin as he plays with the gun in
his hand, everyone ducks, including the
daredevil mom and that has Ntaba chuckling.

“Relax, family. We are family, right? I mean your

daughter is carrying a Khanyile and we take care of our own.” The smile widens, all fake. Khethiwe is pressed to his side, eyes on him as he plays god with her family. This is a mess, that gun will create enmity between her parents and Ntaba. Any chance of them ever liking him are gone, they will never forget this day, especially her mother.

“Let’s go Khethi.” Ntaba is dragging her with him, towards the gate. His mind is muddled, he needs answers. He’s not a baker, there can’t be a bun in her oven.

“What have you done?” Khethiwe whispers, trying to keep up with Ntaba’s long legs. He’s walking too fast, their trip is terminated by a horrendous noise of a gunshot tearing through the air. Ntaba clutches his arms around Khethiwe as they fall with a sickening thud on the ground. Things happen when you show your

enemies your back.

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A/N: Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Fifty-nine

Sponsored by Charmaigne Kotoyi...

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NALA-

Mathonga is asleep, he didn't say much after he came home. Just that he was tired and needed to rest. He wouldn't remove the sarong, and

would not say why.

I'm worried about him, I heard Ndleleni telling Styles that Mathonga has a spiritual gift, he never told me any of that. I plan to ask him about it when he wakes up.

A knock at the door gets me jumping to my feet, I shout a low "come in" and my heart drops at the sight of the brother who hates me. A powerful aura emanates from him as he stands immobile at the door, I blink to avert my gaze from his stabbing one.

He clears his throat and that forces my eyes back to him.

"Any change?" He's asking me? I'm surprised because he's never kind when talking to me, I probably look like a deer caught in headlights. If his eyebrows could elevate any further, they would. The look in his eyes conveys that he is

waiting for an answer.

“He... hasn’t woken up yet.” Syllables shudder from my mouth, it’s a good thing he does not speak to me in English. I would honestly make a fool of myself, I’m still trying to find my way in that department.

“There’s someone here to see him, a friend of Mrs. Sishi.” He tells me, ramming his hands in his pockets. I’m nodding vigorously, it’s not like I have a say in this. Mathonga belongs to them.

The door opens wider as he shifts to the side, Styles walks in and with him is a light skinned woman.

My mouth is agape with the delightful sight of her beauty, I don’t know her but she makes me insecure about my body.

“Oh my goodness, she does look like her.” The lady sings, headed my way. I look like who?

My eyes are on Ndleleni, I mean he is the one I

would turn to for clarification because he's Mathonga's brother and I trust he would never put me in a situation where I am uncomfortable, hate aside.

"Hi, I'm Liyana." She cheerfully says, throwing her arms around me. The hug dawdles, I'm caught between hugging her back and keeping my hands to myself.

"You're stronger than you think, you know that?" She whispers into my ear, adding a gentle pat on my back. Her arms tighten around me before she lets go, our eyes meet. It's almost as if she's searching me, flipping every corner and leaving me exposed. I feel exposed, at least.

"What happened to your brother is not your fault, don't be too hard on yourself." Who told her about my brother? I turn to Styles seeking answers, he shrugs but his eyes tell me he

knows what's going on.

“Liyana is my goddaughter, she has a gift. Her ancestors tell her people's secrets.” He's chuckling heartily, Liyana huffs with a roll of the eye.

“Don't put it like that uncle Styles, they do it so I can help people.” Liyana says, bringing her smile back to me.

“You're a sangoma?” I ask, gifted people are either sangomas, nyangas or prophets.

“Nope, I don't subscribe to any titles and my ancestors are stingy with me. They only show me things regarding my family, the Okolies. I guess they like you, for them to show me what you're going through.” That's a strange gift to have.

“I know what you're thinking,” her laughter resonates into the room, bringing light with it. “Strange gift, right?”

My eyes widen, can she read minds?

Embarrassed, I run my eyes back to Styles. He finds this amusing, must be nice.

“You’re here to check on Mathonga, not make Nala nervous.” Styles says, they are way too friendly, it’s kind of weird.

“Yes, I know.” Liyana nods towards Styles. “I don’t mean to overwhelm you Nala, but if you need anything I’m here. Your little brother is not resting in peace, the grudges you’re carrying in your heart are keeping him from crossing over. He’s a wandering spirit, it’s not good for a spirit to wander.”

I did not expect this, do I tell her that I sent my brother to kill his enemies? That I told him to rest in peace when he has killed them all?

“I come from a spiritually gifted family, my husband walks with his ancestors too. They show him everything. My aunt sees and talks to

the dead, you can talk to her if you like. I believe there are things your brother wants to say, he died in a terrible way. His heart is still broken, the pain he was feeling that day he died... what that man did to him, he can still feel that.”

I didn't want to be reminded that my brother was raped.

“I think that's enough,” Ndleleni articulates, pulling me from Liyana's presence. Maybe it's because I'm hyperventilating, I hear my loud long intakes of breaths. My hands are trembling.

“Get her a glass of water.” Ndleleni tells someone, tears have blurred my vision. He sits me on a chair by the window and pushes it open, the air seems to help my breathing.

He slouches before me, lacing my trembling hands with his.

I thought he hated me, I want to ask. Liyana is the one to hand me a glass of water, she

must've taken it from Mathonga's bedside table. She helps me drink, an apologetic look in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overwhelm you." She repeats herself, my reply is a nod. She's telling me to breathe in and out, slowly. I do that, the look on everyone's faces is of concern.

"Nala." Mathonga's voice catches everyone's attention. Ndleleni runs to his bedside, I have to toddle there. There are tears in his eyes, he stretches his hand towards me.

"Help me up, please. I need to use the bathroom." I rush to his side and quickly wipe his tears away.

"Why are you crying?" I ask, caressing his cheek.

"I can't feel my legs," the whisper is almost inaudible. It reaches my ears still.

“What?” I guess it reached Ndleleni too, he pushes past me. Mathonga’s view is hidden from me by Ndleleni’s gigantic figure.

“Bhuti, I can’t feel my legs.” I hear how his voice cracks, it is heart breaking.

“Don’t worry, it’s probably because you’ve been sleeping for too long. Let me help you up.”
Ndleleni.

He flips the blanket open, Mathonga's legs look fine. Nothing out of the ordinary. Styles lends a helping hand in getting Mathonga out of bed, who has to circle each arm around Ndleleni and Styles. The moment his feet hit the ground, they fail him. I swallow a scream, unable to grasp what is happening to him.

“I can’t feel my legs,” Mathonga says as they lay him back on the bed. “What happened to my legs?”

Maybe Liyana can answer that, she seems to

know everything.

KHETHIWE-

“Khethiwe, Khethiwe.” My mother’s shouts of agony tear through me, she’s crying. Or is it me? It has to be me, one minute I was walking away with Ntaba, the next a gun was fired and now I’m lying under a heavy man and my butt is on fire.

“Peaches, are you okay?” His voice is beautiful in my ears, maybe I’m an idiot for focusing on that and not the pain I’m in.

“Ntaba, it hurts.” My voice is muffled, I want to scream and shout, and curse whoever shot me. How am I still alive with this much pain and a bullet inside my ass? Did it go inside though? I think it did, God it hurts.

I feel Ntaba move from me, I scream when he attempts to turn me around.

“No, my bum hurts. They shot my bum, Ntaba.” I don’t bother curtailing my tears, I want to cry the pain away.

“Baby are you okay?” My father is asking, he’s standing in front of me, I can only see his size four feet. Lord bless my mother’s cold heart, shame.

“Khethiwe.” That’s Ntaba calling me, there’s something about the way he called my name—dark and bone-chilling. A hand glides on my buttocks, making me scream in pain.

“It’s okay Khethi, you’re going to be okay.” Lord I know his teeth are gritted as he says this, I want to see his face so I can believe him when he says I’m going to be okay. It doesn’t feel like it, I see heaven and I’m not ready yet. I owe God so much, I haven’t lived according to his word and

he will punish me for my sins.

“Someone is whisking me up, and turning me in their arms. It’s Ntaba, I would love to say he looks worried for me. But no, Jesus no. The man is fuming, eyes wild and fire blazing.

“You’re going to be okay.” He says, placing a kiss on my forehead.

“Where are you taking her? The ambulance is on the way.” My mother would dispute of course. Ntaba does not answer, he’s looking at someone on his left. I follow his gaze and my watery eyes widen at Ndimande who is carrying a gun. My father’s best friend is the one who shot me, I want to ask why but the man carrying me is walking us away and ignoring every voice telling him to stop.

“We’re coming with you,” my father is telling Ntaba. I don’t want those people near me, I hide

my face on Ntaba's chest and close my eyes. He hasn't said anything, his heart beat though is beating faster than it should be. He opens the back door and lays me on my stomach.

"Are you comfortable?" Why is he asking me nonsense?

"Of course I'm not comfortable, I've been shot on my bum." I don't mean to shout at him, the pain is making me do things I wouldn't normally do.

"I think the bullet grazed over your ass, you wouldn't be alive if it went through." Oh he thinks...

"Then why do I feel like I'm dying?" More tears, I hate tears. "I'm seeing white Ntaba, my body is cold. I think Jesus is coming to get me, Christians see Jesus before they die."

He's laughing, why is he laughing when I'm in so much pain?

He doesn't answer me, but shuts the door. I wait to hear another door opening and closing, his scent fills the car.

"We'll meet you at the hospital, baby." I can see my father from my vantage point, he's peeping through the driver's window.

I don't want to talk to him, his friend shot me.

Ntaba drives off when he moves, he's speeding. If I don't die from the bullet wound, I will die from a car accident.

"Please slow down, we'll crash."

"I'm going to kill him." That's his answer? I think I have an idea who he is talking about, I don't want to get my hopes up and feel special for nothing.

"I'm going to kill that bastard." He repeats.

"Who?" Stupid question.

“How are you feeling? Is the baby okay?” I wish he didn’t ask me that, I’m not in my rightful mind to be answering questions.

“Ntaba drive faster, I don’t want to die” I scream at him. He’s probably thinking I’m an idiot for being undecided.

“You said we’ll crash if I drive fast.”

“Either way, I’m going to di...”

“You’re not going to die,” he interjects sternly. It’s enough to shut me up. I made him angry with my choice of words.

“The only person dying is that old fool who shot you.” Jesus, he means it.

“You’re going to kill him?” Me, not wanting to jump into conclusions. He might be just saying it out of anger, he can’t be capable of murder. I refuse to believe that.

The man has gone silent on me, I want to press

and get him talking. Then again, Ndimande is the least of my worries. My butt will never be okay.

“We’re here.” Ntaba tells me, the car is not moving anymore. He jumps out, and comes to get me out. My level of screams are so embarrassing, I can’t help it, it hurts.

He’s carrying me in his arms, rushing us inside the hospital.

“Ntokazi, she’s been shot on her ass.” He’s talking to a nurse, I wonder if they have a mic in this place. He might as well get one and broadcast the news, this is not happening to me.

“You need to sign a form first befo...”

“I said she’s been shot,” Ntaba cuts in. “That means it’s an emergency, I’ll sign the form when you’re done with her.”

This nurse is not used to being spoken to like a child, I see it in her eyes. She wants to say something, this man has a way of putting one under his feet, the look he's giving her makes me feel sorry for her. Perhaps if I cry louder, and fake fainting I will save her from Ntaba's wrath.

"I... I can't breathe." Tears come easily because I'm in pain, wheezing is as easy as faking an orgasm.

There's panic when my head and arms hang, they think I have passed out. I can't see anything but I hear how the nurse shouts at someone to bring a stretcher. I hear a chuckle from the man carrying me, he sees my dramatics.

My body is laid on a hard surface, stomach down.

"Stay here sir, we'll let you know when we're done with the patient." That's the same nurse

telling Ntaba, I love her. Ntaba won't have to see me being operated on my butt. I open my eyes when I feel the stretcher moving, he's staring back, a frown on his face. Before disappearing down the corridor, I catch sight of my parents running in. I hope they didn't bring the Ndimandes, Bahle has some explaining to do. In the hospital room, I'm injected with something that puts me out.

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"Khethiwe are you okay?" The voice echoes in my ears, bringing me out of a deep sleep. Pain shoots through me the moment I'm aware of the breath in my lungs. I'm lying on my side, eyes taking time to adjust to light. There's a streetlight standing before me, he has that

frown he had the last time I laid my eyes on him.

“Ntaba.” I clear my throat, happy to see that he is still here.

“You lied to me,” what? When did I...

“I thought I was dying, Ntaba. It wasn’t a lie.” It did feel like I was dying, I’m shocked myself that I’m alive.

His eyes narrow, I’m annoying him.

“You’re not pregnant.”

Oh that... Do I cry my way out of this mess, or cry pain and faint? I need an escape.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t have a choice. I wanted to get my parents off my back.” He has to understand, I was caught between a rock and a damn hard place. I could find no other way out.

“Of all the lies handed to you in this world, you had to choose this one?” He sounds like a father reprimanding his child.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t think it through. I didn’t know what else to do Ntaba, please don’t be mad?”

“You could’ve trusted me to get you out of that mess, Khethi.” Oh I’m still Khethi, that’s good.

“There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you, you should know that by now.” He says.

Well, he’s never given me a reason to believe that he would move mountains for me.

“I guess.” I shrug lightly. “Are my parents here?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t want to see them,” any of them.

“And that fool? How long have you known him?”

I want to tell him that I don’t want to talk about Bahle or his parents, my parents gave me a terrible fright. Never in a million years did I think something like that would happen to me.

“I’m in pain Ntaba, can we not talk about them?”

“How is your butt?”

Is that a smirk I see twitching at the corner of his mouth?

“I’m in pain, it’s not funny.”

“No one is laughing Khethi,” he’s serious again, gaze probing my eyes.

“Please tell me they didn’t remove my butt cheek.” That is my biggest fear, I can’t go through life with one butt cheek.

“I told you the bullet grazed your cheek, relax, you still have i-reverse yomhlaba.” (A big ass.)

He’s lying, my ass is not big. My family is a family of flat asses, aunts, uncles, you name them.

“It hurts, will I ever be able to sit? What did the doctor say?” I’m worried, hence the question. I will probably need a wheel chair, but how will I sit on it with no ass?

“It’s just a scratch Khethi,” he’s smiling again but his eyes are cold and empty.

I open my mouth to let the complaint out, “But it doesn’t hurt like a scratch.”

Maybe I’m a cry baby. Ntaba sighs and lowers to peck my cheek. Nerves attack me whenever he’s close like this, my breathing quickens. I bite my trembling lips, shying away from his gaze. Why does he have to do this now?

“Who is that man to you, Khethi?” What? I was expecting a kiss, not a question.

“Who?” The enquiry trembles through my trembling lips, his lips slowly brush against mine. What is he trying to do to me? I can’t breathe for real this time.

“That old man, who is he to you?” He continues to brush his lips on my mine, a light touch that has me yearning for more.

“He... he’s my father’s best friend.” I mutter

nervously, my mind has fallen into the gutter.

“Then you won’t cry at his funeral? I don’t want you crying, Khethi.” He replies coolly, I have a comeback for him—a question rather, is Ndimande dead? Why is he speaking of funerals? The question is wiped off my mind when he starts nibbling on my lips, kissing me and pulling back and kissing me again. He has a mission, I don’t know what and this closeness is not doing me justice. I’m too far gone, lost in everything that is Ntaba.

“How is the pain?” He’s asking about my butt again, lips teasing mine. This man's casualness has no timing.

“Painful.” I whimper, praying he doesn’t notice how my body trembles under his touch.

“Can I kiss it better?” Eh! He wants to kiss my... no I can’t say it. My cheeks flush, I move my face from him to hide it on the pillow. It’s not

long before I feel his fingers caressing the bandage, a gentle touch. I think his mouth follows, two pecks. I can't really feel his lips because of the bandage, there's a touch though.

"You won't tell anyone about this, right Khethi?" The seriousness in his voice makes me want to laugh. I nod and open my mouth to speak, but a presence at the door prevents me from doing so. It's Hlabela and Khothama, why are their eyes popping out like that.

"Is it safe to come in?" Hlabela is the one to ask, Ntaba clears his throat, regarding them with a frown.

"How long have you been standing there?" He asks, ramming his hands into his pockets.

"Long enough to know that you kiss ass." Khothama says, sharing a laugh with Hlabela. I don't appreciate them laughing at him.

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MATHONGA-

Sixty-

Sponsored by Njunju Lerato Matlotleng

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THE KHANYILES-

“Are you okay?” The question is brought forward to Mathonga as Ndleleni helps him get into bed after a bathroom break. Mathonga hums in response, his eyes are on Nala. She’s worried sick, he sees it in her eyes.

“I’m okay, Mathonga.” She has to assure him, he can’t be worried about his legs and her as well.

“Please come closer,” he extends a hand for her to take. She’s a little hesitant, eyes flashing back and forth to Ndleleni.

“My brother doesn’t bite.” Mathonga teases, laughing at his own failed joke. Ndleleni snorts, face bunched.

“I’m going to be okay, Nala. I promise.” He’s not sure if that is true, his ancestors are having their way with him even after accepting to become their vessel.

“You’re paralysed,” she takes his hands. “This is all scary for me, Mathonga. Why didn’t you tell me about your gift?” She’s not upset, just feeling a little left out.

“I didn’t think my ancestors would embarrass me and take it this far.” It’s meant to be a joke, that’s why he’s laughing. She doesn’t seem to be catching it.

“Do you think there’s a way to get them off your back, maybe until you’re ready?” Ndleleni.

He has never taken time to study the supernatural or spiritual world, life has been just that for him—life. God and ancestors never fascinated him to a point of giving them his full attention.

His question is left unanswered, Mathonga’s eyes are suddenly hanging. He’s finding it hard to keep them open.

“We should let him get some sleep.” Ndleleni gestures with a head nod that they should leave the room.

“I want to stay with him, for a while.” Forever is what she means, leaving him alone would be risky. He is not a man in control of his body, he needs someone to constantly watch over him.

Ndleleni says nothing, he leaves as soon as Mathonga completely shuts his eyes.

Liyana was not able to see beyond angry ancestors, no matter how much she tried to get them to talk, she couldn't. The next solution was to call her husband who said he was on his way about forty five minutes ago.

Left alone with the man after her heart, Nala swings her arm over his torso. Her head finds a pillow on his chest, the sound of his heart thudding brings her to tears. Life is not going well for any of them, just when she has found love for herself, strange things start happening.

There were days when she had dreamt of being free from Petros and finally living like a normal person, this life is not what she had in mind. Maybe forever and a day does not exist.

Eventually, Nala succumbs to sleep—safe in Mathonga's arms.

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In the land of dreams, Mathonga finds himself seated on the throne. The throne room is adorned in white from all corners, he's garbed in a golden cloak. On his wrists and ankles are golden accessories that match the golden crown on his head.

There are people coming in numbers to leave gifts at his feet, they leave the throne room crawling on their knees with their heads bowed.

Suddenly a stray dog materialises through the wide opened door, it carries with it a dark presence that brings darkness in the throne room.

"Who let you in here?" Mathonga practices his authority, he stands to ready himself for war.

The dog growls revealing its canine teeth, just

as he's about to question it again, another dog materialises. This one is big and majestic, resembling a lion.

In his subconscious, he knows it came with the intent to protect.

In a millisecond, the dogs run towards him, barking viciously. The small one outruns the big dog, eyes glinting murderously. Mathonga thinks of running, but can't move his legs. The only thing left to do is curl himself on the floor and wait for the unescapable.

“Back off, this is my territory!!!” He hears his voice thundering with authority, it's befuddling—he knows he has not uttered a word, confusion has him lifting his head to inspect. The big dog is in front of him, a wide sweeping wag of its tail calms his heart. There

is no sign of the small dog, he's aware that the missing dog was an enemy coming to destroy where his ancestors are building.

"Mathonga wake up." Nala's voice calls to him.

With a loud gasp, Mathonga jolts out of his sleep. He recognises his surroundings, that he's fully awake.

"Are you okay?" Comes a question from Nala.

"You were mumbling in your sleep, I couldn't catch what you were saying."

He'd answer her, tell her what's going through his mind. However, he's not present with her. His feet are burning, the same feet that had refused to listen to him today.

"Abaphansi bafuna ngigide." (The ancestors want me to dance.)

The whisper is said under his breath, he leaves

the bed and stands firm. Nala is shocked by how he's on his feet, dancing and clapping like nothing she's ever seen before. What she doesn't know is that his ears are ringing with drum beats and whistles.

“Uyamemeza uma Memeza. Uyamemeza umuntu ongasekho.” The song comes naturally through his lips, his feet moving in a strange pulsing dance.

“Mathonga.” Nala fails to raise her voice.

Ndleleni is around, he will know what to do. Her feet are faster than her brain as they rush her out of the room, Mathonga's voice trailing behind her. She makes sure to close the door lest he leaves.

The house is so big yet she can hear Mathonga's singing and clapping of hands from the immense foyer. The stairs are an

inconvenience, but she makes it down. The crew in the lounge is instantly aware of Nala's presence thanks to her loud rasps. Ndleleni stands upon seeing the horror marked on her face.

"It's Mathonga, he's acting strange." Acting strange she says... Ndleleni darts past her, his big feet rushing towards the flight of stairs. Styles and Liyana run after him, panic stricken. They find a sweaty Mathonga stationery, he's facing the door way, eyes not cast at anyone in specific. There are voices in his head, telling him to leave.

"Where are you going?" Ndleleni questions his brother, blocking his way.

"They are calling me, I have to go." Mathonga shoves at Ndeleni's chest, the push throws him centimetres away.

“Don’t let him go, stop him.” Liyana shouts, Styles gets to him first, he’s joined by a recuperated Ndleleni.

“Don’t hurt him, please.” Nala.

Her second language is a flood of tears, thanks to Liyana holding her back, she is not able to get to Mathonga who is not going down without a fight. He’s himself but the strength he possesses does not belong to him.

“You don’t understand, they are waiting for me.” Mathonga roars as he tries to fight the two gentlemen, these episodes keep recurring. It’s getting out of hand, his ancestors do not come in peace.

“Don’t touch him.” Says a man walking through the door—It’s Liyana’s husband; Bambindlovu Buthelezi. The second his eyes clash with Mathonga’s, the Khanyile calf falls to his knees

yelling with jubilation and clapping hands in praise to his ancestors.

“Thokoza gogo.” Bambindlovu.

He’s on his knees as well, head bowed in respect.

“Sothole, Ntunjwa kaLanga, Mthiyane, Ndwandwe.” Mathonga’s voice has transitioned to that of an old woman’s voice.

Dammit, this is like a bad episode of Keeping up with the Khanyiles. Ndleleni is close to cursing, the elders are starting to annoy him. How much can his brother take? The old woman is becoming more persistent with each passing day.

She’s yelling through Mathonga, using his body against his will. His shoulders are vibrating energetically as she rejoices upon seeing Bambindlovu. It must be that he’s gifted and speaks the same language as her.

“I’m Nomkhubulwane Khanyile, ugogo omkhulu. The great ancestor of Khahlamba Khanyile, I’m with my husband, Mahlalehlathini. Mathonga is our son, uNgwane kaNgwadi. I’m proud of him and that he has accepted us, but this boy has disappointed us. He has brought his elders to a foreign land without informing us. How do we talk to him in a land that does not belong to us? I’m trespassing as it is, mina uNomkhubulwane, indlovukazi yase bukhosini is trespassing. I’m not happy with him, I’m not happy at all.”

KHETHIWE-

“That tall man told me not to let anyone in here,” says a nurse walking into my room. I don’t know how to feel about that smile she’s giving me, returning smiles is always risky, you never know if they come from a good place or not.

“Ngena bhuti.” She’s letting someone in after that declaration of hers. What’s wrong with people? I know the tall man she mentioned is Ntaba, he won’t be happy about this.

“What are you doing here?” Bahle and his father are behind her, looking like lost souls. The nurse won’t be a part of this, she throws her hands up and leaves. Why is she leaving me alone with these people?

“Khethiwe, are you okay?” Bahle is a joke, he sure knows how to put on a good façade, I give him that.

“Your stepfather shot me, I’m not okay.” Maybe he’s forgotten what happened back at the house.

“I’m sorry Snowie...” Ndimande says, looking truly remorseful.

“That’s not my name.” I hate it and he gives off weird ambiances. I don’t trust him, especially

after what he did.

“I understand that you’re upset,” he exhales heavily, eyes wet with tears. Does this man think I will pity him? Where is my father anyway? He needs to fetch his friend.

“I didn’t mean to shoot you, Khethiwe. It was meant for that man, he wanted to take you away from us.” Ndimande.

He’s getting closer with each syllable falling off his mouth, I don’t know what I will do to him if he touches me.

“So you thought killing my boyfriend was okay after I told you people that I’m carrying his baby?” I’m not used to being dramatic, more especially with people I’m not accustomed to. But this one deserves to see that side of me, I can’t let him get away with shooting me.

“You want my baby to grow up without a father?” I’m beside myself with anger, livid to

say the least.

“I would never want that for you, Khethiwe. I love you, you’re like a daughter to me.”

“You don’t even know me.” This is what I mean when I say he’s creepy. The man last saw me before I knew who I was.

“I do, I kept contact. Ask your father, all the years I’ve been gone. He’d send me pictures of you, I wrote you letters every year on your birthday and sent gifts.” I did say he’s coming closer, I want to scream for the nurse, but I’m not that dramatic.

I don’t recall receiving gifts and letters from a long lost uncle.

“Why?” It makes no sense to me, as to why he would go to an extent to do such things for me.

“I consider your father my brother, and that makes you my daughter.”

“If that’s how you feel, then why did you shoot knowing well your aiming sucks? You could’ve killed me.” The thought of dying makes my heart overreact, the thought of my body decaying in a box and maggots feasting on it is scary.

“He overreacted Khethi,” Bahle is talking me? After manhandling me like a criminal, he has the nerve to speak to me.

“Don’t you ever make hasty decisions during a moment of panic?” Bahle.

It’s funny because he is here with his so called father, asking for forgiveness. Yet has the balls to snap at me as if I am a child.

“Nothing justifies what this man did, what all of you did. How could you go behind my back and pay lobola for me?” Yes, I have so many grudges against this family.

“It wasn’t me, I told you. Our parents came to

that conclusion, they thought we would be good together.” Bahle.

“Our parents are old fashioned, Bahle. Maybe I can excuse them, but what about you? You lied about wanting to be my friend, you preyed on me and invaded my life knowing what your intentions were.”

“That’s not how it happened.” I know this man is not shouting at me. “I came with good intentions, you’re my best friend Khethiwe. I’ve known you since we were kids, what do you think we were doing back then? A male and female can’t light a match together, something will grow out of that little spark.” He reaches out, taking hold of my hand and gives it a squeeze.

He must be used to it, taking without being given. Like he did with me, I can’t belong to Bahle. I refuse, I was okay with the friendship and maybe something would’ve come out of it.

But he went and ruined everything, showed me his true colours. I owe him a Christmas present for that for opening my eyes too early.

“I’ve loved you since we were kids, Khethiwe. I was too much of a coward to tell you, seeing you again brought back those buried feelings. I love you and I want us to be together.”

I don’t know, either he is a good actor or his feelings are genuine.

“Bahle...”

“I would let go of that hand if I were you.”

Khothama’s voice sashays into the room, I thought he left with Ntaba. Here’s a thing about Bahlephambikwethu, he is a stubborn fellow. Taking orders from people is something he will never do, I’ve seen that side when we were little.

“And who are you?” Bahle asks, Ndimande looks ready to attack poor Khothama. There’s a problem though, Khothama is towering over them. They are basically dogs barking at a roaring lion.

“I won’t answer that, mgodoyi. Let that hand go.” Yeah, I’ve heard how easy Ntaba and Khothama curse. It’s nothing to them, while normal people cringe at the sound of it.

I try to pull my hand away from Bahle’s grip, so there can be peace. He’s not letting me go, he’s doing that thing he did back at the house – holding me without my permission.

“Bahle.” I murmur, squirming to free myself.

“Khethiwe is my wife, who the hell are you?” The idiot.

“Will you stop saying that?” I spit, my voice breaking. I hate it when he calls me that. “I am not your wife.”

I regain my hand back, and ask him to leave. Why is he looking at me like I have cursed his whole existence?

“You don’t mean that Khethiwe.” He mumbles and I cannot understand how he is shocked by my decision. Doesn’t he get it?

“I don’t want you here Bahle, get out.” I grab the plastic cup from the table and throw it at him, damn I missed. My adrenalin is bursting, why does he have to insist that we are married? What I say does not matter to him and that pisses me off.

“Khethiwe calm down, we’re not here to harm you.” If only Ndimande could do me a favour and shut up.

“No Khethiwe, don’t calm down.” Khothama pipes in. “Go crazy if you want, climb on top of the bed if that will get them to leave.”

Okay, I’m not doing that.

Khothama's quick movements send him to the exit, "Eh ndoda, come here."

This is a hospital, is he allowed to be yelling like that? I should've known that he was calling Ntaba with that stupid tone he used. Avoiding fights can't be rocket science, can it? Bahle could've collected his father and walked out of here willingly.

I would hate to see two grown men dragged out of here, kicking and barking. Anything is possible with Ntaba and Khothama, they are Pinky and the Brain of Zulu people. Hlabela needs to put his teachings to practice and call his brothers to order.

"I will see you tomorrow." Bahle announces when the brothers make an appearance. His chest is puffed and gaze destructive as he walks past Ntaba, I'm proud of Ntaba for not reacting to it. Hlabela and Khothama leave after Bahle and Ndimande.

“Where are they going?”

“To make sure they leave the building,” he says this as if it’s his father’s building.

“They have rights you know that, right?”

Ntaba steps forward, wanting to hold my hand. He’s the only one allowed to touch me anywhere he wants, I want to be his to touch.

“If I knew leeches were going to enter your room, I wouldn’t have left you alone.” His voice lowers as he speaks, the last word barely audible. He’s serious about this ‘doing anything for me’ thing.

“My hero, please let me get you pregnant in case you decide to leave my scarred ass.” I declare, not entirely able to keep my smile back.

“Udakiwe.” (You’re crazy.)

He deserts my hands, a scowl on his face.

“I won’t be a weekend special mom, I promise. Or those moms who leave to buy milk and never come back.”

“Khethiwe tell me if you’re hungry and I will buy food for you, otherwise stop talking nonsense.” He clicks his tongue, turning to leave.

“Where are you going?” I shout after him, watching him running like water.

“To get you something to eat, your stomach is full of nothing and it’s affecting your mind.” He articulates.

“Okay baby daddy, hurry back.”

“Doti.” The last tongue click is louder than the first one, he’ll be back.

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MATHONGA-

Sixty-one

Sponsored by Charmaigne Kotoyi

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NALA-

“Nala, Nala.” I’m barely halfway into a deep sleep when I hear Mathonga’s cries of anguish, his hand clutching my thigh. I reach for the lamp over the bedside table and flick the light on.

Pearls of sweat have built tiny houses on his body, he’s tossing and turning, his arm gript on

his lower torso.

“Thonga, what’s wrong?”

“I’m not okay, Nala. ” He delivers, shuffling to lie on his stomach.

“What’s wrong?” Please don’t let it be that old woman again, she is not kind at all. She went mute after voicing her concerns, apparently Mathonga needs to go back home and talk to his fathers. He also needs to report his comings and goings whenever he plans on travelling.

Bambindlovu asked if Mathonga could slaughter a chicken to appease her, get her to calm down or something like that, and she went mute on us. I swear that woman is still getting her periods in the afterlife.

Bambindlovu and Liyana are sleeping over, just in case she decides to come back.

I place a hand on Mathonga’s forehead to check

his temperature, he's burning up.

"It hurts, my stomach, I can't take the pain."
Mathonga exclaims, burying his face in the pillow as he tosses in agony. Shivers run down my back as a scream pipes out of his mouth, it's muffled due to his face pressed onto the pillow.

"What's wrong? Mathonga you're scaring me."

I don't want to panic, it's the first time seeing him twisting in pain. I hate it, I don't want the picture to play anymore. I think of screaming for help, not wanting to leave him alone. But there are kids in the house, Thobani in the room next door ours, Styles' kid is not far from us as well.

I leave Mathonga writhing in bed and dash out to find Bambindlovu, the old woman seems to listen to him. I find him and his wife cuddled on the couch, I'm sure they are tired of us. Ndleleni must've gone to sleep, Styles and Sethu must

have turned in too. 11pm is on duty, it's understandable.

“He’s in pain.” I report, feeling a little diffident. Liyana sighs, chasing her husband’s gaze. They walk past me, giving me no hint to follow them but I do.

We arrive to Mathonga curled up on the bed, groaning in pain. Liyana and I stand back, watching Bambindlovu examine him. He turns to me, his eyes giving away nothing.

“Squeeze seven lemons into a cup, and boil the juice using a pot. Once it starts simmering, add three salt stones, a teaspoon of oil then bring it here.” Bambindlovu.

That sounds easy, I know my way around Sethu’s kitchen. The task takes me about, plus, minus twenty minutes, thanks to the juice maker.

Bambindlovu prays over the remedy before helping Mathonga consume it.

“It’s nothing to worry about, he’ll be fine, let him rest.” Bambindlovu.

I want to ask what’s going on with him, but I’m afraid he will mention the ancestors. Mathonga needs a break from them.

“Keep an eye on him.” Bambindlovu says, giving me a pat on the shoulder before taking his wife’s hand and walking out with her.

Mathonga is suffering, I can tell the pain has not lessened. He’s lying on his side, long legs brought to his chest and arms pinning them there.

“You’ll be okay baby, don’t think about the pain okay.” I comfort him, trusting Bambindlovu’s words. He wouldn’t lie to us, and I’ve noticed how serious he takes Mathonga’s journey.

Mathonga lets out a low growl as he puts

pressure on his stomach. Failing to take it anymore, I sit next to him and pull him to my arms. He shifts closer and lays his head on my stomach.

“It will pass soon, Bambindlovu said you will be fine.” I know he’s afraid, although he won’t say it. He is terrified, I want to take his pain away. His arms tighten around me each time he winces in pain.

Abruptly, Mathonga pushes off of me, he rolls over to sit on his legs. He slouches as he hugs his stomach with both hands.

“Baby are you okay?” He shakes his head, humming a low disapproval when I touch him. I figure he won’t say anything until he is fine, I won’t push either. He is a strong man, nothing can bring him down.

The concoction given to him seems to be working, the pain is subsiding, and he's calmer now. He breathes heavily, snuggling into me and sniffing against my neck. It's not the right time for me to be feeling all fuzzy and warm, I smooch his cheek, sighing with gladness.

"How are you feeling?" I ask after a few minutes of complete silence, we're lazing in bed, his head is on my chest.

"Better." He sounds better, a bit croaky but better.

"Is the pain completely gone?" I ask.

He hums, responding to my question.

"I'm fine." He adds through teasing kisses.

"Nothing a kiss won't fix."

Yeah, he's back.

"Thank you for taking care of me."

I will always take care of him like he takes care of me, Mathonga's shuffle comes with yet another sigh, he leans on his elbows, pooped eyes glancing straight at me.

"You scared me," I tell him.

I want this to be over with, his ancestors to stop torturing him. He's a good man, he deserves better than what they are giving him.

"So what's the way forward?" Since we're up, I might as well lay the topic at the table. I don't want it hanging over me while I'm in the process of healing and trying to be a mother to my brother.

"I'm not sure, but if I have to go underwater or initiation school then I will."

I heard those take months, depending on one's progress. It will be hard not having him around all the time.

"It's never the case though, some initiates don't

require schooling. Their ancestors guide them on what to do to complete the process, I would be one of the lucky ones if that happens.” He passes a dry chuckle, eyes wandering into nothingness.

I might have a slight idea what is going through his mind, this gift that he has is a curse. I wouldn't blame him if that's what he's thinking. After everything that's been happening to him, he has the right to feel that way.

“Bambindlovu said you're carrying a lot of grudges in your heart— that you need to forgive before starting anything.”

“I know, forgiveness doesn't come easily Nala.” He sits up, his eyes leaving mine. “I have recently realised that I've always hated my mother, my entire life I was blind to the hate in my heart but it's clear to me now. It's her fault,

she made me hate her and I don't think I will ever forgive her."

"Hate is a strong word Thonga," I serve him with his words. It was months ago when he was advising me to forgive my mother. All I get from him is a shrug.

"What's on your mind?"

"Dalisile." He scratches his head, while biting the corner of his upper lip. "I think she's not okay."

"Why do you say that?"

There's silence for a while, he puts his hand over his face.

"A strange feeling just came over me, we need to find her."

I didn't know she was missing.

"She's the daughter in-law of the Khanyiles, they want her home. There are things she did, dark

things. They want her home now.”

Is he prophesying? I hope he won't have one of those outer body experiences.

“Mathonga?” He moves his hand and faces me, wild-eyed.

“Do you know what just happened?” I'm trying to make sure that it's him and that he did not go away seconds ago.

“Yes, the Khanyiles want my mother back home. The time has come for her to be trialled.”

Okay! He is acting strange, or I'm not used to this. My eyes trace his figure as he stands to his feet, please don't do anything weird. It's been a long day, and I'm tired.

“Are you coming?” He smiles and extends his hand over to me, bright eyes staring down inquisitively.

“I'm hungry, I want you to feed me.”

I'd be honoured.

His episodes are random, it will take some getting used to. As far as his mother is concerned, he needs to talk to his brothers about it.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He lied about Khothama and Hlabela walking Ndimande and his step son out, maybe Hlabela was tasked to do so but Khothama had diabolical thoughts running through his head, thoughts he shared with his cousin.

Unfortunately, the devil has to take a bow tonight.

Thirty minutes have gone by since he left the hospital, the destination is not home. He's meeting up with Alfred at a local eatery,

midnight is around the corner, ready to entertain people of the night. Ntaba parks the car outside a restaurant and tells his cousin to stay put, he won't be long.

A few feet taken towards the restaurant, he stops. There's a pulse pounding in his ears, his chest tightening—the world around him blurs, but Mathonga remains crystal clear.

It's only now he's noticed his shaky hands, it must have something to do with what he is about to find out. Anything regarding Mathonga makes him anxious, he hasn't heard his brother's voice in weeks and that is a recipe for disaster. The sooner he finds that bastard Phumlani, the sooner he will have Mathonga back.

"Comrade." He can't forget the grin, he nods in greeting and kisses the old man on the cheek.

“You’re still embarrassing, I see.” Alfred observes and finds a reason to add a comment, his lips search for a smile and find an invisible one. “That kiss better not be lethal.”

Ntaba’s chest pounces in a slow rhythm, laughter hollowing in the empty diner. He settles down on the opposite chair and folds his arms across his chest.

“I would never think of harming you-” it’s true, he worships the ground Alfred walks on.

“I ordered coffee, black and strong right?” That’s kind of Alfred, but he ought to know by now that Ntaba does not drink coffee. He’s an African drink type of guy.

“Udlala ngami, baba.” (You’re playing with me.)

Ntaba snickers, and then sighs, placing his elbows on the table.

“What do you have for me?” There is no time to waste, the visit is not a social one.

“Phumlani is like lightning, one minute he’s here and the next he’s gone.” Alfred.

That’s not good at all, why call him here if he doesn’t have anything solid to present? Alfred knows Ntaba’s frustration is displayed through the popping of his knuckles, not that he’s scratching an itch—there’s an urge to punch or break something.

“Relax tiger,” Jeez Alfred, easier said than done.

“My brother has not spoken to me in weeks, baba. I can’t calm down. I need to fix what I have broken and my uncle is my only option.”

Not really, but if that’s what gets his mind active, then...

“I understand, comrade. Family is important to you, that’s why I have a soft spot for you. You value family and love like you were appointed to do so by the gods.” Ha! Ntaba and love in one sentence? If it doesn’t rain this night, then

Ntaba is Romeo 2.0.

“My heart belongs to my brothers, they are the reason I am still alive.” That’s the truth.

He grins when he hears Alfred laugh, a rare sound emanating from the old man.

“Well, then you will be pleased to know that he’s hiding at a shelter in Berea, my people are on it.”

Alfred though... he could’ve said this and saved Ntaba from worrying.

“You’re aware that he is not a sane man?”

What doesn’t Ntaba know? The man is a god.

“I do.” Ntaba says, straightforwardly.

“You won’t get anything from him, but crazy mumbles. My suggestion would be to leave him wherever he is, he will be nothing but a hindrance to the family.” Alfred.

“When can I see him?” Ntaba snubs the suggestion, if he wants it he will ask.

Alfred is not impressed, he glances around to gather his marbles in one place.

“Give me two days and I will deliver him to you.” Now he’s talking.

“Thank you baba, I will await your call.” The Khanyile giant shuffles and stirs while watching Alfred stand to his full height, Alfred can be somewhat standoffish.

Ntaba clears his throat seeing the man staring at him.

“You’re leaving?” Ntaba.

“It’s late, my bed is calling me.” His statement proves that the man is ageing and ageing faster than Bella Swan in the world of the immortal.

“I will walk with you, my brother is waiting for me in the car.” Ntaba offers, Alfred nods,

putting his hands behind his back.

They leave the diner after Alfred pays for his coffee, the man bids Ntaba farewell, gets into his car and drives off.

“Sheesh!” A voice rings behind Ntaba, he swivels on his heel to see Khothama gracing a clustered facial expression. “Who is that baboon?”

Ntaba shakes his head at the judgemental look on his cousin’s face.

“What are you talking about?” Ntaba.

He walks pasts him to get to the driver’s side, Khothama joins him in the car.

“What shenanigans are you cooking with that man?” This one likes things.

“He’s helping me find Thonga’s father.” He pulls out of the parking lot, headed towards the open

road. He's not going to tell Khothama that he sees a father in that baboon, he won't reveal that Alfred taught him how to kill, steal and always be a step ahead.

"I thought you said Phumlani is crazy." He thinks it's absurd that Ntaba would want to bring a crazy man back into their lives.

"Jesus turned water into wine, fixing Phumlani should be a piece of cake." Ntaba states, lowering the volume on the radio. He is not a maskandi fan but his cousin is, that's why he was having a one man bhinca-party when Ntaba was in the diner. Excitement washes over Khothama, he looks over at his brother with a grin on his face.

"Remember when he raised that man kwabafileyo?" (From the dead)

Ntaba was not there, he can't remember of

course, but he's heard the story of a man by the name of Lazarus.

"You see how well you get me?" Ntaba tells his cousin who nods.

"Shit, and that day when he walked on water." Another trip back to the days of Jesus, the two share a look and burst into Nyaope laughter. It's how Khothama tells it like he was there.

"Yes and the moral of the story is?" Ntaba.

"Jesus was the goat, ndoda." That's not the answer Ntaba is looking for, his brows furrow as his gaze briefly darts to Khothama.

"A magician?" Khothama is confused by the look Ntaba is giving him, if that's not the moral of the story then what is?

"It simply means there is hope for Phumlani." Ntaba explains.

Oh, that makes sense.

“But if Phumlani was crazy when he ate from your father’s plate, will he remember what happened?” Good question from Khothama.

“He has to remember, he owes Thonga Lami answers and I will make sure he provides.”

Ntaba.

“You’re such a softie, you’ll make a great father one day.” That’s so stupid of Khothama, Ntaba seems to think so.

“Speaking of which,” a slow, rasping chuckle leaps from Ntaba’s chest. “My heart almost stopped today when Khethiwe said she was pregnant, I was convinced she was.”

Someone is laughing like a drunkard, yeah, it’s Khothama. Head tilted on the headrest of the car seat and all adult on display.

“That’s what you get for not using a condom and kissing ass.” So the torture begins. “That girl gave you something, men don’t go around

kissing people's asses.”

Khothama is laughing like he doesn't care.

“Don't start with me, Khothama. What about you huh? That woman living in your house, why is she still there?” Ntaba expected Khothama to kick her out of his father's house, they both suspect premeditated murder—that Thethelela is responsible for Bopha's death and she is getting away with it. It's hard to prove anything when the autopsy came back with no traces of poison.

“The house basically belongs to her, my father would've wanted her to have it.” Khothama shrugs, popping his knuckles.

“She killed him,” Ntaba gambles.

“I know, I just don't want to dwell on that for now.” He is not saying he's leaving Thethelela to karma, he's saying he needs time to mourn his father.

Spotting an open KFC eatery, Khothama suggests they get something to eat.

They can see from outside; through the glass window that there aren't a lot of people inside. These men stride like royalty, broad shoulders squared, chests out and eyes cast on one place. They join the line, three people are before them, waiting to place their orders.

"Ndoda, isn't that Zamo?" Khothama pronounces.

Ntaba glances up from his phone without raising his head and darn it, it is her. She's standing next to the staffroom, completely oblivious of who has entered the place.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Ntaba asks, it's after midnight, her peers are drooling and dreaming of unicorns. Why the heck is she not

home?

“What is she wearing?” Khothama sounds disgusted. “No offence but your sister dresses like she doesn’t want.”

A man emerges from the staffroom, KFC uniform garbed on him. Their jaws tick at the same time. They know that son of a gun, he’s on Ntaba’s hit list.

They stare with wide eyes as the man wraps his arms around Zamangwane’s waist and kisses her on the lips, that bastard can’t be much older than Vukuzakhe.

“Sangweni?” Ntaba hisses, feeling his blood boil.

A commotion erupts, Ntaba pulls out a pocket knife, he dashes over to pin Mfundo against the wall and presses the knife on his neck. Behind him is Khothama, aiming a gun at Mfundo. The few customers in the eatery run out at the first

sign of danger, screaming in terror. Waiters have found a hiding place behind the counter.

“Bhuti, don’t hurt him. He’s my husband, please don’t hurt him.” Zamangwane yells at the top of her voice, fuming eyes turn to her. She bats an eye as shame cloaks the entirety of her body.

The feeling of failure is like that visitor that comes unannounced, Ntaba is disappointed in himself. He’s been so busy with his life that he forgot about his little sister.

He snatches Khothama’s gun, knocks Mfundo out with it and lets him fall with a thud.

Zamangwane’s teary eyes are on the man she claims is her husband, she wants to run to him, check if he is still alive. However, her brothers look like they are ready to slaughter her.

“What the fuck did you say?” Ntaba yells, something he never does. The child flinches,

afraid of the unknown. She curls up beside Khothama, looking for safety. But this one is another raging bull.

“I dare you to repeat what you said,” Khothama deadpans, removing his belt from his pants, ready to whoop her ass. It... would be weird.

Ntaba does not speak, he loads the gun, bends over and points it at a passed out Mfundo’s head. This drives Zamangwane insane, she dashes to shield the man and this angers her brother further.

“Please don’t kill him, we just got married.”

*

*

Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Sixty-two

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VUKUZAKHE-

He hasn't been to see Mathonga and no one has called him to update him on what's happening in his younger brother's life. All is well, according to him and as soon as they are all safe, Mathonga will go back to KZN and their lives will continue from where they left off before a plague hit them. He has it all planned out.

Black; Funo's bodyguard was let go the day Vukuzakhe came back, there is no use in having a bodyguard when Zakhe is with the younger man all day every day.

"I want this man found. I don't care what you do,

find him.” He’s on the phone with a private investigator, mission find Phumlani Khanyile is on. Along with Ntaba, Zakhe is working hard to dig the past. It’s a must they find the man, all this is done for Mathonga.

The small gadget is tossed on the couch, a Zulu man’s tongue click is equivalent to a Nigerian man’s tongue click. He’s frustrated by the investigator’s incompetence.

“Who do you want found?” Asks Funokuhle as he gently bustles into the living room and places a kiss the older man’s cheek. The power nap did wonders to the man, he looks rejuvenated. But it’s not morning yet, what’s he doing up?

Zakhe’s eyebrows come to life while watching Funokuhle throw himself on the couch and channel searches. His world goes completely out of focus while every detail about the boy is clear and mesmerizing.

“Hey.” Funokuhle snaps his fingers, taking Zakhe out of the world of thinkers. “Who do you want found?”

“No one, kid.” He lies and settles beside him, their knees brush a smidgeon—it sends a jolt of shivers through the entirety of Funokuhle’s body.

“Are you hungry?” Zakhe asks. “You went to bed before supper.”

“How can I eat without you?” Funokuhle’s reply is quick, and dished with a shrug.

“I’m hungry.” He hints, retching for oxygen. Funokuhle finds it dramatic, he diverts his gaze to the big man seated next to him and a smile finds his lips.

“Oh, is that why you’re asking if I ate?”
Funokuhle.

“Maybe that was my way of telling you that I’m

hungry.” Is he sulking? The big man is sulking, bottom lip slightly pushed forward. He passes another sigh and drops his head on Funokuhle’s shoulder.

“Sometimes I wonder if you love food more than me.”

Where did Funokuhle get the gun to fire that? His statement invites awkwardness, it’s chased away by Zakhe softly chuckling.

“Food before boys.” Zakhe comments, playfully. His head heavy on Funokuhle.

“Okay, that saves me the trouble of having to whip something fast. I’m a boy who is competing with food for your attention and you’ve chosen food over me.” The words shower over Zakhe, Funokuhle starts to turn, preparing himself to leave the room. His little trip is denied by Zakhe gripping his hand. One turn from Funokuhle and Zakhe is standing

before him, he scoops him up in his arms.

“What are you doing?” Funokuhle questions, voice breaking from little use. He entraps Zakhe’s neck with his arms, for balance, and the softening smile on Khanyile’s face causes the minion to feel exceedingly shy at being the subject of the man’s attention.

“You’re making fun of my love for food.” The older man says, evenly sprinkling a drop of teases. Their eyes clash, adoration pulses in Funokuhle’s heart.

“I feel safe with you.” The minion blots out randomly.

“You are always safe with me, kid.” And that’s a lifelong promise. He sits them down, Funokuhle makes himself comfortable on Zakhe’s lap.

“Something strange happened today,” Funokuhle introduces, worry glinted in the tone of his voice. “While I was taking a stroll in the

garden this morning, I saw a man taking pictures of the house.”

It’s not a normal thing to happen in the burbs, unless a ‘for sale’ sign has been put out.

“Did you confront him?”

Funokuhle blinks at him, his weary eyes suddenly heavy-lidded. “I did, he said he was house haunting. He couldn’t look straight at me, his eyes were very shifty and I have a feeling he was taking pictures of me, not the house.”

His words run together, hinting at tiredness. He shuffles on Zakhe’s lap, rests his head on his chest and shuts his eyes. He is tired and going to bed hungry never hurt anyone. Vukuzakhe is left to worry alone, someone is watching them. Who could it be?

THE KHANYILES-

Vumile is startled awake by the noise tearing through the closed door, he flinches, eyes going wide as he realises with a sort of confusing fright that something is happening outside.

“Did you hear that?” Not really understanding what is going on, and his mind going blanker than a sheet of paper, Vumile manages to hear his side-chick’s voice beside him. Yes, they are sharing a bed once again... Nandi’s bed.

“What is going on?” Vumile questions upon hearing people talking, and then among the voices, Zamangwane’s cries of sorrow echoing very close.

“Shut up wena.” His son’s voice is next in line, Nandi jolts out of bed, she throws on a morning gown and a pair of push-ins.

Vumile stands there, frozen for a good ten seconds, his head fuzzy but clear at the same

time.

“Aren’t you coming?” This is no time to be freaking out, he blinks as Nandi’s question hits his ears and tells Nandi to stay behind while he checks what’s going on.

Being a mother and hearing her child’s uncontrollable cries outside, Nandi ignores Vumile and flies out the door, eyes wild and scanning every inch of her surroundings.

She catches it... Ntaba dragging a man away, towards the main house while Zamangwane is struggling under Khothama’s grip. She’s choking on tears, feeling weakness pull at every muscle of her body as she pleads for her brothers to have mercy on the man she claims to be her husband.

“Ntabezikude!!!” That roar would surely wake the entire homestead, it’s in the middle of the

night for Pete's sake.

Nandi is close to having a mini heart attack, what under the dark skies is going on here? Zamangwane said she was at a friend's house, she spoke to the mother and it was confirmed.

The old couple catches up with the kids, just as Nandi is about to pull her hysterical daughter into her busty chest, Zamangwane hesitates, fear in her eyes. Nandi knows her daughter like the back of her hand and she knows Ntaba; that he would never do anything absurd without a solid reason.

"Zamo?" The child's name trembles from Nandi's lips, yet the question dies on her throat, afraid of the answer.

"What is going on here?" Anger has Vumile by his balls, blood red eyes wedged on Ntaba. Ntaba releases his grip from an unconscious

Mfundo, he's fuming, chest heaving and face contorted with rage.

"Ask your daughter what she's doing with this old man." Ntaba sizzles, kicking a man who's down and out.

"Bhuti, please." Zamangwane has barely stopped struggling by force to get Khothama off of her, when she finally escapes his grip and rushes to hug Mfundo. Khothama's attempts to pull her back are terminated by Vumile who stands in front of Zamangwane.

"Do not touch my daughter." Argh Vumile.

Khothama raises his hands, surrendering to whatever is happening and steps back.

"Don't protect her baba, you have no idea what this child has done." Ntaba hisses, Vumile turns to his daughter. He touches her arms, to bring her to her feet. Their relationship as father and daughter is as non-existent as his plans to

marry Nandi, yes the man has been stalling.

He loves his daughter though and would move mountains for her.

“Daddy.” There’s a first time for everything, tears fill Vumile’s eyes. He’s been wanting to hear her call him that. She buries her face on his chest, sobbing loudly.

“Zamangwane,” Nandi’s shaky voice calls.

“Zamangwane, what is that on your finger?”

It’s a wedding ring, shiny like her dream of being Mrs. Khanyile.

“Your daughter married this fool, ma.” Ntaba snitches, sending a heated glare down Mfundo’s way. His blood boiling all over again.

A numbness like anything she’s ever felt before stirs to life inside Nandi, a feeling so encompassing.

Zamangwane is hidden in her father’s arms,

away from her mother's wrath.

"I said, what is that thing on your finger Zamangwane?" Nandi explodes in shards of anger, her hands are on her daughter's upper arms, dragging her away from her father's wings.

"I'm sorry mama." She struggles to look her in the eye, right after her apology she slides behind her father, clasping the hem of his top.

"What have you done you stupid girl?"

Nandi yells, eyes dripped with spite. She wants to hear it from the horse's mouth, sorry doesn't say much. She could be sorry for sleeping out, not washing the dishes or leaving her room untidy... heck she could be sorry for stealing a Rand from her purse.

"He's my husband, ma." Shut the front door!

Zamangwane's cries echo in Nandi's ears, she's biting her nails, face resembling an innocent little girl who has been swallowed by the world and needs a saviour.

"I met him a few months ago, before we moved in here. He understood me and listened to me, he treats me like I matter and takes care of my needs."

"You have noticed that he is a fossil, right? He's old enough to be your father." Khothama seethes. "No offence baba, you're a 16 valve compared to this idiot."

He finishes with a request for forgiveness, no one pays him attention—Zamangwane is the one who should be talking, explaining herself.

"We got married yesterday, I was going to tell you. I wanted to tell you but he said we should wait..." Zamangwane.

"That's impossible, you're only 17. You need a

guardian to...”

“Y... you gave... co... consent ma.”

Zamangwane’s words dribble up and down her quavering lips, she’s back to hiding behind her father. No word has come from Vumile, he’s as shocked as Nandi. How did they let this happen?

“That’s not true, I would never.” Confusion hits Nandi like lightning.

“What’s going on?” Hlabela is here as well, no one answers him.

“MaShamase? You gave my daughter away?”
Ehh! Vumile...

“No, I swear I didn’t, I would never do that.” She grabs Zamangwane by the collar. “What have you done Zamangwane? Khuluma!”

Nandi rumbles, violently shaking her daughter. Vumile pulls his child back, and that puts a frown on Ntaba’s face. It’s not that he has a problem with Vumile protecting his daughter,

but Zamangwane has messed up, she needs a good scolding... a few slaps here and there and maybe remove one of her kidneys— that should teach her.

“T... the day of bab’omncane’s funeral...I asked you to sign a form for a school excursion.”

Nandi ponders back, she was busy as a bee that day. She does recall her mentioning something about a school outing, all she needed was a signature and she was good to go.

“I knew you were going to say no ma, that’s why I lied about the papers. They were not for the trip, you unknowingly gave consent for me to get married and Mfundo has connections at Home Affairs, so the process was not really hard.”

“So what you’re saying is that this man took

advantage of you?” Ntaba is not really asking a question, he has concluded in his head that the man preyed on his little sister.

“No, bhuti. I love him and he loves me too.” The audacity to let these powerful words roll past her tongue.

“Love yamasimba, what the hell do you know about love wena? You’re a baby.” Ntaba fires, pointing a finger at her.

“I’m not a ba...” her vocabulary is clogged by Nandi landing a hot slap across Zamangwane’s face, the sound travels a distant while causing silence in their midst. Face puffy and eyes blown from crying, Zamangwane wails like Mfundo has died and left her with nothing but debts and a bitter mother-in-law.

“Do you know what you have done, Zamangwane?” Nandi yells, slapping her on the other cheek.

Vumile plays daddy by pulling the child away from her mother, Zamangwane leans into him, trembling and wheezing like a dying deer. He is the only one who seems to be on her side.

“That’s enough Nandi,” his voice is kept low and controlled. “We can sort this out without resorting to violence.”

Violence? Nandi can’t understand Vumile’s language, she wants to kill this child... erase her existence and maybe, just maybe she wouldn’t be feeling the shame that’s engulfing her.

“Violence is the only way out baba,” Ntaba pulls out a gun, he’s been wanting to kill Mfundo since they left the eatery.

“She is a child, beating her up won’t solve anything. You will only make matters worse.” Vumile states, he’s annoying as fuck, or so Ntaba thinks.

“No, but killing this Bastard will.” Ntaba has a

loaded gun aimed at Mfundo.

“Daddy, please don’t let him kill him. I will kill myself if Mfundo dies.” Oh wow!

Nandi is fighting the urge to slap her daughter again, Khothama is laughing alone in disbelief. Hlabela has his own problems to actually catch what is really going on here. No one has noticed that he’s fully dressed in jeans, a coat and sneakers. There’s a packed duffel bag in his car featuring a toothbrush and other important kits.

Mpumalanga is calling his name and Kushi demands his presence, it’s an urgent matter.

“Put that gun away Ntabezikude.”

Vumile for sale, anyone?

It will be a cold day in hell before Ntaba takes his father’s useless advice.

“This is a trap baba, this msunu is using your daughter to get back at us. This is his way of avenging his father’s death.” Ntaba.

“Ntaba is right baba, they are hitting us where it hurts the most.” Khothama adds in agreement.

“Mfundo will never do that, he...” Zamangwane.

“Yeyi shut up wena.” Nandi can’t figure out if she’s still breathing or she’s a ghost waiting to follow the light, this is a night and a half—the worst night of her life. Her daughter has brought her shame.

“I hear you but I can’t grasp why you had to bring him here unconscious, why do you have to always act impulsively?” Vumile has always been the voice of reason, trusting blindly and making hasty decisions. Ntaba’s frown is visible under the moonlight, rage flickers in his eyes—seems it’s here to stay.

“He’s lucky I haven’t killed him.” Ntaba snaps before he can help himself, his eyes say it all—he doesn’t have to give out gruesome details.

“This marriage is not even valid, I don’t care what you people think you did with the government people. You are a child Zamo, a minor.” Ntaba continues.

“But we love each other, bhuti.” Argh shame.

It’s not like she did anything wrong... she’s a girl enticed by an older man and happened to fall for him... she loves him... he’s her... husband.

“Yeyi, you sound like a broken record.”

Khothama’s glower deepens, his jaw clenches. He thinks Zamangwane needs a good beating and she will be straight as a ruler.

Vumile rubs her back to shush her cries, she’s currently resembling a spoiled brat that gets away with anything.

“I’m not blind to what Zamo has done, I will question Sangweni and get to the bottom of this. We need to hear his side of the story.”

Fathers like Vumile... sigh!

“There is no other side of the story baba, Zamo has revealed the truth. These two are married, we need to kill this man and throw his body in the river.

The mention of killing has Zamangwane sobbing loudly.

“I’m not disputing that, but I suggest we all go to bed, we’ll talk about this in the morning.”

Vumile, such a disappointment.

“I’m not a do it tomorrow kind of guy, you should know that by now baba. I finish what I start, that should be fucking clear to you.”

Ntaba sizzles.

The coldness has returned, dangerous and carrying promises to terminate.

“You will watch your tongue when speaking to me, Ntabezikude.”

“Or what?”

That escalated way too fast... all Ntaba wants to do is get rid of the enemy and save his sister. He can't understand why Vumile is not allowing him, why he's not reacting to Zamangwane's surprise-marriage.

“Ngwane...” Nandi needs to say something.

“What is wrong with you? Can't you be a normal child for once?” For a while, all is quiet, then Ntaba's soft chuckle breaks the silence.

“Normal child?” Yep that is what daddy said.

“Your baby girl has been taken advantage of, it's strange to me that you're okay with this.”

“I didn't say I'm okay with it, I'm saying we can tackle this in a more civilized manner.” Vumile.

“By civilised you mean sit down with Sangweni

and talk over a cup of tea and biscuits?”

Khothama crosses his arms, his chest seeming to burst as anger swoops over him.

“Baba you can’t be that dumb, these people are playing us for fools. They played Zamangwane for a fool and she fell for it.” Khothama finishes.

“Can we all please calm down, biting each other’s heads off will not solve anything.”

Deputy Jesus stands in between Vumile and the boys, a man of peace, he is.

“Maybe that’s the language your father understands, Zamangwane is seventeen. This man took advantage of a baby.” Ntaba is not letting go, maybe Vumile will finally put a stop to all this by killing Mfundo himself.

“H... he didn’t take advantage of me.” Oh she can still talk?

“Did you sleep with him?”

Zamangwane blinks, her gaze is lowered as she

fiddles with the sleeves of her jersey. She's not sure if she should answer Ntaba's question.

"Did this man touch you?" The question is repeated by Khothama.

Her subtle nod is nothing short of alarming, at the horror, Nandi lets out a shuddering breath, eyes full of censure.

Ntaba catches his breath, a sick sort of feeling stirring in his throat as he thinks of how he's failed his siblings.

He grabs Mfundo and shakes him awake, the helpless man mumbles, eyes slowly flapping open. He's so out of it that he can't recognise his surroundings, but he hears Zamangwane scream crying.

"Zama..." her name drags out of his mouth and that angers Ntaba. This old man has slept with his little sister and somehow convinced her to

marry him and that all of this is okay. He lands a sickening punch on his face.

“Bhuti no,” she yelps, running to— maybe protect her husband. Khothama holds her back, Nandi does nothing to stop her stepson. Vumile is yelling for him to stop punching the defenceless Mfundo... and Hlabela... well there he goes towards his car... unseen. He has his own problems to worry about.

“Stop!” Vumile sends his voice as loud as it would go, but Ntaba won’t stop. Rage has taken over... at the sight and smell of blood, he loses himself.

“Bhuti please stop, you’re hurting him.” Zamangwane begs, struggling pointlessly. Her cries kill every amber in Vumile’s soul, he’s a father whose goal is never to see his daughter reduced to tears and pure agony. There’s a way to solve this matter, and maybe if they have to kill Mfundo, they can do it when his little girl is

not around... watching.

“Ntabezikude stop.” Vumile orders.

Ntaba is momentarily disoriented when his father grips his shoulders and pushes him away from a blood stained and groaning Mfundo.

“I said stop!” Vumile’s authority roars to life, suddenly the palm of his hand lands on Ntaba’s cheek. The sound is loud that Nandi screams, Zamangwane is not there, her main concern is her husband. Khothama takes his place next to Ntaba, eyes glaring at his uncle and nostrils flaring from whiffs of anger. How dare Vumile slap his brother.

“Please, I have had enough of your nonsense. Till when will you act like an animal, can’t you be like your brothers? If you continue like this, I will have to take drastic measures.” That’s a threat and Ntaba can spot a threat blindfolded.

“You’re embarrassing, nothing you do adds value to anything. Life is not about killing people and asserting your anger when the situation does not serve you best. You’re useless Ntabezikude, useless man.”

It’s no biggie, he’s a father scolding his child. It’s been done for centuries... it’s normal and hey, nothing hurts this Khanyile giant. He’s stoical, cold and indifferent.

Vumile watches as the shimmer of anger washes through his son’s eyes, through Khothama’s eyes as well.

“I’m moving out.” What is happening? Ntaba is not one to blow the horn. Gasping breathlessly, almost inaudible— Vumile’s mind takes him to dark places as he tries to say something... say anything—but every word seems useless after the words taken by Ntaba, a man who never

goes back on what he decides on.

“If that’s what you want, don’t let me stop you.”

The words are more or less pushed out of Vumile by the pure amount of disdain and horror he has at what is happening.

“Ngwane, no. Please stop, you’re destroying your family.” Nandi clearly yells, nearing Vumile faster and a tad more anxiously.

“I have done nothing of the sort, this boy has some growing up to do. Maybe he will finally learn responsibility... be a real man.”

Khothama mirrors Ntaba’s movements as he wheels around and heads to the car, leaving everything behind.

“Ngwane he’s leaving, your son is leaving you. Stop him please.” Nandi implores desperately, her cries swirling around.

Vumile’s eyes widen at the realisation, lips thin—he is deeply upset. He doesn’t move, he

doesn't blink or relax, or even so much as breathe.

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A/N: Let's push for 9pm with 400+ comments.

MATHONGA-

Sixty-three

MATHONGA-

"Mathonga." Her morning voice sends tingles through my body, I lick my lips, gaze flickering to her mouth. I want to kiss her so badly, morning breath and all. It will be a while before I get to taste her lips again, she covers her mouth and shakes her head as I lean in to steal

a kiss.

“Mba?” My lips pucker up ready to take hers, the headshake continues.

“Morning breath...” She mumbles against the palm of her hand.

“Nala, we have about ten minutes or so.” I tell her after glancing at the digital clock on the bedside table, my plane leaves at 9:30am. Her brows crinkle together, she’s confused, but I don’t tell her what I mean instead fall forward on top of her, flattening her on the bed.

My heart races at the darkness pooling in her eyes, she knows what I want and that look tells me she wants the same thing.

I don’t know how she will react to all of this, she’s seeing a therapist, it’s been a while and hopefully she is healing.

“Mathonga?” I feel a question coming, and send it back by kissing down her chest. It’s strange at

first because I caught her off guard, for a good ten seconds she looks shocked, and shivers as I pull her nightdress over her head, exposing her breasts. Soon our hands are fumbling over each other's bodies.

My heart dances joyfully as I feel her soft skin under my fingertips.

"I can't wait to have you, Nala." I've been waiting for this day, it's been long coming.

I'm a tad bit stunned when she grabs the back of my head, pulling me closer for a searing kiss.

I kiss her back with every ounce of longing in my body. Her gasps are loud in my ear with every breath we take, her hands are warm on my skin. I let my mind stray into obscene territory, my thoughts drift to lovely things like; the way Nala's skin feels against mine, the way she responds to my kisses.

I position myself in between her legs, my heart warming at the sight of her flushed face.

“What are you doing?” She asks, I send her a smile, leaning in to whisper in her ear.

“Today, it’s all about you. But you’ll owe me one.” She shivers and goose bumps coat her skin.

“Matho...” she stops, probably at the feel of my tongue on her skin as I kiss my way down to her breasts. I hear her swallow, head tilted back and eyes closed.

She’s kneading my back, nails digging in like a kitten. Every little gasp and quiver of her body is a gift, a keepsake. I take a moment sucking her breasts before I kiss her down to her thighs, her body tenses when I try to spread her thighs open.

“Relax for me, Nala. I won’t hurt you.” I wouldn’t dream of it.

The fear in her eyes won't leave, I have to place gentle kisses on her inner thighs to get her to stay calm and trust me.

"Do you trust me?" I ask, blinking up at her. The faint nod is not assurance, I wouldn't want to take advantage of her.

"I trust you, with my life." She says as I attempt to cover her nakedness with a blanket. "I trust you."

A little thrill zips through me, I lick my lips desperate to taste Nala in this way.

I wet my finger in my mouth to lube it up and gently rub it between her inner and outer lips, heading up to her clitoris. In gentle circles, I move it around her clit avoiding the little nub.

My heart shoots up into my throat, hearing Nala moan softly.

Once the nub is peeking out of the hood, I go back to her flappers, fingering them some more. A moan escapes her throat the second my tongue touches her clitoris, and circles around it. My hand fondles with one of her breasts, gently twisting her aroused nipple.

“Ah! Thonga.” I can barely hear her plea, not with the ringing in my ears and the excitement of being this close and intimate with her. Her breaths are rapid, body twisting sensually. I can feel my erection straining against the front of my pants, I’ll deal with that later.

The licks I give Nala are slow and gentle, fast and firm. My tongue loves where it is, I would do this the whole day.

Her body jerks back when I insert a finger into her vaginal opening, I look up to see panic in her eyes, this was a bad idea. I doubt she’s ready

for it, she must see my thoughts.

“I’m okay, I want this. I want you and I trust you.” She’s trying to assure me, but I’m not persuaded.

“We can do this some other tim...”

“No,” her denial is quick. “I want this, don’t stop please.” The look in her bedroom eyes is rather convincing and it has me taking the position again. My finger slowly slides into the warmth of her front bottom, and my tongue goes back to its happy place, her clit. I’m aroused by the moans seeping into the room, how she pleasurably takes my name.

She’s getting loud, I want to tell her to keep it down but internally chuckle when I see her bite down on her knuckles to keep from being loud.

Everything from the way Nala’s hips are arched, back bowed so strongly against the mattress as

she tries to get closer and pull away at the same time, all of it has me shivering with pleasure. I keep the strokes of my finger gentle, while licking and teasing her clit a few times before speeding up the motion of my tongue. Her hips begin to harshly thrust up into my mouth.

From what I can see from my vantage point, her face is twisted in a complex mixture of pleasure and hesitancy. I know she's getting there when she throws her head back on the pillow and her hips start moving roughly. To give her the final push into the cum-train, I dive in, wiggling my tongue on her clit. I'm not imagining sounds, the strangled cry is definitely from her. I want to tell her to scream if she wants to but don't want to stop.

"Mama yo!" She finally releases the scream, body convulsing violently. I have to stop myself

from chuckling at her innocence, a smile visits my lips as I gently lick her soft parts once, then twice.

Nala has covered her face with a pillow, legs closed. I can hear her panting, my heart drowns. Is she crying?

“Nala?” What have I done? “Are you okay?”

She manages to peel her face open, throwing the pillow aside.

“Thank you.” She says, diffidently or slightly mortified. My heart pounds in my rib cage, relief taking over me. Her giggles fill the room the minute my arms surround her naked body, and shower her face with my kisses.

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“Shower with me?” It’s a big ask, I’m not entirely

sure if she's comfortable with being naked in the bathtub with me. Sex is different, we're both aroused at that time and nothing else matters but getting an orgasm.

"You shower, I'll make the bed in the meantime." That's a no, I guess.

"Suit yourself." I tease, stealing a quick kiss on her lips.

"Hey, are we leaving?" She asks, her lips pressed in a frown and eyes on the suitcase by the door.

"I'm leaving." This is not how I wanted to break the news.

"You're leaving us behind?" That would be selfish of me.

"No, I will visit whenever I can." I take her hands seeing how upset she has become. "The ancestors want me back home, there is so much I need to fix. I don't want to weary you

with my problems.”

“But I want to carry some of your burdens,” that’s sweet of her but she will drown if I let that happen.

“You have Thobani to worry about and yourself, I will visit you guys, every weekend if I can. I’m not abandoning you Nala, you and Thobani are my responsibility. He’s halfway through therapy, moving him around will confuse him.” I think that little nod means she agrees.

“I’m in love with you, no way am I living without you.” I confess.

“I’ll miss you.” I’ll miss her too, I hold her tight against my chest and kiss her deeply, not holding anything back. She’s clinging on me, as if she will drop if she lets go.

“My knees feel weak...” She blurts out, ridiculously. I can’t help the wide grin stretching my lips, my confident smile earns me a punch

on the chest and a shy smile from her.

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The past twenty four hours have been the scariest moments of my life, I thought I was going to lose my mind and never find my way back. I can't recall most of the things I did, like leaving the house and coming back dressed in a sarong.

Everything will be revealed back home, the ancestors want me there and that's where my path will lead me today. Leaving Nala behind is not easy, but at this point our paths are different, if we are destined to be together then fate will bind us together again.

In the dining room I find the man who has been nothing but great help to me, he's wearing umblaselo, same fit as yesterday. He nods as he sees me. I think he'd talk if his mouth were not full, I want to laugh at the number of bread slices on his plate.

"Bambindlovu." Just when I think I have seen it all, Joburgers shock me. I'm taken aback by how he squashes the white bread until it's a roll and dips it inside a cup of hot pipping tea.

"Mfethu, unjani?" (How are you?)

"Alive, thanks to you." I join him at the table, there's nothing I can eat here or maybe I don't have an appetite.

"No," he shakes his head, dipping more bread in his tea. What's the point of all this when the bread and tea will meet in his mouth, although one will get there first but eventually... argh!

"Your ancestors are keeping you alive, mfethu.

They would've killed you by now because you are so stubborn. You're lucky they haven't turned their backs on you."

"But they expect so much from me, how am I supposed to keep up? I'm only human." I'm not complaining, it's annoying having to live for the dead. They are hot, then they are cold. It's draining honestly.

"It's not your job to know how to keep up, just let them lead you. Listen to your dreams, don't take them lightly. Every dream has a deep meaning." He swallows down his food, chuckles and takes one more sip. I can't keep up with how fast he's eating, my stomach grumbles. It's his fault I suppose, for eating that bread like a chef baked it.

"The great Nomkhubulwane is a lioness hey?" He laughs, and I'm lost. "The ancestor that

guards you, she is feisty and doesn't take nonsense." I join him in laughing, I guess she's the old woman I've been seeing in my dreams.

"She's a dragon, that one." I comment, my eyes running through the foods on the table. I think I will have porridge, nothing here shakes my appetite.

"Your birth was a blessing to your village, that's why it rained on that day. The skies were opened, the village was granted a rainy season once more. But the decision your mother took regarding you and the events that took place that day angered the ancestors. They shut the skies, only to bless the villagers with rain on your birthday."

That sounds like a movie, honestly, it is hard to believe that anything like that can happen.

However I have seen enough in my life that I would believe it if he were to tell me that I can fly.

“What did my mother do?” My mind is stuck on that part.

“It’s not for me to tell, your parents will tell you everything you need to know.” He says, finishing the sixth slice of bread. He’s not a big man, where does the food he eats go?

“My parents are very secretive, they will never tell me anything.” I don’t expect anything from those two.

“The time has not come yet, just be patient. You need to be strong mfethu, your brothers depend on you.”

Yeah right! It’s the other way around.

“My brothers treat me like a child.”

“That’s because they see you as one, in their eyes you will never outgrow them. But they are not as strong as they appear, they are fighting their own battles.”

This worries me, I've been so self-absorbed that I failed to ask them how they are.

"Listen, I have a meeting to get to. Travel safe, I'll see you around ndoda." He laughs as he ambles out the dining room. I guess it's time to face reality.

DALISILE-

Mgobhozi is not doing well, she's tried all kinds of muthi to cure her decaying foot. Nothing seems to help, her sister won't say why she's slowly losing her foot and Dalisile is out of her wits. Doom is near, she feels it, she dreams of it and can taste it on her tongue.

Her precious Vukuzakhe is useless with Mathonga getting stronger, she knows he's getting stronger. He comes in her dreams, with that rude old woman who calls herself

Nomkhubulwane and Khahlamba. She's been in the family for too long now to know their faces, her husband's ancestors.

That day at the hospital, the day she went to see Vukuzakhe and found Mathonga in the presence of two elders who are no longer a part of this world, she knew what it meant. That her end was probably near, what puzzles her though is why the old woman let her see them.

Normally, she should've lost her mind on the spot.

"Our plans keep failing, sisi. The only option we have now is to go back to Izingolweni and plead for Vumile's forgiveness." Dalisile tells her sister who is lying on the bed, legs spread and eyes on the ceiling. There's a smell of decaying flesh in the room, getting used to it will take forever for Dalisile. She is so sure that this is

her sister's end, that if she continues following her she will meet the same fate.

"It will be a cold day in hell before I do that."
Mgobhozi hisses, flicking her tired eyes to glare at her sister.

"Then what do you suggest we do? Look at you, you're rotting." It's not a lie though, but Mgobhozi does not appreciate her sister's honesty—bloody hell it stinks more than her foot.

"I don't know, your children are dealing with me." A confession.

Dalisile frowns, the only child of hers who is gifted and possess power is Mathonga. The rest are useless.

"My children?" She positions herself on the edge of the bed, trying by all means not to cover her mouth.

"Sakhile and Vimbela," she breathes trying to

adjust herself on the bed. One move and pain shoots through the entire leg like a jolt of electricity.

“The night I went to their graves with Nyoni, there was another presence.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, but their presence was powerful. I’ve never felt anything like that in my life.” It was not a big deal back then, she brushed it off seeing how she couldn’t see the person.

“I think it followed me, it’s been following me ever since. I tried to get rid of it, Nyoni did her best as well but she’s lost her children. All of them have died unexpectedly.”

“Surely there’s something you can do about it, talk to your witch friends or your cult.” Fear is a sweetheart, Dalisile’s heart is pounding violently in her chest. If what Mgobhozi is saying is true, then... then they are coming for her.

“No one wants to risk losing their lives over me, Mathonga’s ancestors are finally fighting back. He knows they exist, he’s accepted them in his heart and that is dangerous for us. We tempered with them, made them our slaves and now they are out to get us.” It makes sense to Dalisile, she’s suddenly reminded of the Zulu saying ‘Okungapheli kuyahlola.’ (Something without an ending is unnatural.)

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She jerks to her feet, yelling.

“Then what? What were you going to do? You don’t have a gift Dalisile, you have nothing to protect us.” That’s where she’s wrong, Dalisile huffs a derisive breath... she lifts her left hand, flashing it around.

“I think I might have a weapon, something that will save us.” She says, a smirk forming at the

corner of her mouth. Mgobhozi is smart enough to grasp what she's planning.

"Forget it, Vumile will kick you out the second he sees your sorry ass." She wants to laugh, she opts to save her laughing bundles for sunny days. It's too rainy and dark to let herself be tickled.

"But I am still his wife, bile was sprinkled on me the day I married him. I am a Khanyile by tradition, they will have to pardon me." Yeah, dreams are nice.

"Remember the broken curse? We took Nandi from their son, we destroyed his life, took his children from him."

"But I gave them an heir, I made them what they are today. Birthing seven sons is no joke, surely I must be rewarded for it."

"Seven and you took two of them, that is a sin I doubt they will ever forgive." Mgobhozi.

Dalisile's frown is deep and coated with confusing, Mgobhozi is suddenly negative. The woman who's been bent on winning and having her way, the woman who is obsessed with living the lavish life.

"At least I'm coming up with solutions, you're just lying there giving up on everything we've ever worked for." Dalisile shouts.

"I don't know how to fight anymore, I'm nothing compared to the Khanyile ancestors. I told you they are fighting back, they will take us out." The truth is suffocating, neither of them want to die. Dalisile muses on Mgobhozi's words, Vumile should have a soft spot for her in his heart. Surely he will take pity on her.

"I'm going back home," and there's nothing Mgobhozi can say to stop her.

"You are digging your own grave, you don't

know what's waiting for you back there. I can't tell you anything, I'm too weak."

"It's okay, you stay here. I will get someone to look after you while I'm gone, but I promise to come back for you. We're going to be okay."

She waves and leaves her sister's house.

Vumile has a heart of gold, he will listen to her—and she is still his wife, legally and traditionally.

Hope clings on to Dalisile, it's all she has to approach her husband.

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Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Sixty-five

THE KHANYILES-

The guards were gone this morning, no one knows what that means. They were Ntaba's people, he appointed them. Ntaba is big on family matters, keeping them safe at all costs. So this move is questioning. He hasn't shown his face, no one has heard from him.

Zamangwane is locked in her room, thanks to Nandi. She might as well be a woman scorned, her daughter is surely testing her patience. She's been screaming and crying, pleading and groveling and Nandi... well her conscious is as dirty as Mfundo's finger nails.

Mfundo was sent back home this morning, without his precious wife or an explanation. When the Chief speaks, people listen.

Vumile has so much on his plate, his sons are not home, and his daughter is a rebel. If old age doesn't take him out, stress will.

He's slouched on his bed entertaining thoughts of his daughter when he hears screaming outside... Darn it!

"What is it now?" He curses under his breath.

Khahlamba is definitely living up to his promises to destroy. He's out the door in a flash, eyes widely searching the grounds.

"Dalisile!" Yep! The rightful queen is home and so is his first born son.

"Are you trying to kill me, Vukuzakhe?" He hears his wife shout when he's within earshot. By the looks of it, Vukuzakhe has done something to heavily annoy this woman and where the hell has she been? He'd ask, but there's an issue at hand that needs to be dealt with. Dalisile can't be shouting like a crazy woman for no reason.

"Keep your voice down mother." He'd throw in "please" if Dalisile was not attacking him like

this. Funokuhle is inside, shaking under his skin and afraid to bat an eye lest he meets Dalisile's fiery gaze.

"Vukuzakhe?" Vumile calls, eyes glowing with adoration. His son is home, he can't express how much he's missed him. His arms wrap around him before he receives a greeting from him.

"Welcome home son."

"Thank you baba."

Dalisile is not enjoying the little reunion, she wants answers.

"Did you know that your son is gay?" She's still shouting, Vumile sighs. He's been afraid of this, he thought Vukuzakhe would wake up a changed man.

"I'm not gay." Vukuzakhe disputes, and that

confuses the hell out of Dalisile.

“Really? Then how do you explain kissing that dirty boy?” Her hand flings towards the car.

“Choose your words carefully mother,” it’s not a threat, he’s just... okay it is a threat. Funokuhle has no one, the last thing Zakhe will ever do is let people trash talk the man he loves.

“Vukuzakhe?” Vumile starts, eyes directed to the boy in the car. “Why is he here?”

“He’s with me baba.” So is Bongiwe, his wife. She’s been with him for more than three years.

“I get that he’s with you,” Vumile sighs, being a father is exhausting. If there was a way, he’d resign with immediate effect. “What is he doing here? This is your wife’s marital home.”

Dalisile is beside herself with shock, this is not the family she left behind. What in God’s name is happening here?

“Vumile!” Her eyebrows pucker with confusion, her husband has not met her eyes. Perhaps this is the time to shut up and go say a prayer before coming before the chief.

“Since when are you soft spoken Vumile? Your heir was kissing a man just now, you should be throwing that boy out of here.”

Now, that’s risky. There’s a gorilla willing to protect his minion with everything he is.

“No one is touching him,” Zakhe interrupts, sure he has a small voice that carries nothing but authority and people listen when he speaks.

Vumile lets out another sigh, the old man is exhausted. Yes he doesn’t agree with how Vukuzakhe is doing things, but why is Dalisile annoying him? He turns to her, a frown pasted on his face. Dalisile blinks her eyes away from him then back in a split second, their eyes lock.

“Where have you been?” He sounds impassive.

Dalisile’s heart leaps to her throat, she swallows it back down. Mgobhozi’s words swamp over her like a flood. “Vumile will see you for what you are the second he lays his eyes on you.”

“Wh... what do you mean?” She’s asking because she’s gone missing before and not once has he ever questioned her. Vumile rubs his forehead, taking yet another gifted sigh. One more sigh should send him to an early grave, there’s something about Dalisile that’s unsettling. Somehow he can’t understand why he’s married to her, why he chose her of all the women in the world.

“Vukuzakhe, take your friend inside. We’ll talk later.” Zakhe is glad that he’s not going to be interrogated.

“Are you allowing this abomination?” Dalisile

yells, shooting fiery darts at her husband.

“We need to talk.” This is where he is, he wants to talk about this so called marriage and why it ends today.

“You’re insane Vumile, I will not allow this nonsense in my house.”

These people are talking about two different things here, Vumile wants a private conversation with Dalisile and Dalisile is trying her best to avoid the topic or going away with him.

She thought she had a plan before coming here, turns out her thoughts fooled her.

“I will handle my son, leave him alone.” Vumile takes her wrist to lug her away, Dalisile is not having it. She escapes his hand and runs to Funokuhle, she arrives with a slap across his face just as he dashes out of the car. Zakhe’s minion stumbles back, eyes wide with shock

and lips ajar.

“Mother!” Zakhe's small voice travels at the speed of light, before he can tell her to never do that again, Dalisile has Funokuhle by his shirt, dragging him towards the exist. The boy is whimpering, tears threatening to leave his hazel eyes. The mission is aborted by Zakhe, pulling his mother away. Funokuhle hides behind him, gripping the hem of his shirt. His tears are controlled thankfully, he needs to be strong.

“Stop it mother, just stop.” He’s stuttering and that has Dalisile rolling her eyes, she will never get used to this bullshit. God just had to do this to her precious son, couldn’t Mgobhozi be the one to birth a son who stutters with a voice of a woman?

“No, this is crazy Vukuzakhe. Do you know who you are?”

“What does that have to do with him?”

“He’s... he...” Frustration fills the entirety of her being, she pulls off her weave screaming. “My son is not gay, do you know what people will say? I didn’t give birth to a son who sleeps with men, that is disgusting.”

“That’s your opinion mother, I love that kid and he's not going anywhere.”

“That’s absurd, what you are saying is pure nonsense. Get this boy out of here, Vukuzakhe, or I will disown you. You will be dead to me, do you hear me?”

She can shout all she wants, he’d never do that to Funokuhle not after the promises he’s made. He’d rather die than let him out of his life or let anyone lay their hands on him.

“It’s either me or him, I will not share you with this dirty boy.” She’s blunt, yet her words are slicing Funokuhle so finely, leaving him in thin

pieces. The minion wraps an arm around Zakhe's waist, afraid of being tossed away. What if Vukuzakhe chooses his mother over him?

Vukuzakhe has a befitting answer, one that will forever change his relationship with his mother.

"That is enough," Vumile steps in. "I want you out of here."

A smile grows on Dalisile's lips, her eyes held on Funokuhle.

"Yes, you heard him, get out." She snaps at the young boy.

He whimpers, releasing a muffled cry. He can barely breathe. Where will he go from here? His brothers will kill him.

Zakhe turns to Funo, and brings him to his side in a one arm hug. Dalisile is not enjoying the view, she's disgusted to say the least.

“Baba,” Zakhe says, ready to fight for his love, to leave with him and never set foot here. But he sees Vumile staring at Dalisile with a look of pure hatred, it hits him that Vumile meant that Dalisile should get out.

Silence stretches, one that’s extremely uncomfortable.

“Get your things and leave, Dalisile.” Vumile continues and that seems to turn her world upside down, everything that’s been her life, her family, her children, Vukuzakhe, it’s all vanishing right before her eyes.

“You can’t be serious, I didn’t do anything wrong.” Her voice is humble, lost in an unending wilderness. Vumile notices how she’s crumbling from a once intimidating woman down to a little insecure girl surrounded by bitterness.

“What has gotten into you Vumile? Is it that

woman?" She didn't want to get into this, she wanted to avoid the topic to buy herself some time but now she's stuck between a hard place and a raging wave. Nandi is in the kitchen, looking out the open window, Dalisile saw her and it took every humble bone in her to stop herself from going after her.

"You're cheating on me, Vumile. You brought your mistress into my house, and now you're asking me leave everything behind. You must be joking." She's laughing, a leopard never changes its spots.

"I don't care, I'm done with you Dalisile. Get out."

Her confusion long dissipated, her bitterness has changed into anger.

"You're choosing her over me?" She's stunned by it. "And wena Vukuzakhe, why aren't you saying anything?"

She's directing her anger to everyone around her.

"You're my son dammit, I gave you all the love a mother can give. I put you on a high pedestal and made you king in my life. But today you're turning your back on me? You're choosing this faggot over me. Do you know the wrath of God? He will punish you, this is a sin."

Hehehe!

"I would fight for you if you were not so bitter mother, you changed after Mathonga's birth. You became bitter and cold, I couldn't recognize the person you became. Hlabela and I had to raise the boys, my brothers don't know you as a mother. So I don't see why I should take your side, I choose my brothers, I choose Funokuhle over you."

Dalisile gasps at her son's words, she never

saw this day coming. Not the boy she loved and cherished all his life. He ate Danone, while the others ate amasi. He sat on a stool while the others sat on the floor, he's her prince, her lifeline.

"I'm not going anywhere, this is my house. I am Mrs. Khanyile, a bloody queen. No one will remove me from my position, no one." She places her hands on her hips just for effect, really. Vumile doesn't care anymore, it's as if he knows this day has been long coming, that what's happened in the past has resulted to this moment right here.

"You're leaving, there are many hotels around here and you've got enough money to pay for one. Or head to your sister's, I'm sure she will be happy to see you."

Mgobhozi's words come back to her, she did say this will happen. Maybe she should've taken her words into consideration and stayed away

till they found a solution.

She glares at Funokuhle who is protected in Vukuzakhe's arms, then sends her gaze to the kitchen. The woman responsible for all this is in there, she moves as fast as wind headed to the kitchen. Vumile sees it coming and locks his arm around her waist, pulling her back.

"I'm going to kill her, I'm going to kill that woman." She's kicking and screaming, unable to escape Vumile's tight grip.

"Let me kill her Vumile, I won't let her have everything I have worked for."

"Stop it, Dalisile." Vumile will have a heart attack if this drama doesn't stop, he thinks it's time he talks to Khahlamba and get the man to stop messing with him. When he releases her, she falls to the ground panting, hands tightly balled into fists.

"You're going to regret this, all of you. I'm going

to make you pay.” Tears will never know her, her eyes are as dry as raisins. She lifts her head to look at the man she married years ago, it’s written in his eyes that he’s done no matter what she does, she will never be able to appease him.

As she stands to her feet because a queen gets back up whenever she falls, a black Jeep pulls into the premises. Immediately, the sky starts to darken. Their eyes turn to the sky, there’s a cloud as small as a man’s hand blocking the sun. For a second they thought it was going to rain, there seems to be more clouds gathering around, not enough to cause a heavenly shower. Mathonga steps out of the car, he looks different, matured and too serious.

“Mathonga.” Vukuzakhe says, a bit stunned. He didn’t know Mathonga was coming back and he’s alone, Ndleleni is not with him. This boy

likes taking risks, there's a reason he was sent away. Little does he know that the boy walks with his ancestors, the Sangwenis will see their wrath if they dare touch him.

"Ngwane KaNgwadi." Joy fills Vumile's heart, he missed his son dearly. He welcomes him with a hug, Mathonga hesitates before returning. His eyes are on the wide eyed woman who mothered him. Her teeth are shattering as if the clouds came with a cold front.

"Dalisile," Mathonga shouts, moving away from Vumile. Dalisile lets a quavering breathe, something is different with Mathonga. The look in his eyes and that authoritative voice he used.

"You smell of smoke." Mathonga points at his mother, feet leisurely moving towards her. Dalisile staggers a smidgeon, what is this boy talking about?

"Tha... that's ridiculous, I don't smoke." She

cackles, eyes dubiously moving about.

“You smell like fire, your clothes are covered with ashes.” Mathonga insists, his words are accusatory. “You killed them, didn’t you?”

He shouts, his glare going from soft to enraged, Dalisile yelps and runs to hide behind Vukuzakhe.

“Your brother has grown crazy, stop him.”
Dalisile.

“What’s going on, Mathonga?” He’s right to ask, he’s never seen him talk to their mother like this.

“The fire that broke out the morning of my birth, the fire that killed Vimbela and Sakhile, she started it. She planned it all.” He sees it, every detail of that night. It’s that old woman living inside him, she’s out for justice.

Dalisile’s heart is dancing to the beat of fear, this boy can’t know this... he was a baby then.

“Tha... that’s not true, I would never.” Her voice is failing her, giving her away.

“Are you sure about this?” Zakhe’s entire posture shifts, a frown coming across his face.

“Nomkhubulwane showed me everything...”

This name Vumile knows, he knows his family history and this name rings a bell. He’s heard his elders speak of her, she is a Khanyile by marriage.

“That’s your...” the rest of his words hang in the air, he is in awe.

“I know who she is.” Mathonga interrupts confidently, he will explain everything later.

“Your wife killed your sons, baba. I was supposed to die along with them.” Mathonga.

Vumile has always suspected, he’s always wanted to prove it but had no idea how. Look what his forefathers dragged in, the woman

who murdered his sons. He studies Dalisile with an unforgiving judgement, eyes blazing murderously.

“Vumile... he’s... he’s lying.” Oh, shaky! She pushes Funokuhle off of Vukuzakhe and takes his space. “Son please, stop your father. He’s going to kill me, help me please.”

Zakhe’s hand finds Dalisile’s shoulders, he pushes them from him. All his life he blamed himself for his brothers' death and his mother watched as he drowned in depression and sorrow.

“You’re evil.” Zakhe sneers down his nose, turning a cold eye on her.

With a crazed look on her face, Dalisile starts to panic. They all seem to be against her, the look in their eyes judging her. There is no way out for her, if she decides to run, she won’t run far.

“I want to call my lawyer.” She says, studying all

of them with a critical squint.

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I appreciate your comments, they keep me going. Please don't grow weary, or my human battery dies.

MATHONGA-

Sixty-four

HLABELA-

He missed his flight and had to wait for the morning flight, he's finally in Mpumalanga, outside Kushi's house. She was hysterical over the phone, crying her heart out.

"They are taking my kids from me." Is what she said, he would've stayed back with his family

but there was nothing he could do there.

He uses the house keys gifted to him by Kushi to enter the house.

“Kushi!” He calls.

“Lock the door.” He hears her mumbling before seeing her standing in the kitchen doorway.

Hlabela does as told, not sure why she’s asking him to lock the door. His heart is racing nervously as he remembers her cries over the phone.

“Where are they...” Before he could finish talking, Kushi throws herself in his arms. Her breath is on his neck as she pushes them in the living, her arms never leaving him. Then Hlabela is hugging her back, feeling confusion tug at his heart. He can’t help but wonder if there’s someone in the house, Kushi is trembling and seemingly afraid.

“What’s going on?” He whispers, his hand

gliding up behind Kushi's neck and holding her.

"Bella." She sniffs, her breath coming out a ragged gasp. Hlabela hurriedly pulls away to get a look at her face, his heart aches as he reaches to touch the hot tears.

"Kushi, talk to me."

She shakes her head, hands traveling up to clasp Hlabela's collar.

"My uncles and brothers-in-law found out about us, I don't know how or who told them. They took my babies, they are taking them back to India. I have to go back too, they want me to fulfil my duties as their widow." She's spitting out the words, suddenly sobbing. If he knew what to do from here, he wouldn't be panicking.

"Hey, calm down. It's okay." He shushes her. It's not okay, she's leaving and there's nothing he can do about it.

"They are taking me away Hlabela, don't you get

it? They'll be here any minute now."

"You're a grown woman, Kushi. They can't take you by force, we can alert the cops. Get a restraining order or something."

"You don't know my brother's in-law, they have influences everywhere. They can do just about anything they want and get away with it-"

"I have influences too, I can protect you." He thinks he can, he's got the money to pay people to get rid of their problems. But, does he have the heart to do it? He's played Mr. Perfect all his life.

"What about my children? They have my children, I can't let them go back to India without me. I will never see them again." Yeah, he didn't think of that.

Out of options or thinking of a way out where everyone will win, he pulls Kushi closer, until

she takes a deep breath and rests her head on his shoulder—clinging to him desperately.

“I don’t know where my children are, I’m losing my mind Bella. You have to help me please.”

His eyes are on her again, head spinning as he struggles to digest the terrible news.

“I will get your kids back, first we need to get you to safety before they get here.”

Kushi’s body fails her, all the energy leaving her body. Limply she falls into Hlabela’s arms.

Holding her against him, Hlabela tries to comfort her but is met with more shivers and weak cries like that of a suffering animal.

“I can’t lose them, I can’t lose my children.”

Hlabela stills, he’s speechless. He’s known Kushi’s wounds and how deep they are, but he didn’t realise how much bigger they were. He’s breaking and softening, he pulls away to cup

her face. He has to say something, anything to comfort her and give her hope again.

“Look at me.”

Kushi’s cries slowly dissipate, her breaths shallow.

“I love you.” That’s it?

Kushi is silent for a few seconds, then she leans forward, pressing her lips to his. He tastes the salt of her tears as they share a slow kiss, lips barely touching.

“I love you too...”

The hammering of their hearts start with the sound of banging on the door and a voice shouting-

“Kushi open up.”

Her eyes widen, she clings on to Hlabela’s coat for dear life, hands trembling.

“They are here, you have to hide.” She murmurs and Hlabela thinks it’s ridiculous. He’s not a fighter, he’s never tried to fight a day in his life. This is the time to Google ‘How to knock someone out with a single punch.’

“We saw him coming in there, open the door Kushi.”

The banging is louder, and before the two make a decision, the door is kicked down revealing five Indian men, probably in their late forties, with turbans wrapped around their heads.

“Uncle.” She’s looking at the eldest, the man is fuming, eyes burning with rage. His footsteps thunder towards Kushi, Hlabela plans to attack back if he makes a single move. His chance is taken by three men lugging him back.

She wants to scream his name, but it dies in her mouth when her uncle lands a back hand across her face that throws her across the

room.

“Kushi!” Hlabela shouts for her.

There are hands on his body, more than three people pulling him away as he struggles to get to her. He refuses to move and that annoys the men, they attack him with punches and kicks till he’s lying on the floor. He doesn’t give up trying to get up, especially since Kushi is wailing so painfully.

“Stop fighting it, you’re going to die anyway.” A voice, it might be the voice of Kushi’s brother-in-law, or uncle. The heck, Hlabela is not listening. He couldn’t care less, his priority is to save his love.

His resilience is something to be admired but not by these angry men, the more he tries to be strong, the more they attack him.

“It’s enough uncle. Please I will do as you say,

I'll stay away from him.”

But that's not what Hlabela wants, he hasn't told his father about her but he wants to introduce her as the woman he loves. If she leaves... if she leaves he won't get the chance, and he's so sure he will die.

“Please...” Something helpless and useless within hlabela wants to turn to his enemy and just plead, he can't find the words. His mind is muddled, his head hurts. He feels himself losing consciousness and coming back to life with a single jolt.

His vision is blurred, but he's able to see what's unfolding before him. The uncle, pulling Kushi kicking and screaming out the house, he'd jump and stop them but all the strength in him has been drained.

A chill creeps up his spine, a sick feeling like

trying to stand up too fast and unable to stop his mind from spinning, his ears from ringing... blackness clawing at his conscious before a total black out.

VUKUZAKHE-

Flying home would've gotten him there faster than driving, but Vukuzakhe wanted time to think, clear his head.

Bringing Funokuhle with him, could be him acting stupid or he's taking advantage of the fact that his wife is at her father's house. Either way, he could do the right thing, pull out of his father's premises and find Funokuhle a hotel. Today is one of his trashy days, he wants to introduce this young one to his family. There are days when he wants to put himself first, today is one of those.

“I must be out of my mind.” Funokuhle’s voice breaks him out of his swirling and colliding thoughts, he glances over at him from the driver’s seat.

“What we’re doing is not right, we can’t just rock up unannounced and declare our love for each other.”

“I think we can, we can’t hide forever. I’m done hiding you.” The man has made up his mind, he sighs at the pure hope in his own voice. There is a high possibility that his family will not accept his boyfriend, he has no clue what he will do should that happen.

“I still can’t believe...”

“I know,” Zakhe finishes Funo's thoughts. Falling in love was an unexpected incident, it was a mistake they couldn’t correct. Funokuhle should have pushed him away, fought against his feelings or at the very least fought him.

Zakhe couldn't have imagined this boy loving him, it must have taken so much courage for Funokuhle to reciprocate.

"This is it." Zakhe says, ready to step out of the car. His pulse is beating nonstop in his veins and his heart is trying to crawl out of his chest. The plan is to go in there alone, tell his family about Funokuhle and come back to fetch him depending on how they will take the news.

"I only want to know one thing," Funokuhle introduces, eyes wide and hopeful.

"Yes, anything kid."

"Am I worth it?"

Zakhe frowns, tilts his head to try and make sense of Funokuhle's question.

"Being gay is not really a thing in this part of the world, people will ridicule you. You will always

be judged, it might even put a stain on your father's name, am I worth all that?"

He's thought about this long and hard, everything that Funokuhle has brought forward and came to a decision. They are here now, there is no going back.

Zakhe grabs him by the waist and pulls him close, shocked and bashful, Funokuhle tries to push him away but it's no use. He stays firm in Zakhe's arms, glancing up at him.

"Yes." Khanyile says. "You are worth all that and more to me, you always have been."

What a way to make a man blush.

"What about you?" Vukuzakhe's question has a touch of worry, as Funokuhle meets his eyes once more, the answer falls out without him having to think of it.

"I wouldn't be here if you were not worth it."

Warmth fills Zakhe's chest, their confessions seal it. His gulps, his gaze lowering to Funo's lips in a way that makes the other blush.

"We can't do it here, your family is inside." Funo shyly disputes.

"Just a peck," he replies, gradually trailing his lips closer to Funo's, across his chin. He kisses him slowly, carefully luring Funo's mouth open with the edge of his tongue. He parts the seam of his lips and skilfully delves inside.

A shrill scream brings their kissing to a screeching stop, Funo's eyes are wide, unmoving from Zakhe's face.

"Vukuzakhe!" Yep, he knows that voice. Only one person is fond of screaming his name like a crazy person.

"Shit!" He curses under his breath, turning to face his mother standing outside the window.

She's in one of her favourite two-piece suits, a pair of big ass sunglasses and a long weave. He presumes she just got home, judging by the suitcase behind her.

KHETHIWE-

Ntaba is ignoring my calls, I know because I have dialled his number a million times and he didn't bother answering one. Last night he left with the promise that he will come back, what if he's losing interest again? I can't let that happen, I don't have anything to fall back on.

The twins came back early from their trip, Sono came to visit, I don't know where her sister is and I couldn't care less. The only adult I have seen so far is my aunt, their mother.

My father is at work, as to where his wife is beats me. Lethiwe called, wishing me good

health. What's so special about this girl he's always with that he can't visit his sick sister?

"When are you coming back home?" Sono.

I want to say never, I can't stomach the thought of going back to my father's house. Beggars can't be choosers really, it's not like I have anywhere else to go.

"I don't know, I'm waiting to hear from the doctor."

"Your condition is not that serious, you were grazed by a bullet." She's laughing, I don't see anything funny about this. Especially when my life becomes a film when I have to go to the toilet.

"What were you doing on the streets at night?" That's right, I told her I was mugged. I'm surprised she believes me, when I don't have anything to my name. She doesn't know about Bahle's proposal, this one is a hopeless

romantic, if she finds out she will persuade me to go with it.

“I told you, Sono.” I check my phone for messages from Ntaba, there’s nothing. I need to breathe, I can’t breathe.

“What’s wrong with you?” She must notice my distress.

“Ntaba hasn’t called, and he’s not answering his phone.” I sound like a girlfriend.

“So? He has a life.” She will never get it. “This Ntaba guy is a looker hey?”

He’s also a no-go zone, I don’t like competition.

“Stay away from him.” I don’t want to warn her twice, having to compete with Thethelela was too much for me. This concept that a man will always cheat even if you set him up on a date with Jesus should be burned with all toxic men, I don’t see myself getting over Ntaba and Thethelela’s betrayal.

“31 year-old Ntabezikude Khanyile, third born son of Chief Vumile Khanyile. It says here that he part owns KHANYILE HOLDINGS, ohhh and he’s a bachelor.”

My mouth drops, all this information she’s getting from the notepad in her hand.

“You Googled him?” I am dumbfounded, I didn’t know he’s on Google. I wonder what else it says about him.

“Of course I Googled him, like I do every guy who piques my interest.” She replies, scrolling through the tablet. Piques her interest huh? I see where she’s taking this. I grab the tablet from her, needing to see what she’s looking at. And there he is, my beautiful Ntaba. Does he have to be a heartthrob though? This is where my problems stem from.

“I would appreciate it if you would not drool

over my man, please.” I’m crazy okay, in my head he is my man. I don’t think I will ever stop loving him, in that sense that he will always be my first love.

“Your man?” People that like things can’t be trusted. “I thought you said he’s...”

“I know what I said, I love him, but he doesn’t love me and he never will.” I delve into it, there is no point in hiding anything from this one. She will eventually find out, that’s if she doesn’t coax me into telling her the truth.

“So the worker fell in love with her boss?” It’s not as bad as she makes it sound, and what’s wrong with falling for my boss? He’s also human, he doesn’t shit gold.

“Where is he, then? Why is he not here?”

There’s a knock at the door before I could answer, my mother walks in with Nomsa and

three other women, her church friends, I recognize every one of them. I thought I made it clear that I don't want to see her, what happened to my rights? I have the right to say no to my parents.

"My baby." God should call her out on that fake smile on her face, this woman does it so well, it almost looks legit.

"How are you?" Definitely not okay, unfortunately I can't say that with the church people here.

"Khethiwe ngane yami, your mother told us what happened." Mam'Ngadi steps forward with a smile on her face, I check my mother to see if she's okay in the head. She told her church friends that my ass missed a bullet, there goes my church days.

"The ladies came to pray for you my baby." A round of applause for this mother of mine, great

actress she is.

“For what?” I whisper snap, but the ladies hear me. I would be dead if eyes shot lethal lasers.

“For a quick recovery, we want you home soon.” She says, her gritted teeth revealing her truest form—Cruella.

“We heard about your marriage to the Sithebe boy, you are a lucky girl.” Mam’Ngadi seems to be the one talking the most, my mother put her up to this. They want to plant the idea of me and Bahle in my head, it’s not happening.

“We are not...”

“Uh, I think we should start with the prayers before visiting hours are over.” Mom interrupts, her eyebrows gesturing that I keep my mouth shut. Is it necessary for me to have a mother?

Sono laughs softly when Mam’Ngadi pulls out a two litre, Cocacola bottle from her bag. It’s filled with water and part of me is sure that that’s

church water, we are a 'I receive' church. But to come with a whole two litre of water here, does the pastor even know about this? Holy oil would have sufficed, I could apply it on my scar.

"Close your eyes Khethiwe," the woman instructs and no, I don't want to close my eyes.

"This is the only way we can remove the demon inside you."

"Demon ma?" What is Mam'Ngadi talking about? Does she even know me to assume I am demon possessed?

"Yebo, unamadimoni." Really? Plural!

Mam'Ngadi is convinced that the devil lives in me. I chase my mother with a side eye, the stoical look on her face tells me nothing. She did this, she spread this crazy rumour.

"I was only shot at ma. I'm not possessed."

“Denying marriage means there is a demon inside you, my child. Marriage is a beautiful thing, especially when you have been chosen by a rich man. Who would ever say no to money and luxury? The devil doesn’t want you to have nice things, he doesn’t want to see you happy, that’s why he’s fighting you.”

This woman looks humble and respectable, I’m shocked by what’s coming out of her mouth.

I should have known that this is about Bahle and his stupid lobola, as long as my parents have his money I will never be free from them.

“Ma, I...”

She roughly splashes a handful of water on my face shouting- “Phuma Sathane.”

I swear I feel like I’m drowning, I don’t do well with cold water, I open my mouth to tell her to stop but she goes for round two and three, until I lose count. The other ladies break forth in a

church. 'Sizowanyathela amadimoni.' I'm done with civilization.

"Ma, stop." Shouting is pointless, Mam'Ngadi can't hear me. She's so focused on this fake exorcism of hers, I would run if I were not injured.

"It's fighting her Mam'Ngadi, pray harder." One of the church ladies yells hearing me scream, I can't see a damn thing. There's water in my eyes, my body is shivering from its coldness.

Why am I screaming like a possessed woman? But why wouldn't I scream? The water is freezing.

"Hold her down, sis'Tracy. We can't let the devil take over our children." It's Mam'Ngadi, sounding determined.

Hold me down? I have an injury for crying out. Rough hands hold me down on both sides, I can't move to save my life. Now I'm screaming

for them to let me go. I can hear my mother's voice among the singing ladies, is she for real?

"Mama," I shout for her, my eyes tightly shut. Where is that woman?

"Phuma Sathane." I hear Sono yell excitedly, she's cheering them on— this is not happening. Son of David, this is a hospital. Where are the nurses?

"You are powerless Satan, ngithi fusegi yezwa, voetsek. Get your hands off the child of God, awunamandla doti." (You are powerless.)

Mam'Ngadi shouts, emptying the entire bottle of water on my face. I gag, spitting as some of the water passes down my throat. I'm panting and trying to release myself from the hands holding me.

"I think we should have brought a 10 litre bucket of water, this demon is stubborn." Mam'Ngadi says out of breath.

I will never set foot in church, so help me God.

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Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA

Sixty-six

Sponsored by Charmaigne Kotoyi

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THE KHANYILES-

“Lock her up in one of the rooms, we’re going to get to the bottom of this.” Vumile commands and marches off to call his brothers. Zakhe is gentle when he takes her hand.

“Vukuzakhe listen to me, I didn’t do it. This boy hates me, he’s always hated me and now he’s

turning you against me.” Dalisile pleads.

Vukuzakhe is listening but has nothing to say to her, he wants to feel sorry for her and help her. He would if she didn't kill his brothers.

“I still remember that day like it just happened mother,” he starts, voice straining in his throat. “I remember how you kept me in that room and didn't want me to leave, I couldn't understand why you were so persistent that I stay with you but it's all clear to me now. You planned and executed the murder of my brothers, your own kids.”

Saying it makes it all real, he was flabbergasted for a while but everything is aligning now, sinking in perfectly.

“I didn't do it, what mother would have her children killed?” She'd say this under oath, in front of God even.

Vukuzakhe is done talking, he pushes her into

the room, she doesn't fight him... strange.

"You will remain here until father decides what he's going to do with you, although I think you should be locked up in prison." He tells her, ignoring the look of hurt in her eyes. Dalisile folds her arms, as she stands firmly and unafraid.

"They don't love you like I do son and when you realise that, you will come back to me." He's certain that won't happen.

He's ready to shut the door when his phone buzzes, he fishes for his phone in his pockets and swipes the screen open. It's a message from Ntabezikude, Vukuzakhe looks up at his mother without entirely raising his head.

"Phumlani has been found," he shouldn't be doing this, considering what the man did to his mother. But the message says to tell everyone and alerting Dalisile is good, that way she won't

be caught off guard by his sudden presence.

“He will be here tonight,” Zakhe adds, ignoring the shock on her face.

“Don’t bring that man here Vukuzakhe, I will kill him if I see his face.” Her voice is a whisper, a shaken low voice. He lowers his head, it’s hard for him to have to do this to her, but he has no choice, it’s out of his hands.

“I’m sorry mother, I’m really sorry.”

He shuts the door, and locks it after.

“Don’t let that man come here Vukuzakhe, he’s not a good person.” She shouts after him, while banging the door. Dalisile has messed up, but bringing her rapist to the premises is darn right evil. If push comes to shove, then he will protect her from Phumlani.

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“How did the two of you meet?” Trust Mathonga to ask this question, Funokuhle feels the heat of the spotlight he’s been placed on. He can’t tell him that they met at a river and had a one night stand.

“You’ve never seen me interrogating your women?” Zakhe says, standing in the doorway of the rondavel appointed to Funokuhle. It’s getting dark outside, of course they had to give him a place to lay his head.

Zakhe’s brows rise, due to how Mathonga has taken up space on Funo’s bed and the minion is standing in the middle of the room with folded arms.

“What women bhuti?” Sarcasm is hidden in his question, he kicks off his shoes, and shifts back on the bed till his back meets the headboard.
“I’ve only been with one woman,”

Oh shit! He's completely forgotten about the woman who taught him to love, the woman who was there when his mother wasn't. He hasn't bothered to check up on her, she might be going through the worst with her grandmother gone.

"Can we talk?" Zakhe asks.

"I'm still talking to Funo, he was about to tell me how you two met." Mathonga grins and winks at Funokuhle.

"I wasn't," the minion giggles, it has Vukuzakhe's lips drawing into a small smile.

"Hey, we need something to talk about at the wedding. I can't stand in front of people and say 'cheers to Funokuhle, the stranger my brother loves.' I need a whole two page speech, otherwise I'm not coming to the wedding."

No one between the two lovers has ever

mentioned getting married and here is the little brother jumping into conclusions. Zakhe clears his throat, eyes set on Funokuhle who has suddenly become shy.

“Come with me, Ngwane.” Zakhe tells him and disappears out the door.

“Stay here, I’m coming.” Mathonga jumps off the bed, he’s putting on his shoes in a hurry. “I still want details, ndoda.”

He says and leaves without an answer.

Vukuzakhe is standing under a tree, hands in his pockets and eyes on Mathonga as he approaches.

“Are you okay?” That’s the big brother’s question, after what happened with Dalisile and today’s revelation, Mathonga ought to be in a bad space.

“Did she finally confess?”

Mathonga’s question causes Zakhe to release a sigh of dread, what he did was not easy.

“No, I doubt she ever will.” He shifts a smidgen, looking over the horizon.

“I think we should let her go, she will never accept that she’s guilty. You saw how deranged she is, in her head she has done nothing wrong.” Mathonga.

“I know, but we can’t let her go. Ntaba texted me, he found your father. They are on the way here,”

Mathonga’s ears give up their task, he is stuck on the part where his biological father has been found. He will see him for the first time in his life.

“Thonga?” Zakhe’s worried voice snaps him back to reality, he blinks fixing his gaze on Zakhe.

“When will they get here?”

“Probably later tonight, he’s flying him down to KZN from Johannesburg.”

What to do? What to do? Mathonga is suddenly not sure if meeting him is a good idea, what if he’s not what he expects? What if he will leave him with a bag of disappointments?

“Okay,” Mathonga wriggles his shoulders, keeping his thoughts to himself.

“Have the ancestors said anything yet?”

He shakes his head and breathes out a “no.” It’s one of those days where it feels like they were never there to begin with, maybe they will come alive when Phumlani gets here. It was them who demanded that Dalisile comes back home, they must have a plan.

“We need to be strong, things are going to change around here.” Vukuzakhe voices, it has Mathonga rubbing the back of his head. He

wants to pry.

“Like your relationship with Bongiwe?” He blots out, Vukuzakhe forehead furrows. Mathonga has hit a bull’s eyes, he’s trading on the right path. He doesn’t see Bongiwe agreeing to this, whatever his brother is planning on doing.

“Are you going to marry him?” A little forward, this boy. Zakhe’s frown grows, he answers him with a head nod. He plans on marrying Funokuhle, he just needs to call a family meeting, uncles included and tell Bongiwe that he is taking a second partner. He won’t ask her because, well she will say no.

“That’s the plan.” This one has been too confident since he came back from the land of the dead.

“Well, there’s going to be drama around here.” Mathonga is laughing... alone. Zakhe hums, he

knows how dramatic his wife can be and that's okay. He will have to find a way to pacify her.

“Vukuzakhe!” That's Funo's voice calling out to him, he rarely hears him take his name and whenever he does, something flips in his stomach, a feeling he'd love to keep and would be embarrassed to admit. But today, his name rolling out of Funo's tongue has birthed a feeling of worry.

“And then?” Mathonga questions his brother, they are looking at Funo speeding up to them with panic written on his face.

“What is it Kid?” Zakhe queries.

Funokuhle is out breath from running, he can barely speak. He reaches out a hand, in it is a phone. Zakhe takes it, a frown lined with questions plastered on his face. Okay this is Facebook, he's not on the app but is familiar

with it.

“What is it?” Mathonga has grown impatient, it's because of the look of worry carried by his brother.

He snatches the phone to check for himself, and his mouth drops. What he's looking at are pictures of Zakhe and Funo, spread across social media. Private pictures, some revealing them naked in the shower, in most of them they are kissing or clinging on to each other.

“This is you and...” his eyes turn to Funo who looks terribly worried. He quickly locks the screen because he respects his brother and seeing him naked is traumatising.

“Someone has been watching us, we only spent two days at the house in Northcliff. When did all this shit happen?” Zakhe roars, clenching his fists in anger.

“It's possible that someone installed cameras in

your house.” Mathonga’s supposition shocks the living daylights out of the couple.

AMANDLA-

Lazing around is exhausting, I’m grateful to Sabusiswa for arranging a date night. I’m meeting her at a restaurant in Mandela Square, I’ve never been there before. She said to take an Uber that will drop me off at Sandton.

Trumps Grillhouse is up to me to find, that mother thinks I know everything or she expects me to know everything.

I’m not accustomed to the draped collar dress she sent me, it’s backless and has a slit thigh. Also, velvet is not my favourite. The dress is beautiful though, perfect for a night out.

I have to force my feet into four inch heels, my

shoulder touching braids are left untied. Sabusiswa hates them, she'd rather I wear a weave. She had three weaves sent to the house four days ago, that's what she does, leave me alone the entire day and have things delivered to the house.

Anyway, I tried the darn weaves and spent my day nursing a headache. At one point, I had a nose bleed, for the first time in my life. Go figure.

I'm not loving the life I'm living, I'd choose the village over this

Time is not on my side, the Uber will be here in 2 minutes. This has me rushing out with my belongings, it feels good to be outside in the world.

A silver Toyota Yaris parks in front of the gate, I have to check the number plates to make sure I'm getting into the right vehicle. The driver

looks dodgy, I might judge him wrongly. It's not like my safety would be guaranteed if he looked like Will Smith.

By the time I reach my destination, I have had enough of his chatting.

Sandton is crowded, it's not a surprise really. People love eating out, I'm loving the atmosphere here, being out of that depressing house is therapeutic.

There's something I can't shake though, it feels like there is someone behind me. I felt it from the moment I walked out of the house, and when I look back I find no one. It's a creepy feeling, at some point my body shivers coldly.

I see my mother standing by Nelson Mandela's statue, it's the first time seeing it and I am tempted to ask her to take a picture.

“You’re late.” Her cold gaze is getting old, what is she trying to prove exactly? The temptation to disrespect her by rolling my eyes is closer than the presence behind me.

“You said 6pm,” I throw in a little attitude, ten minutes late is no big deal... haibo.

“Six on the dot, not a minute later.”

Who is she? Bill Gates?

“I’m here ma, and I’m hungry.” Hao, now I must faint because of time? This woman is not serious.

“Follow me,” she says, clicking her tongue.
Ohho!

“Wait, I need a picture with the legend.” I hand her my phone, now this I can faint for. Food is not going anywhere. Sabusiswa stares at my phone like it will burn her manicured hands at first contact.

“Please, just one.” I’m using my persuasive smile, not that it’s ever worked on her. She’s the love child of thunder and lightning, angry as hell, twenty-four-seven.

I yelp in excitement when she takes my phone, it dies when she really takes one picture. Yoh, hai. Life is hard, shame.

The restaurant looks lavish, too fancy for my liking. Dinner is a nightmare, maybe I would enjoy it had I were dining with friends. Then again, I’m friendless.

“Remove your elbows from the table, and chew properly.” Eh!

Some people here have their elbows on the table, and a lot of them are chewing like goats. She thinks her mother is the queen of England, this woman grew up in the bundus, chasing chickens.

“Ma, where is my father?” Yes, I did that. She thinks she can control me, let me burn her seat for a while. Her eyes bulge from their sockets, right after she chokes on wine.

“Where is this coming from?”

“I just want to know, you never told me who he really is and why he left.” She’s never spoken about him really.

“Your father did not leave, he was never there.” She gulps down a glass of wine and leaves it empty, my mouth drops when she flags a waiter and asks for a whole bottle. Soft life, must be nice.

“I don’t understand, what do you mean he was never there?”

She glowers at me with sharp eyes, that won’t stop me from asking.

“That’s enough Amandla, we are not here to talk about that man. Now cut it.” She’s snapping at me, it’s annoying, she’s annoying.

“Excuse me, I’m going to the toilet.” I throw the napkin on the table and push my chair back to stand, Queen Elizabeth the second is glaring up at me.

“It’s the ladies, don’t embarrass me.” She whisper shouts, this one does not know me.

“Excuse me, MaCele, I need to use the toilet.” She already thinks I’m an embarrassment, so why not embarrass her further by saying it out loud?

I get a few looks that don’t bother me.

Someone bumps into me on my way to the toilet, almost knocking me down. It’s a kid, he’s staring up at me, probably terrified by the frown on my face. I soften my features to get him to

relax.

“Thobani, get back here.” There’s a lady headed my way, with an angry look on her face. She grabs the kid’s hand and pulls him to her. “I told you not to run, what is wrong with you?”

“It’s okay, he’s just a kid. Don’t scold him.” I don’t know why I’m butting in, as her eyes meet mine, a smile crawls to her lips.

“Say sorry Thobani.” She’s telling the little boy, he’s too grumpy for a child.

“Sorry Thobani.” The kid says and I can’t help but laugh at his cuteness.

“Don’t act smart with me, apologize to the lady for running into her.” She’s strict, kind of reminds me Sabusiswa. Yawn!

“I’m sorry.” He finally says, totally unnecessary if you ask me. What can I do but flash the poor kid a smile.

“Nala can we go now?” He pleads, looking up at her.

“Nala? That’s a beautiful name.” I start a conversation, for some odd reason.

“My mother seemed to think so too,” her reply comes with a shrug. It’s not really a big deal to her.

“Do you live around here?” I have to ask, I’m in dire need of friends and we could click. She looks a bit sceptical, I have to redeem myself. I’m sure I sound like a freak. “Don’t worry, I’m not planning on robbing you. I’m new around here, fresh from Izingolweni in KZN, I don’t have friends.”

Sometimes you must sell yourself in life, her smile appears again.

“Really? I’m also from Izingolweni.” She sings, gleaming with excitement.

“Great then we can be friends, I don’t have any.

It'd be nice to have someone to talk to." Yeah, that's right, I'm desperate.

"That'd be great."

"I'm Amandla by the way, and you're Nala." She laughs with a head nod.

"Yes, nice to meet you Amandla." She's nice, I like her already.

We exchange numbers and go on about our business, mom can't find out about this. She is against me having friends.

Sabusiswa is settling the bill when I come back, of course as expected. She grimaces at the sight of me, I'm still alive anyway.

"We have somewhere to be," she tells me, grabs her handbag and manoeuvres past me.

Right now I couldn't care less where she's taking me, anything is better than being in that

godforsaken house.

We get to the downstairs parking lot in peace, and no words shared between us. I'm starting to think my mother is a special case.

My eyes scan the parking lot, searching for her car, that bright red Jeep. As I turn to ask, I see her opening the door of a bright red Ferrari.

Okay I get that red is her colour but that's someone's car.

She's getting in, without looking back at me. Did she buy a new car?

"Is this yours?" I ask the minute I jump in, it smells brand new in here.

"Yes, it was a gift from a friend." Okay, a friend.

"Your boyfriend?" This I want to hear, she side eyes me. Seems I jumped the gun.

"That's none of your business," she snaps, and starts the car.

Whatever.

Like dinner, we're trapped in silence. In more or less than ten minutes, she parks outside a double story house. She tells me to follow her, where else will I go?

The interior is way different from the outside, it's furnished with dark colours, dark red being one of them. It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen. There's a long passage leading to... I don't know where but whatever it might be must be scary. The house itself is scary, red curtains... Really now, that's not it.

“Who lives here, Dracula?” It's cringing, Sabusiswa doesn't find me funny, she huffs like the grumpy old hag she is. Oh well.

Everything in me is screaming that I leave, but I can't seem to find the courage, my body says stay but my soul screams go. A lanky man in a

hideous red suit meets us at the door, he must be the butler.

“The master has been expecting you,” he announces and turns to go back where he came, his pointy shoes loudly clicking on the tiled floor.

“Can I wait in the car?”

“That would be rude, Amandla. Let's go,” she says, directing her feet where the guy went.

We get to a door that has a huge cross sign on it, the man must be a devoted Christian or a pastor.

But... wait a minute, the cross is upside down.

“When we get in there, you don't speak unless spoken to.” Yeah no, I'll probably not do that.

She knocks three times, and enters without permission. There's a short, and dark man standing behind a desk. He's bald, the only hairs on his face is that ugly beard hanging down his

chin, and what do you know? He's also wearing a red suit. His eyes find me first and shivers instantly ripple through me, my heart gives a warning that I should not be here. I want to go home.

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MATHONGA-

Sixty-seven

Sponsored by Ntombikayise Gqokoma

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NDLELENI-

He was running some errands when Hlabela's

call came through, the two-hour drive to Mpumalanga was filled with worry. He bubbled with anger when he found his brother bloodied and nursing his wounds.

Hlabela explained what had happened, how he was attacked by a bunch of old Indian men and couldn't fight them singlehandedly.

His biggest worry is Kushi, Ndleleni is not there. He wants to harm the people that hurt his brother.

They are in the car, heading to the nearest hospital even after Hlabela insisted that they find Kushi first, his wounds can wait.

"Do you know how we can track her down?"

Hlabela grunts, he's seated on the passenger seat, hissing in pain. He can hardly see a thing through his swollen eye, and he reeks of blood.

"I might know someone who can find her," he's

frowning.

How is Hlabela in love? Does this thing really exist? After everything they have been through, everything they have done together. He finds it strange that Hlabela's heart can still feel something for a woman.

"I can't let her go to India, ndoda. She's my life."
Hiabo!

It's that deep sir... feeling a bit uncomfortable, Ndleleni clears his throat. His focus is mainly on the road, his ears are perked due to Hlabela's words.

"What's it like?" The question is hushed, almost choking him.

"What?" Hlabela responds, as he wipes blood from his mouth.

"Falling in love." This is uncomfortable, he can't believe he's talking about this... thing. Hlabela has no answer for him, he is still trying to wrap

his scrambled head around Ndleleni's question. He glances over at him, maybe he will read him this way but finds nothing. Ndleleni gives that throat clearance a second round, his hands are restless on the steering wheel.

"I don't know, it's unexplainable." It is explainable, he would explain if his head was not pounding the way it is.

"But how do you know you're in love with this girl?" Ndleleni is digging.

"She's all I think about, life seems impossible without her." Hlabela.

Ndleleni is tiring, now is not the time to school him on love.

"Are you sure it's safe to love her after what happened that night?" Okay, that was unexpected. Hlabela's brows crinkle, he remembers that night. They have kept it a

secret, it's the shame of knowing what they did, what they took from the family.

Hlabela keeps quite, there was no reason for Ndleleni to remind him of the past.

"Guilt eats me up every night ndoda, I don't remember having a peaceful sleep." He's never spoken to anyone about this, perhaps Hlabela is the right person because he was his accomplice.

"Why are we talking about this?" Can't the past be left there, in the past? No one has ever brought it up, why is Ndleleni doing this now?

"I don't want to suffer anymore Hlabela, the truth is suffocating."

"But she made us promise never to say a word." He sounds like a little boy suffering from insecurity.

"She did and that was her manipulating us. We were kids, easily manipulated. Ma didn't care if

we died in that fire, remember who rescued us? Vukuzakhe... we would've died with Sakhile and Vimbela had he not been there."

Hlabela starts to think back, Dalisile has never played her part in his life. It's always been Vumile and his brothers.

"I don't know if you've noticed, we're free from her. We've been free for years and I think it's time we tell baba what happened." Ndleleni says, he's basically telling his big brother what to do.

"He will hate us, I don't think I can handle that." Neither can Ndeleni but he's got nothing to lose.

They are suddenly caught in silence, minds travelling to different places.

THE KHANYILES-

“Why do you kids do things without telling me?” Vumile’s chilly voice stings Vukuzakhe and Mathonga’s ears, the reason behind his anger is that Phumlani is on his way here without him consenting to it.

“That’s the thing baba, we are not kids.” Zakhe disputes. “If you don’t take action then we will.”

Vumile springs from the seat, he can’t have a moment’s peace in this place.

“Spare me please, I don’t want my brother anywhere near my son.” The warning in his voice is loud and clear, but this is getting old. Zakhe and Mathonga engage in a conversation with just simply looks, if they don’t stand up to this man, he will forever have his way and his way is indirect.

“If you don’t want to see him, then keep your distance. Phumlani is coming and it’s not up for discussion.

That's it, these boys should prepare his place of rest, buy him a coffin and choose the suit he will be buried in. His time is near.

Vumile sits back on the sofa, he leans over, elbows on his knees and head bowed. He's thinking, it's all he's been doing lately. His brain is tired and overused.

"I don't know what's going on between you and that boy," he's changed the subject. "It would be best if you send him to a motel or home to his family. He's not family and should not be involved in our family matters." Is this him saying yes to Phumlani's visit? It must be him saying yes, Zakhe is not entirely against it, as long as Funokuhle is not thrown out of the homestead.

"I can drive him to the nearest motel," the place where Mathonga gets this confidence comes

from Zakhe sharing everything with him.

“It’s okay, I will do it. You stay here and wait for Ntabezikude.”

Shit! The plan was to escape that, he’s not sure if he’s ready to see his father. His heart has not settled since Zakhe shared the news, the two saunter out of the living room, leaving their father sighing like a depressed man.

Funokuhle doesn’t protest at the mention of him staying at a lodge, this also helps him avoid drama.

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Less than an hour later, Zakhe is back. Dumile and Qinisela are here, fortunately, Qinisela was with Dumile when the call came. He seems to be the happiest of them all, he was always

against the banishment of Phumlani.

He felt Phumlani was not in his right senses to have done something so despicable, and to be thrown away like they don't have the same blood running in their veins was prejudice.

The meeting is held in the throne room, there is enough room here to accommodate everyone.

"Zakhe call your brother," a grumpy Vumile orders. Vukuzakhe looks at him like he's grown a pair of horns, his eyes browse around the room, landing on each person that's staring back expectantly.

"Is there a problem?" Vumile is snippy today, stress will kill him.

"I haven't seen Thonga since I came back," Zakhe's reply has his father heaving a sigh.

"He's probably around, call him ndodana." Says Qinisela, he's seated on a chair close to Vumile. There's been tension between these two since

that whole incident where Qinisela forced the truth out of Vumile, regarding Mathonga's identity. Zakhe takes his phone from the table, eyes are on him as he dials Mathonga's number. He meets the voice of a white man after a couple of rings, his eyebrows gather together. He sends his gaze to his father, Vumile is sweating, heart hammering in his chest.

"It's off, I'll go look for him." He stands and quickly dashes out of the room.

Vumile vigorously rubs his forehead, he's not sure if he's alive, or death has claimed him. He starts tapping his foot, if he were a little kid, he'd be biting his nails.

"Don't you think you're too dramatic?" Qinisela is starting.

What, is he planning on finishing him off? Vumile ogles up at him, eyes silently blaring with bitterness.

“Not now bhuti, I don’t want to end up saying things I will regret.” Well, that’s if he has that in him.

“You two need to bury the hatchet, what’s done is done. We can’t change the past, what we have to do now is embrace the future. The change that’s coming.”

Wise men like Dumile deserve all the beautiful things in the world, his words don’t reach Vumile on a good note.

“You people seem to forget that Phumlani is a crazy man, what sensible thing is he going to bring to the table?” His voice is starting to pick up, not a good idea considering they are all adults here.

“Phumlani is your brother...” Qinisela snaps, he is getting fed up of Vumile’s childishness.

“He took advantage of my wife,” he would take the word rape, but it stirs up the anger living

inside him.

“We’re not sure about that, it was makoti’s word against his. Phumlani was mentally ill, it was unfair for him to be dismissed without saying his side of the story.”

“What are you trying to say Qinisela?” Okay, first name calling is never a good sign. Dumile buries his face in his hands, he didn’t expect Vumile to be the first to throw in the disrespect card. Qinisela’s eyebrows look confused, he is raising and dropping them—all done in a space of a millisecond.

His flaring nostrils speak of the rage stirring up inside him, he clenches his fists under the table. If this piece of shit was not chief, he would have thrown a punch across that arrogant face of his.

“I’m saying, my brother is innocent till proven guilty, an investigation should be opened. We have to prove if makoti was raped or she cried

rape.” Yeah, the nerve is there, swimming in his veins. Vumile slams his hands on the table, fuming like a boiling kettle.

“Are you saying my wife lied to me?” That’s exactly what he’s saying, Qinisela would nod but he doesn’t want to jinx it. “Answer me, Qinisela.”

This man and roaring, thinking he’s a wild cat. He’s on his feet, so is Qinisela. Scorching glares on each other, Dumile finds this quarrel unnecessary, he sits back and folds his arms. One thing he is not going to do is chide two greying men who’s bald heads are in June, out here looking like Dr Phil.

“Vumile,” a small voice slithers into the room. His heart sinks and bounces back up, it’s thudding vigorously in promises of a heart attack. His anger transitions into a frown, he quickly turns to the door. Someone dial the

ambulance, the news reporters and Isolezwe; the chief is about to breathe his last.

“Phum...” he can’t bring himself to saying his name. Yellow eyes are staring back at him, bright with a hidden smile. The man is deathly thin, a tumbling mop of dreads heavy on his head. The clothes on his body look new, Ntaba must be responsible for that, he could’ve taken the man to get a haircut too.

“Vumile... i... is that... you...” This one stutters like Vukuzakhe, it’s been years, they have forgotten his speech impediment and his feminine voice. Like all of them, he is a giant.

“Is... that you... Vu... Vumile?” Tears...

The three brothers are standing in awe, twenty-four years is a long time to be away from home.

“Khanyile, Ntunjwa kaLanga, Mthiyane, Ndwandwe, Ngwane.” Qinisela takes their clan names, in gratitude to the ancestors for keeping

their brother alive. Qinisela nears Phumlani and hugs him like it's the first and last time, Phumlani panics, and pushes Qinisela off of him.

“Eh baba, wenzani?” Phumlani says, his eyes are popping out of their sockets as he points a finger at Qinisela.

“Touch me again and I will stab you, siyezwana?” He finishes.

At this, they hear a chilled laugh at the door—it's Ntaba, no one had noticed him since Phumlani had the spotlight.

“Don't touch him and you should be fine,” Ntaba alerts them.

Qinisela is not afraid for his life, he's happy his brother is here.

“Vumile... my bro... brother. Co... come give me

a hu... hug.” That took a minute, his arms are stretched out, there’s a smile on his face. Yellow teeth on show, he has no front teeth. No way is Vumile going into those arms, not after Phumlani threatened to stab Qinisela.

“Don’t be afraid Ngwane, give the man a hug.” A mischievous smile is dancing on Ntaba’s face, he leans against the wall, hands across his chest and anticipation in his eyes.

Phumlani is approaching Vumile, his movement is shaky. Vumile gulps nervously, he looks to Dumile for help and finds him smiling at Phumlani. Qinisela is not even an option.

Phumlani is too close, Vumile can’t escape when his feet refuse to do their job. Phumlani’s hand collides with Vumile’s cheek that he reels back but manages to hold on to a chair for balance. Shock visits every soul in this room,

except for Ntaba. He's laughing, lightly and heartily. He pulls a chair back, positions himself on it and sits back crossing his leg over the other.

"This is going to be fun." Ntaba announces to no one, the sight of Vumile rubbing his burning cheek is beautiful, he will never be able to forget it.

"What..." Vumile does not complete his question, a second slap has met his other cheek. This time he falls on Dumile.

"Phumlani stop," Dumile warns, trying to shield his brother.

"Don't meddle Babomncane, just watch." Ntaba dismisses, he's engrossed on Phumlani and Vumile's reaction to each slap. Qinisela and Dumile gasp when Phumlani grabs Vumile's shirt and start slapping him countless times.

"Ntabezikude stop him, Phumlani is not well."

It's not like Dumile to panic, he's worried for his brother who has been thrown to the floor by a crazy man.

"Don't worry, those slaps are not painful." Ntaba.

Qinisela's light bulb switches on, "You told him to do this, didn't you?"

"Why would I do that uncle?" The smile on Ntaba's face says he's guilty. Dumile runs to help Vumile from the floor, he receives a threatening stare from Phumlani.

"Wenzani?" Phumlani questions him, he's about to attack him when Mathonga and Vukuzakhe walk through the door. The big brother is holding Dalisile's hand.

"Great, everyone is here." Ntaba announces, shooting up to his feet. Dalisile shakes her head as her eyes fall on Phumlani.

"No, no." Her voice is loud, Phumlani freezes at the sound of it. Gradually, he turns and his eyes

almost leave their home. Tears swell behind them, fear has him by his hair.

“No, no.” He covers his ears screaming, worry visits Qinisela, he wants to move closer to Phumlani but is not sure if it’s safe.

“Why did you bring me here? Take me back, take me back now.” Dalisile commands Vukuzakhe.

“No one is going anywhere,” Mathonga seems to carry a certain authority lately, at the sound of his voice, people seem to tremble and obey.

“Vumile, she’s going to kill me,” Phumlani’s words collide against each other. He’s a stuttering disaster, he runs to hide behind Vumile and the chief flinches thinking he’s about to be slapped again.

Zakhe is not sure he heard right, the man spoke like him, his forehead welcomes a few lines as he scrutinizes Phumlani under his confused

gaze.

“How could you be so cruel Vumile? You know what that man did to me.” Dalisile is yelling above normality, if she’s not careful, they’d think she’s the crazy one. Vumile can’t answer, he is still trying to pull himself together.

“Your husband has nothing to do with it,” Ntaba says, standing from the chair. “I brought uncle here, my sweet mother.”

She sneers at him, this one has comebacks from hell. She has never tried to challenge him, he’s a demon child, as Mgobhozi would put it. Dalisile ignores him and turns her murderous gaze to Phumlani, their eyes clash. It doesn’t take a genius to see that Phumlani is terrified of her, he’s shaking like a leaf.

“Wena!” Dalisile points a finger at him and that fuels the lit fire, Phumlani shrieks, he drops to

his knees, and crawls under the table. His brothers are confused by the happenings, they know he lost his mind, it's the fear of Dalisile that's confusing them. Shouldn't Dalisile be the one who is recoiling at the sight of Phumlani?

"He's afraid of you?" It's more of an observation than a question uttered by Mathonga, Dalisile scoffs, nothing in this world will ever get her to like this boy.

Her life is a mess because of him, she should've aborted him when she had the chance.

"So? He's the not the first man to tremble before me, I am a queen." This is said with pride, her voice tingling with menace.

"Cut the arrogance Dalisile, your time is up." She hates that he speaks to her using that tone, as if she has no choice but to conform. "This is a

trial, your sins are going to be brought before you, before baba decides your punishment.”

He’s still talking? If Mathonga knew how much she loathes him, he would keep his mouth shut.

Dalisile clicks her tongue, she guides her feet towards Vumile. The closer she gets, the louder Phumlani cries. No one has tried to console the poor man curled under the table.

“Tell that boy not to talk to me, Vumile. All of this is his fault, I became a different person because of him. Tell him not to speak to me.” She states, and where would she leave the arrogance?

“What do you mean it’s Thonga’s fault? He’s done nothing to you mother, all his life he tried to impress you, to get you to notice him. You deprived him of a mother’s love.” Vukuzakhe.

Dalisile swivels dramatically, eyes stopping on Vukuzakhe. She pats her messy cornrows, to do

away with whatever is crawling on her scalp.

“Being his mother was not my plan, even if you paid me with all the money in the world, I never would’ve acknowledged him.” She laughs.

“You don’t deserve to be a mother Dalisile, how can you be so cruel?” Vumile says, he is recovering... shame!

Dalisile turns back to him, laughing like it’s the funniest thing she has ever heard.

“Cruel?” She utters, the smile on her face transitioning into a grimace. “Have you gone to bed with an empty stomach? Have you ever begged for food on the streets and have people ridicule you for being poor? You can’t relate Vumile because life has been good to you and your past generation, do you know where I have been weVumile? Do you know what I went through to get to where I am?”

“What does that have to do with Mathonga?”

Vumile yells back, he wants to understand her situation, her struggles but first, he needs to understand why a mother hates her son.

Dalisile claps her hands, letting out a loud cackle.

All of a sudden, her mouth opens, her tongue starts working and words pour out with no hassles, seemingly uncontrolled.

“He threatened my future as queen, as a wealthy woman. My sister saw it coming, she saw him coming and the power he will possess. I hated him before he was born, so I tried to get Vumile to hate him, and when nothing worked, I had to come up with plan B. I wanted him to agree to send the boy to my sister once he was born.”

Dalisile scratches her head, glaring at these people who have turned their backs on her. How can they do this to her? She deserves

better than this.

She backs away, regarding Mathonga with a glare from hell.

There's a stretching silence, everyone is growing impatient.

"What was plan B mother?" Zakhe breaks the silence, Dalisile heaves a sighs, she is taking time to process everything, Vumile raises an eyebrow at her sudden silence.

"Phumlani was a better option because of his condition, I knew he couldn't stand up for himself. So, I made Vumile believe that his cousin raped me."

Gasps!

The silence is back, it has brought an elephant. Dalisile lowers her eyes, suddenly feeling ashamed at how these people are staring at her.

"What?" Vumile murmurs, his feet are wobbly as

he trains them towards Dalisile. She folds her arms, and claims her haughtiness back.

“The boy is your son, Vumile. I lied okay, but I didn’t mean it. It was the only way to send him away, if I knew you were so soft, I wouldn’t have wasted my time.” Her voice lacks compassion, her face lacks emotion. She has the demeanour of a person who has nothing to lose.

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A/N: Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Sixty-eight

Sponsored by Ntandokayise Gqokoma

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NALA-

The purpose of this dinner was for Thobani's sake, he needed to be out in public. Liyana suggested it. I don't want to lie, I had fun. She is a cool person to be around.

"It would also be a good chance for you to meet my friend," there's this friend she won't stop talking about. I'm eager to meet the woman she speaks highly of.

Sethu and her daughter Asanda tagged along of course, Thobani needed a companion. They have grown close, although five years apart. Asanda is a smart little girl, very naughty but lovable too.

"I think I should take Asanda home, it's getting late." Sethu introduces, patting her daughter's back. She's snuggled on her mother's chest,

falling in and out of sleep. We're still here because Liyana's friend had something to do.

We're waiting for her.

"You can go sis' Sethu, I'll drop Nala home."

Whipping my eyes, I meet Liyana's, they resemble a question. I guess I can wait a while longer.

"I don't mind, please take Thobani with you. I will tuck him in when I get home."

The boy clings on to my arm, "No Nala, I want to stay with you."

He can be paranoid, he is afraid that one day I will leave him like Thabani did, therapy is serving him good though. He can speak and accommodate strangers like Sethu and Styles. It's been easy for him to get along with five-year old Asanda, children find it easy to befriend each other.

"How about we get some ice-cream before we

go home?” Sethu comes to my rescue and Thobani seems to love the idea, for the first time in a long time his eyes glimmer with excitement.

“I love ice-cream a lot,” he must think he is not included. Laughter is heard around the table, he shies away by hiding his face on my chest.

“If you go with aunt Sethu and Asanda, she will buy you a big cup of ice-cream.” The smile on his face is precious, mission accomplished. Sethu heads out with the kids, leaving me alone with Liyana.

“He’s going to be okay, you know that, right?”
Liyana.

My eyes dash to the exit, they are out of sight. A smile crawls to my mouth, I trust Liyana’s words. She and her husband are gifted, I happen to think it’s beautiful. Also having

someone you can trust on your side is a breath of fresh air.

“I know, he just needs some time.” Hopefully not much.

“And you? Are you going to be okay?” Shouldn’t she be able to tell? I can’t find the answer to her question, my life has a missing puzzle and I am yet to find out what it is.

“I don’t know,” I shrug, looking away from her penetrating gaze, she is always trying to read me.

“You just need to let go and you will be fine, let go of your brother too... the one that passed on. Allow him to rest in peace, he’s just a baby.”

Why is she making me feel guilty? My eyes run around the crowded restaurant, eyeing people coming in and out. I can’t help but wonder if they are facing life problems like I am, things seem to be okay from my view.

“Can we not talk about him please?” I’m never in the mood to talk about Thabani, what he went through in the hands of Petros; I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. Liyana nods, she lifts her glass of juice and quenches a thirst. Her eyes are on me, unblinking.

“Would you rather we talk about your father?” She leans over the table, watching me as if I would disappear with just a blink. Shivers rush down my spine, a lump forms on my throat.

“I can’t talk about a man I don’t know, I don’t remember my father.” The only face I remember is that of the twin’s father, he was like a fly, there one minute, gone the next.

“Your mother didn’t have a picture of him?”

Why is Liyana digging so much? And the funny thing is that I’m entertaining her, as much as I don’t want to talk about it.

“No,” I say, gulping down the apple juice in my

glass. I need a refill.

Liyana is smiling at me. I'm about close to asking her why she keeps looking at me like that when a loud voice pierces through the restaurant, calling her name.

It turns heads, mine included. I see a beautiful woman swinging her hips towards our table, the smile on her face throws me into the lake of jealousy. I want to be this happy in life, I guess happiness is not for everyone. She wears the patches on her skin so flawlessly, I think her condition is called vitiligo. I had a friend in primary school with the same patches, her skin pilled off leaving her light in most places of her body.

"Babe!" Liyana stands, and throws her arms around her. That's it, money truly buys you happiness. Looking at Liyana and her friend, I

see nothing but happy black women who are content with life.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Kenneth wanted me to fill in a questionnaire as to why I have to go out.”

Liyana laughs at her friend’s explanation, her eyes dart over the lady’s shoulder. I didn’t notice the tall dark man behind her, he’s standing like a statue, unapproachable and pokerfaced.

He kind of reminds me of Styles, probably the darker version of Styles.

“Zitha is lying, isn’t she?” Liyana is asking the man, he shrugs and emits a low chortle that rumbles not far but enough for people near us to catch and turn their heads.

“Why would I lie? He won’t let me move without him, why do you think he’s here with me?

Please ask him why he is here with me?” The way the lady rolls her eyes makes me want to

laugh.

“I think you failed the questionnaire, that’s why Kenneth is here.” Liyana replies with a soft laugh, his name is Kenneth? It’s a funny name for a black man, he was probably born in the stone ages. But I can’t really tell with that chiselled face, his fine jawline and dear heavens, there are no wrinkles on his face. His black is probably the kind that does not crack. His eyes drift to mine, he’s caught me staring. His face does not move, flinch, or twitch. He’s a corpse.

I need to be buried as soon as possible, why am I not looking away? I fight my eyes and send them to the table.

“I also couldn’t stop staring the first time I saw him, you’re trying to figure him out, right?” I hear Zitha say and shift my eyes to her. She’s smiling down at me, and I thought Liyana’s flawlessness had me feeling insecure, this one makes me want to join groups on how to look

like a woman. My tomboy body needs to go.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare.” I find myself saying, I guess I was trying to read him.

“This is her,” Liyana interjects taking my hand to bring me up. I don’t know what’s going on, but I let her control me. Zitha’s eyes are on me, mouth slightly open, Kenneth is staring as well. His stare makes me want to hide, it’s too deep.

“Wow!” The blow leaves Zitha’s mouth, things are getting weird, and I am lost.

“I told you she looks like you,” Liyana says. Who looks like who?

“What’s happening?” At some point I have to ask, can’t be standing here like a mannequin while they gawk at me.

“Who is your father?” The question comes from Zitha, I already told Liyana that I don’t know my

father.

“He left before I could get to know him,” I don’t care about him to be honest, he’s never been a factor.

“Would you believe me if I said we could be sisters?” Zitha is playing jokes on me, a dry titter escapes my chest. Looks like I’m the only one laughing, they are all gawking at me with wonder in their eyes.

“Tshilidzi you son of a bitch, look what you have done.” Zitha mumbles, unshed tears swaying behind her eyes. What’s going on? Who is this Tshilidzi?

THE KHANYILES-

Vumile does not resemble a man who received a few slaps from his long-lost cousin, nope...

not with how he's holding Dalisile's arm. Dumile and Qinisela are the only ones trying to pull him back, her sons have lost hope.

At least Mathonga and Vukuzakhe, Ntabezikude does not care one bit, a smile is resting on his face, he's back on that chair, enjoying what's happening before him. Taking a video won't be so bad, but then again, his mind works better than a video camera.

"Vumile let her go, you're forgetting who you are." Qinisela must be Hlabela's father because wow, his reprimand sashays past Vumile's ears, undeserved, deep down he knows he's wrong but who cares?

"I'm going to kill you, Dalisile." In a frustrated and raging voice, Vumile sputters.

"Yeah, I don't think so. I am your queen, what will you tell the villagers?" She scoffs, before Vumile pins her against the wall and clasps his

hand around her throat. She chokes out a cough, wincing with the sudden attack. She stares into his eyes for a minute, smiling.

“Who are you?” He’s astounded by her attitude, how she is not bothered by what is happening. He lets her push his hand off her neck, she clears her throat, blinking her long lashes to gain back her normal sight.

“I am queen, your queen, Vumile.” She’s forgetting a lioness, an untouchable rock.

Vumile snorts, fighting her is useless.

He looks over at Phumlani under the table, pain shoots through his heart like sharp darts. His brother was away from him for twenty-four-years, he was alone with no family to care for him. Vumile’s jaw clamps as he struggles to come to terms with the decision he made those years ago, deep in his conscious, he hears Phumlani’s desperate plalone

“Why are you sending me away, brother? Are you going to visit me? Where am I going to live? Please say you will visit me.” Phumlani cried like a child that day and Vumile turned a blind eye, anger simmering inside him.

“I banish you to a lifetime of isolation, away from your children.” Vumile lays down the command, eyes still on Phumlani. The only thing that has him turning to Dalisile is the sound of her mocking guffaw, Ntaba is laughing with her. A confusing moment that draws lines between Vumile’s eyebrows.

“You still live in the past, I see. You can’t banish me, times have changed Vumile. I’m not going anywhere.” She marches to a chair and lowers her body there, Ntaba is seated close. He taps her on the shoulder, Dalisile faces him and

frowns.

“You’re a fighter, mother. I love it, please keep it up. I’m inspired actually, and you know what, I think you and I would have made a great team. I have the coolest mother in the world.” He’s loud and derisive, Dalisile scowls and replies with a tongue click.

She folds her arms, and is so sure no one will move her from the chair.

“Maybe you are right,” Vumile nods to whatever she had said. “Maybe I can’t banish you from the village, but I can forbid you from entering the Khanyile premises. I can forbid you from ever meeting your sons.”

“No baba, speak for the others. I have found my muse,” Ntaba states, sending his father a wink. Vumile is not in the mood for his stupidity.

“Leave my house,” Vumile tells Dalisile.

“I think you should leave mother, you have done

enough damage.” Vukuzakhe adds, he’s standing next to Mathonga who nods in agreement.

“Thula wena,” Dalisile snaps at her son. “You don’t know what you’re talking about, lestabane.”

Vukuzakhe decides not to stoop to her level, keeping shut is best. This is their mother, if only she wasn’t the person she is, he would lend a helping hand and get her out of this mess.

“You’re not as strong as you make us think, Dalisile. I know you are crumbling inside,” Mathonga steps forward with these words. A frown pulls on Dalisile’s face, she gives him the dirtiest of looks before turning her head away.

“You can’t fight this, it’s pointless. You know that it’s over for you.” Mathonga continues, he slouches before her and stares up at her.

“I hate you,” she says, calmly. Her eyes though are filled with the hate she speaks of.

Mathonga nods, placing a hand on her lap. Her eyes react by softening, it’s against her will, uncalled-for.

“I know, but I forgive you. I hold no grudges against you, mom.” Now, what is this boy trying to do?

“Ngwane, move away from there.” It’s a warning from Vumile, he does not like the close proximity of these two.

“You ruined my life, I hate you.” At long last, emotion has found a way to her cold voice.

“I’m sorry, but I’m not sorry that I was born. Deep down, you are not a bad person. Life made you bitter and angry.”

How does this boy get her? He’s right on track. She finds warmth as she gazes into his eyes, and it riles her to infinity.

“Get out of my sight,” she snaps, slamming her hands on his chest. Mathonga loses balance and falls on his butt.

“Thonga lami!” Ntaba panics, jerking up to his feet. He’s not as fast as Dalisile who has her hands around Mathonga’s neck, she’s straddling him.

“You deserve to die, I hate you Mathonga. I hate you.” She screams on his face, saying his name for the first time in his presence. Mathonga is mostly focused on that, than getting the woman off him. Tears fill his eyes, she is his mother after all. He wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for her, forget that she has worked hard to send him back to where babies come from.

Vukuzakhe has found his way to Mathonga in a flash, he helps him up as soon as Ntaba scoops Dalisile up.

“No, let me kill him. I hate him, he has to die.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Ntaba seethes, he releases her and rushes to check on Mathonga. His hands cup Mathonga’s face, eyes checking for any marks on his neck.

“Are you okay, Thonga lami?”

Zakhe has asked this question already, but because he’s Ntaba, he has to make double sure.

“I’m fine,” Mathonga adds a head nod to assure his brother. He is pulled into a tight hug, one he tries to escape with a chuckle swirling from his mouth.

“I missed you Thonga lami,” Ntaba is too much, it’s so like him to steal the moment. This is about Dalisile and she is not happy that Mathonga is the one to receive all the TLC, she clicks her tongue and adds an eye roll.

“If you stop talking to me again, I will finish your

mother's job and kill you myself." Mathonga nods for the second time. "Be angry, but don't stop talking to me, or you will know me,"

"I hear you bhuti, now let go. It's getting uncomfortable and awkward," Mathonga complains, eyes smiling at his brother. Of course Ntaba has to place a kiss on his forehead before letting go.

"This is nonsense, I'm going to bed." Dalisile weee!

She turns without waiting for a reply and starts to stalk over to the door, someone grabs her hand, and rushes with her towards the door.

"Vumile, what are you doing? Let go of me." She's yelling, trying to stop her feet from moving. Vumile does not offer a reply but continues to pull her, she knows this is it. He is dragging her out of here, she snaps her head

back to see everyone staring at her.

“Vukuzakhe, stop him. Look what he’s doing to your mother, talk to your father please.” These are the last words she emits before Vumile shuts the door behind them, no one is certain how far he’s going to take her. Vukuzakhe is worried for his mother, it’s late and dark out. He hopes he will take her back to that room, at least she will have a roof above her head for the night.

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A/N: I know a lot of you are waiting for your favs, I haven’t forgotten about them. I need to cover up all loose ends to balance the story and not leave anyone out in the cold. The story is still about Mathonga, right? See you tomorrow, don’t forget to leave a comment, they are

precious to me although I don't reply to most of them, I see them all.

MATHONGA-

Sixty-nine

Sponsored by Thelma Boitsi Swana

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AMANDLA-

My head hurts, I try to move my body and pain shoots through me like a fast train. I can't recognise my surroundings, as I let my eyes move around the room. It's so ugly in here, red curtains and grey walls.

Wait a minute... red? Where is this place?

Whose bed am I sleeping on? What I can see

from my hazy view is the ugly red bedding.

What is it with this red? Panic tells me to get up, my body feels heavy— it takes a while to actually sit up.

I try to recall what happened before I blacked out, and everything comes to me as clear as daylight. My mother introduced that short man as Qhaga Mpanza, something pricked me when he shook my hand. I remember blood oozing from my palm, before I passed out.

I send my eyes to my hand, praying it was a dream. This bandage wrapped around it is proof that I was not dreaming, I'm in a nightmare and I need to wake up now.

I pinch my wrist, eyes clenched while pleading with God. Why am I not waking up? Where is Sabusiswa?

Thank God and the Holy Spirit that lives in me, I

manage to scamper down the bed. This is when I realise I'm wearing a satin, red night dress.

What the... Red is not even my colour.

Looking around for the dress I was wearing, I see nothing. There's nothing in this room but a double bed, and two doors. I am sure the one opposite the bed is the exit. That's always the case, plus it's bigger, exaggerated if I may add. I amble on the carpeted floor to get to the door, before I reach it, it swings open.

My whole body freezes at the sight of Qhega, he's changed into informal clothing. I don't pay attention to what he's wearing exactly.

"Zivelele, you're awake." He says, stirring the glass in his hand. The brownish liquid catches my attention for a very short amount of time.

His eyes are on me, which I don't get because my name is Amandla, not whatever he called

me.

“Where is my mother?” I’m going to give her a piece of my mind for leaving me here.

“She’s not here,” he replies too quick and sure.

“Where is she? Call her, I want to go home.” I’m losing my cool, I’m a woman who is good at this screaming game.

“Sabusiswa is not coming back for you, this is your new home, Zivelele.” What?

“What do you mean she’s not coming back?” I ignore the name, I’m more concerned about Sabusiswa not coming back for me.

“You belong to me now, we’re married.”

This is the funniest thing I have ever heard, he frowns as my laughter dances around him.

“Excuse me? I don’t even know you, and I’m sure I wasn’t out that long to forget what

happened today.”

He thinks I'm a fool, I see it in his smile. We're basically the same height, it will be so easy for me to slap that smirk off his face.

“We are married Zivelele,” he sniggers. “And that's your new name by the way, it's how things are done around here. New life, new name, new everything.” His voice is starting to annoy me, along with this thing he keeps saying and that ugly name.

“What are you talking about?” Jokes aside, and I need to breathe. Panicking will not get me out of this situation. He lifts his left hand, there's an Elastoplast on his palm, right in the middle. He rips it off, revealing a fresh cut, it's not that deep nor does it look like it hurts.

“A blood covenant, my blood runs in your veins now. Just a single handshake and we entered a lifetime of commitment, your soul belongs to

me. We are husband and wife, you're mine now."

No, that's impossible. This has to be a dream.

My knees are throwing in the towel, I try to protest, get them to listen to me but they throw me down. This man is smiling proudly.

"No, you're lying." I find my words, as stunned as I am.

"This is how things are done in my world, you are Mrs. Mpanza. I control you now, you don't belong to yourself anymore. Your mother gave you to me, in exchange for her life and the comfortable life she's living. Where do you think all that wealth comes from? Nothing in this world comes free, same as being my wife. You have a duty to fulfil but that's a story for another day. The appointed time has not come, yet."

My heartbeat fast-tracks as a tense feeling twists my stomach. Jesus, why have you forsaken me? Whose soul did I take for you to let the devil take mine?

“Don’t think too much, Zivelele. I will give you the world, if you obey me and do everything I tell you.” He’s shaking that glass again while ambling to me, I want to scream but can’t find my voice. I know it will fail me even if I dare try.

“My name is Amandla,” I correct the bastard, shooting daggers at him. I want to get up from my knees, show him that I am not weak. But turns out I am, I’m not as strong as I thought I was. My body is weak, I can’t find my strength.

“No, no darling. You are who I say you are, and your name is Zivelele. You don’t want to make me angry, trust me.” He spits, holding me the glass. Whatever is in there smells like a sewer, my insides swirl teasing my bile.

Unprovoked, my hand presses into my churning stomach, I clog my nose with the other. Nausea and disgust find a home in me, pushing me to throw up the contents of my stomach.

“Drink this.” He commands, I am not taking that. I shrug it away with one wave, it lands to the ground, staining the grey carpet. He shakes his head, disapproving of my actions.

“There’s plenty more where that came from, I can even give it you in your sleep and you will never know.” What he says scares me to death.

I make sure not to meet his eyes, I don’t know what he’s capable of. He turns to leave, one hand in his pocket and the other carrying the glass he picked from the floor.

“I want my mother, take me to my mother now?” I shout after him as he opens the door, he tilts his head to the side, showing me his side profile. I can see a grin pulling at his lips and I know

he's not letting me go. My whole being crumbles, I search for tears but can't find them. I'm too angry to cry. How can my mother do this to me? She should've aborted me.

KHETHIWE-

Ntaba is still not taking my calls, I tried to call him a couple of times today to no avail. I'm starting to worry, he's a man who is always there.

I would have loved for him to see me off, I prefer him over my father, actually.

He got here at the crack of dawn, or so he said. This man thinks I can't see right through him and his wife. After telling him about my supposed exorcism, he gave a million excuses for his wife.

I am done with family, this time I am doing me.

“Khethiwe!” I’m so close to clicking my tongue at the sound of his voice, a father cannot annoy his child this much. I choose to look out the window till we get home, he can talk to himself if he wants.

I’m starting to wonder if this drive home will ever end, he’s driving like a pensioner.

“There’s something I never told you, baby.”
What now, he’s going to force me to listen to him because I’m in his car? I should’ve taken a taxi, then again, they don’t come with pillows on the seat.

My father brought a pillow for me to sit on, yeah, yeah it was just a bruise but butt cheeks are one of the most sensitive areas on a human body.

“The day you were born, I received news from

your mother that she was in labour, so I had to rush home. I didn't have a car back then, we used trains. She was in agony by the time I got home, Ndimande was not available for me to borrow his car and he was the only one in the neighbour who had a car."

At the mention of Ndimande, my ears perk. I've always wanted to hear what the story is behind that man's smiling face.

"We took a taxi, we didn't know that our lives would flash before our eyes that day."

"What do you mean?" Curiosity does not belong to cats, his story is getting interesting. He steals a glance before taking his focus back to the road.

"The taxi collided with a small car, the accident caused major damage to the car. Somehow the taxi driver panicked, he asked us to get out and

drove off, leaving us stranded. Your mother had passed out, I was going crazy thinking she was dead. My biggest worry was you, getting you into the world safe. Her pregnancy was a risky one from the beginning, anything could've happened to you or her."

"I didn't know that, is that why she hates me?" I shuffle to face him as the car stops at a red light, and find him digging his nose. His sinuses must be acting up... still... disgusting.

"Your mother doesn't hate you," yeah right.

"What happened next?" I snub his statement, he will forever defend his wife and I am not about to entertain him.

His stern eyes are on me, reminding me of how strict he was back in the day. I'm exhausting him, I can tell by the sigh he exudes from his flaring nostrils.

"The road we were on was known to be very

empty, by the grace of God Ndimande happened to be passing by.” No, he must not involve God in his shenanigans. “A neighbour had told him that your mother had gone into labour and we were on our way to the hospital and...”

What? Hold it right there...

“Don’t you think that was too much of a coincidence? What were the odds of Ndimande appearing out of nowhere and rescuing you?” Please don’t tell me my father is naïve.

“Are you going to let me finish?” He chides, strictly. I have to compose myself and take a breather.

“I’m sorry baba,” black parents always want an apology, even for breathing the same air as them.

“To cut the long story short, he took us to the hospital. He made sure we were all okay, ran

around like a headless chicken to make sure your mother was given special treatment.”

I wish he was a headless chicken, that way I wouldn't have to deal with him.

“I owed him so much and when he proposed the marriage idea, I couldn't say no. I was too ashamed to deny his request. I owed him my life, three lives to be exact.” He says.

I happen to think he was too excited, I'm angry at him actually. How can he gamble with my life like that?

“So out of the three of us, you sacrificed my life instead?”

“Don't make it sound like that, Khethiwe.” His voice cracks, I don't care about his feelings right now.

“But that's what happened baba, couldn't you give him money? My life means nothing to you, that's why it was so easy for you to hand me

over to your friend.” I don’t usually raise my voice at him, things happen when I’m livid – and why is he still driving like a dead man? I don’t want to be next to him anymore.

“Khethiwe stop saying that, okay? You’re my daughter, my only baby girl. I care about you and your future.” Lies I tell you, it’s all they do, lie like it’s a trend. Parents are way too good at this lying thing.

“Then don’t let me marry Bahle, please baba. Give them their money back.”

“If I do that, I will be known as the man who doesn’t keep his word, what about my dignity Khethiwe? Is it not your job as my child to make sure I don’t lose it?”

This is a first for me. He misses the angry look twirling around my face because he is such a good driver who never looks sideways when

driving, unless necessary.

“Bahle is a good man, he will treat you right.”

“And who said I need a man?”

“You’re just angry, that’s why you are saying stupid things. You will grow to love him once you are married, give love a chance baby.” I gave love a chance once and it tore me to pieces.

My father thinks like my mother, and I thought he was the innocent one between the two.

“I don’t want to be with him, I hate him baba.” I don’t hate him, I’m just saying. I will get my way, come hell or high waters.

“You need to stop overthinking this whole thing, this is why you’re filled with so much anger and hating people who have done nothing to you.” He’s suddenly grunting, I have crossed the limit

of all limits. How can I not? This man is not hearing me, he refuses to hear me.

“I’m not going to marry him.”

“You will,” he spits too fast.

“I will run away,” how did I think of that? With folded arms, I keep my eyes on him to see his reaction and he is sweating.

“I will disown you.” He says.

“Fine then,”

He clasps his fingers around the steering wheel till his knuckles start to whiten.

“Why are you so stubborn Khethiwe?” He barks, but I’m not deterred whatsoever.

I guess I am my father’s child.

“You will marry into that family,” the second bark has me flinching. My father has not spoken to me in this manner since I came back home, what is that woman doing to my first

love?

I'm going to ignore him, he will talk to himself.
Who does he think he is, controlling my life?

My mother is home, with her sister-in-law and her nieces. Sono and aunt-Rebecca are the only ones who look happy to see me. I don't blame Amafu, sometimes I'm not happy to see me.

I haven't had time to sit down and rest my feet when I notice a suitcase at the corner of the sitting room, right by the door.

"What is that, baba?" I ask the man as he walks through the door and sways past me.

"Your suitcase," he says, shrugging his shoulders like it's a trivial matter. I know it's my bloody suitcase, but what is it doing in the living room?

I catch the looks of pity on Sono and Aunt's

faces, it stirs anger in me, I'm not sure I can control it this time.

"Why is it not in my room?" He looks over at me, then back at his wife. She's sitting beside him on a two-seater couch, staring impassively.

"You're going to live with the Ndimandes." My father says.

These wonders and not wanting to end, I have to cross my arms over my chest so I don't fall. My body is about to give up on me, my heart is beating a crazy beat and my head is spinning.

"Why are you forcing this?" The question is for both my parents, I should be asking why their brains are filled with water.

"We spoke about this, Khethiwe." Yeah hey, KaMandonsela has tricks, I applaud him—no, really, kudos to him.

Shutting my eyes, I try to catch every breath I need. I'm a dead woman walking, my parents have dug my grave.

I take one last deep breath, and glance over at everyone in here. They are seated, watching me standing at the door. They want to be a family without me, it hurts, but I will not give them the power they think they have.

"Fine, I will go." I announce, my voice trembling with each syllable. They are stunned, eyes popping out and mouths wide open.

"You will?" My father stands to hug me, what is he happy about. I have to fake a smile, he must be stupid to think this is what I want.

"Yebo baba, I will do as you say. Like you said, you owe them your life. I will give my life to Ndimande."

The smile on his face is priceless, he's

genuinely happy. That Ndimande bastard must mean the world to him.

“You’re making the right decision, khethiwe. Our prayers have been answered.” Look at this mother, since when does the devil offer prayers. I don’t spare her a glance, she makes me sick.

“Excuse, I need a glass of water before we leave.” I stalk to the kitchen, whispers break at my departure. These people do not know me, they named me Khethiwe in their sleep.

The bottle I need is right where I thought it was, so is the tiny box of matches. We have a smoker in this house, today Lethiwe’s smoking habits are going to come in handy.

Eyes are on me as I enter the sitting room, they are all looking at the bottle of paraffin I’m fighting hard to open.

“Khethiwe.” My father mumbles, this might be

the last time he's saying my name. "What are you doing?"

Pouring the paraffin over my body, that's what.

"Khethiwe you can't kill yourself, life is too much fun." Sono's statement doesn't move me, what is nice about life?

I'm drenched in paraffin from my head to my feet, it burns, I need to scratch but fight it.

"Khethiwe please, don't do it." Aunt Rebecca finds her voice, my mother and Amafu are relaxed. It's nice to know I am hated in this family.

"Who said I'm going to kill myself?" I ask, and cause confusion.

"But you..." Sono.

"I would never kill myself, I'd rather kill myself first." More confusion!

Let me make it clear to these hard heads, I pour the rest of the paraffin on the sofas, spewing some of it on these clowns. No one is safe here. My mother is shouting that I stop, she's talking to herself because I am not listening.

I throw the empty bottle aside and light the stick of matches.

"The only way I will leave this house is over everyone's dead bodies." I'm sure they understand this language, looking at their shocked faces, and fear on them, they heard me loud and clear.

"Switch that thing off, wena." Mom's lips quaver so beautifully, I'm loving how terrified she looks. She is a scaredy-cat, I love it. Sono and Amafu have cuddled up next to their mother, looking at me like I birthed Satan.

"You're a demon child, you need help." My

mother again, I laugh at her facial expression. If my fingers were not occupied, I would take a picture. "This child is evil baba."

"Then call the pastor bitch, the devil lives in me." Aunt Rebecca screams upon hearing my reply, they want possessed? I will give them possessed.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng...

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THE KHANYILES-

It's been a quiet morning, and a peaceful day.

Vumile is not home neither is Vukuzakhe. Ntaba didn't sleep here last night, he stands to his decision to move out.

Dalisile has been kept in one of the rooms, with tight security. Vumile's plans to oust her changed when he received a call from his son, Ndleleni. He mentioned something about the death of the boys, he didn't go into detail.

"I will explain when I get home," Ndleleni had said and that was enough for Vumile to keep Dalisile around.

Mathonga is in his room when the maid Zondiwe walks in carrying a glass of juice. He sits up from the bed, glaring up at the woman who is smiling down at him.

"Is this your room?" He asks, eyes narrowed. Zondiwe is confused, she found the door open and invited herself in... since the door was open.

“I’m sorry bhuti, the door was open and...”

Boring, he’s not interested in details, he wants to be alone.

“What do you want?”

“Mam’Nandi asked me to bring this to you, she said you might be thirsty.”

Nandi usually delivers food herself, she doesn’t make use of the staff.

With a smile on her face, Zondiwe places the glass on the table. She exhales softly as she turns to leave, but Mathonga’s stern voice stops her. She freezes, before facing him.

“Drink that juice,” it’s an order and Zondiwe has been working here long enough to know when the princes or chief command, you can’t deny them.

“Huh?” She’s looking at him with fearful eyes as he stands to tower over her short-self.

“I said drink that juice.” Zakhe or Ndleleni would have never repeated themselves, but because this is Mathonga and he believes in second chances...

“B—but the juice is yours sir, a—and I can’t drink from the royal cup.”

Mathonga crouches down to be eye level with her, “I’m giving you permission.”

That’s a tough one, pearls of sweat start to form on her forehead.

“I will lose my job, I can’t go against the palace rules.” She whispers, her voice slightly wavering as if she is going to cry. Mathonga studies her carefully, jaw ticking with irritation. He stands straight, towering over Zondiwe again. He can see how she trembles under his gaze, eyes rushing to the open door.

“You’re wasting my time, servant.” It’s not him, it can’t be him behind that voice. Never has he

ever called the workers 'servants.' They would testify to that.

Zondiwe flinches, whimpering under his cold gaze, and fidgeting with her fingers.

With shaky hands, she retrieves the glass, her eyes find Mathonga again. His face is hard, eyes daring and aura terrifying. Maybe it's because he is taller than her or his anger is radiating from the entirety of his body, intimidatingly.

Her lips part, ready to emit words but she is stopped by a guttural voice.

"What's going on?" Ntaba has just arrived, it takes one look from Mathonga to know that something is wrong. A frown etches on Ntaba's face, he lets himself in and stands next to Mathonga. He's confused by the girl with the

shaky hands and wobbling glass in her hand.

“Usisi randomly brought me a drink, so I asked her to drink it first.” Mathonga.

Zondiwe is not having it, she crumbles to the floor, dropping the glass in the process. A river is too small, she’s crying the entire Indian ocean, Ntaba is lost in confusion but Mathonga is spot on with what is happening. They don’t say anything but wait for her to give an explanation.

“I can’t drink this, sir. I’m sorry.” She wails.

“Why not?” Ntaba asks, already jumping into conclusions. He removes his hands from his pockets, eyes glaring.

Zondiwe drops her head, these two are killing her with their stabbing stairs.

“It’s...” she sucks in a breath, wiping her tears while at it.

“Khuluma!” Ntaba whisper-snaps, if a bull was

quick to anger, he is resembling it.

“It... it has... poison.” There should be a gasp... anyone? Ah, yes, they don’t react so dramatically.

“Uthini wena?” (What did you say?)

Funny how Ntaba has taken over the interrogation, Mathonga is watching intently, like he knew what was happening from the second she walked through the door.

Zondiwe’s cries elevate, too dramatic and too loud.

“She made me do it, I swear I didn’t mean to.”
Zondiwe.

“Who?” Ntaba asks, Mathonga shakes his head in disappointment. Yeah, he knows... he doesn’t walk alone anymore.

“The queen...” where are the dramatic sound effects, flashing lights and an Indian woman

with a shocked facial expression?

“I’m not going to force the truth out of you, spill wentombazane or face prosecution.” A threat from Ntabezikude, he doesn’t dish them empty and invalid. Zondiwe bows her head, crawls to Mathonga’s feet and touches them, crying like she’s begging for a promotion.

Mathonga steps back, disgusted and appalled by her mere presence.

“I was sent here by the queen’s sister to spy on Mam’ Nandi, they wanted me to get her panties and used pads. I couldn’t because she is a cautious woman, and I didn’t want to do it believe me. I’m sorry bhuti, please don’t do anything to me. I will go away from here, please, I have a mother who depends on me.”

“What about the poisoned juice, where did you get it?” Ntaba asks, ignoring her snorted cries.

“The queen gave me the orders this morning,

when I went to serve her breakfast. I bought the rat poison from the spaza shop, she threatened to expose me when I told her no... I didn't have a choice. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

They are not shocked anymore, Dalisile is capable of taking over the devil's throne.

There must be something about Mathonga that has these people confessing like they are under oath, Ntaba seems to think so. He glances over at his brother, a frown on his face.

"Why are you chilled about this? Didn't you hear what she said?" Ntaba.

"I knew what she did, I saw it the second she walked through that door." Mathonga doesn't even bat an eye towards his brother, he's glaring down at Zondiwe, wondering how a young girl allowed herself to be used like this.

"Permission to deal with her!" Ntaba is asking

nicely, he has plans for this woman, diabolical plans. This is his Thonga, no one touches iThonga lakhe.

“No,” sigh!

“Mathonga...” He’s not going to jump for joy at this, like what the...

“I don’t know if you heard, but lentombazane was sent to kill you.”

“Call the police,” Mathonga orders.

What Vumile would do is call the village elders and decide her fate, but this is Mathonga, he listens to his ancestors not his heart.

Zondiwe weeps, she’s playing with tears; this lady.

“Bhuti please, it wasn’t my intention, I would never...”

Ntaba grabs her by her braids, bringing her to her feet. A woman can’t be manhandled, they

are fragile and bruise easily. A scream erupts from the sister once Ntaba starts dragging her outside by her hair, Mathonga does nothing to stop him, knowing how he can be.

Immediately, the palace is filled with the screams of a woman. Like the buildings are on fire, people flock outside with curious eyes and hushed sounds filled with questions.

Nandi is out here too, curious as a cat. Perhaps it's a good thing Vumile is not around, he'd be telling Ntaba to stop acting like a hooligan.

"Ngyaxolisa bhuti, please forgive me." (I'm sorry.)

It's directed to the man who has her hair in his tight grip, Ntaba pays her no attention.

"Lalelani la, nonke." (Listen here all of you.)

He is addressing the servants, the ones that are

not present will hear from tittle-tattles.

“This man standing right there is my brother, my brother. Anyone who lays a finger on him will face death.”

Well... he is capable of taking a life, he's done it a number of times and enjoyed it.

The servants are in the dark, Ntaba has not said anything that explains the situation at hand.

They are watching, and waiting for more information.

“We give you jobs and a place to stay, and you thank us by plotting to murder us?” He is not shouting but his voice rumbles, it must be the hoarseness.

“This woman planned to murder prince Mathonga.” Prince who? Trust Ntaba to be dramatic, that's something he would never say.

A smile emerges and stays on Mathonga's mouth, either Khahlamba or Nomkhubulwane

have ordered him to remain calm, or are massaging his nerves so his anger takes a back seat.

“Now, I want you all to watch and learn what we do to traitors.” Ntaba yells across the grounds.

The servants gasp and share their views, a lot of them have been working here for years. They love these boys like their own.

Before he can speak further, someone throws a stone that lands on Zondiwe’s temple. She screams and falls to the ground, that was risky for them to attack with Ntaba standing in sight.

“Who threw that?” Mathonga’s voice is calm, his eyes though are heated.

No one has an answer for him, “Let her die.” A male voice materializes from the small crowd, Mathonga finds the man with his eyes. It’s the gardener, an elder he respects like a father.

“Cha baba, that’s not how we do things here.” Mathonga says, before looking down at a crying Zondiwe. The stone did damage on her forehead, she’s not bleeding but there’s a throbbing bump.

“Why not? She tried to kill you.” The same man says, angry like a father.

His colleagues agree with him, “Maka bulawe.” (Kill her.)

They shout in bolts of anger, music to Ntaba’s ears. He wouldn’t have it any other way, stepping away from her is him permitting them to do what they have to do.

More stones are thrown at her, a few are brave enough to come close and kick a lying dog. Her screams can be heard through the noise.

“Stop what you’re doing, that’s enough.” Mathonga will lose his voice yelling like he’s

performing at a school play.

“Let them be, mob justice is art.” Whatever that means.

Ntaba is always okay with someone dying, just as long as it’s not his family.

“No, I don’t want blood spilled in these premises. Abaphansi are against it,” Mathonga is starting to panic.

If Ntaba was good at it, he would roll his eyes.

“Get them to stop, we can’t taint their land with people’s blood, innocent or not.”

Ntaba huffs, “These dlozis are cramping my style, I don’t like this.” He retrieves a gun from his waist, and releases a single bullet in the air. It has Zondiwe’s attackers ducking and covering their heads as they scatter to different directions. She is left bruised and whimpering like a wounded animal, Mathonga heaves a sigh... that gun shot was not necessary.

Mathonga turns to Nandi, her face is cold as ice. The old Nandi would be screaming peace, this one looks done with life and humanity.

“Ma, please call the police.” At Mathonga’s request, she hurries into the house to do his bidding.

“I hope she survives prison, this is not something I will easily forget.” The warning, or could be a threat—is out there. Mathonga wants to ask what Ntaba means, but he’s walking away, to his car.

KHETHIWE-

I’m having a terrible day, the old folks of this house are not talking to me. I wish my brothers were here, Lethiwe and his disappearing acts are taking a toll on me, I have a feeling who he’s seeing is pregnant. I just hope that my brother

has not become a house husband.

I understand why he is never around, and why Phathiwe never visits or call. My parents are the definition of toxic, no one wants to be around them.

I have my room back, I had to force the twins out. If it weren't for the stunt I pulled earlier, they never would've agreed.

I'll be sharing my bed with their mother, which I don't mind. She's afraid of me, it's in the way she looks at me.

I'm starving, it's been hours since I locked myself in this room. No sounds have come from outside my bedroom door, I don't know if they are still around, or they've evicted.

My eyes clash with my mother's as I step into

the corridor, she quickly looks away. I'm offended, she really thinks I have a demon.

"I made an appointment with the pastor, we're seeing him tomorrow." She tells me and walks past me, I see she hasn't learned a thing from this morning's lesson.

"I'm not going," I reply and rush the opposite direction, her tongue lick follows me before she yells to tell me she and her husband are going to a church meeting.

"Your aunt is coming with us, don't burn my house down." She adds.

I'm too hungry to reply, hunger and anger make a deadly team, so it's better I shut up.

"In the kitchen, I find the cousins." Amafu cackles mockingly at my presence, Sono bursts out laughing, she comes and gives me a tight hug.

“Did you bath? You still smell like paraffin, unless you’re still going ahead with your plan.” I’m falling for my cousin, I love how light hearted she is.

I think I’m a little embarrassed, when I think back to what I did. But they deserved it.

“The water is cold, someone finished the hot water.” I know Amafu did it on purpose, it’s not the first time. She clicks her tongue and stands to stir something in a simmering pot, I’m not eating that.

“You know Sono, I have always known you are stupid. As to why you are promoting Khethiwe’s evilness, beats me.”

Now this girl... I’m ready to throw a comeback that will send her flying back to her father’s house when Sono beats me to it.

“I’m not a fool Amafu, I know evil when I see it and from where I’m standing, you’re the one

with a demon.” Oh, I like the angry Sono.

“Who are you talking to like that? I’m older than you, I will slap you wenja.” Amafu.

“Please you were born two minutes after me, and don’t forget I give as good as I get.”

“Yeyi, wena Sono!” Amafu pushes her sister, she stumbles back with a scream. I have to stand in the middle to stop them, I don’t want these twins fighting. I have seen their fights, they can get nasty.

“Please, I’m not in the mood guys.” I shout, it’s the only way they will hear me. “I’m having a bad day, I’m in pain and hungry.”

Hai! I can’t be taking care of them and my bleeding heart.

“I don’t see how that’s any of our business,” Amafu’s big mouth needs to be duck tapped. “You’re an abomination Khethiwe.”

Her cackles are pricking at my heart, I'm counting... and losing my patience by the second.

"It's how you're so ungrateful for me, your parents have gone to all lengths to give you a husband but you're so spoiled that you can't even be thankful to them."

"Take that back Amafu," I whisper shout, moving in on her. She's not afraid, maybe a punch would put her in her place.

"I'm not taking shit back, the truth hurts, right?"

"Amafu shut up, before you say something you will regret." Sono yells behind me, twin two should take her sister's advice.

"The Madonselas never get married, but you're out here acting like a queen denying a marriage proposal."

"Why are you lying Amafu?" I ask, curious about her articulation.

She steps back, places her hands on her hips. What irks me is the arrogant expression lain on her face.

“Twenty-eight years old and you don’t know why no man has ever proposed marriage to you?”

The cackle is back—this witch. “Lethiwe has two children from two different mothers, and I’m sure he is going for baby number three.

Phathiwe is living the life of a drunkard in Johannesburg, no child, no wife... nothing to show that he is a man.” How does she know about Pathiwe? He’s not really open and we hardly hear from him, so I can’t really speak for my brother. I can only hope that this girl is lying.

“And you Khethiwe, uyinyumba. At twenty-eight, you don’t have a boyfriend... let alone a child to shame the devil. The Madonsela offspring will never taste a life of marriage, no man will ever marry you sisi. Neither will you carry a baby in

that useless womb of yours.” (You’re barren.)

She concludes, dragging my frame with her ugly eyes. I could pluck them out, if only I had pliers.

“You’re lying, my parents are married.” All of this is making me upset, I shrug off Sono’s hand from my shoulder.

“Your father is the only one among his siblings, the rest are still wishing for it. Most of them are childless, like the three of us, Phathiwe included.”

I’m getting tired of Amafu, why is she scaring me? I’d rather not get married than not have a child.

If I die with no child, then that will be the end of me. I will soon be forgotten, I need an heir, someone who people will point at and say ‘look, that’s Khethiwe Madonsela’s child.’

“How do you know so much?” I turn to Sono, the look on her face attests that she is familiar with what Amafu is telling me.

“We overheard mom and aunt Alice,” I know aunt Alice, she is older than my father. Although she has fooled around, she has never lived with a man— not even for a month. Her womb is pure, she’s never fallen pregnant. You can spot her loneliness from a distance, I don’t want her life— I’d rather die.

I need a glass of water, I’m having a hard time processing this information. I can feel their eyes on me as I turn to the sink, I manage a sip, as thirsty as I am. My stomach is suddenly in knots, my air pipes are clogging.

I spill the rest of the water in the sink and clutch my trembling hands on the edge of it , head lowered.

“That’s not going to happen to me, I refuse to

be like aunt-Alice. Ntaba said he wants to be with me, I... I think he loves me, and he will marry me one day." I tell my cousins.

My words contradict with what I'm feeling inside, fear has moved into my heart. Hearing Amafu laughing turns me into an angry person again.

"You think we haven't been in relationships?" Amafu's enquiry forces me to turn back to them, she is staring back with mockery in her eyes. "Men come and go, they all seem interested until they are not. Even this Ntaba of yours will leave one day, he will forget you ever existed. It's not like you're worth it anyway."

"What is your problem Amafu? Why are you working hard to put me in a dark place?" A smile finds her face, I want to hate her so much.

I think I have enough hate bundles to use on her, she's a nuisance.

"I'm only stating facts, you're not special Khethiwe. Uzophelela ekhaya girl, awuyindawo."
(You will never leave this place.)

That's it, I'm tired of her curses.

"I told you to stop," I'm the one who's doing the pushing now. She's taller than me, a bloody giraffe, her body is immobile.

"Do that again, and I will slap you." Her hand is raised, ready to land on my face but the courage to do it is not there.

"You're lucky I don't throw punches Amafu, or you would be toothless right now." I get into her personal space, breathing down her long neck.

"She's not worth it Khethi, let her be." Oh, is this not the Sono who was ready to slap her sister no so long ago?

My hands are itching, desperate to slam against something, Amafu's face to be precise.

"Oksalayo, we're all losers. You're not better than us because you've tasted the prince's dick." Amafu barks, suddenly angry. I will not be disrespected by her, she leans back when I throw a slap and grins victoriously as I miss her scrawny face. She must thank that father of hers for her height, or else...

"You're going to pay for saying that to me," the only place I'm able to reach is her shoulder. I make sure to poke it roughly, she shoves my hand away, clicking her tongue in the process.

"KaMadonsela." What is he doing here? Who let him in?

Shame laughs in my face, I want to hide. This is the second time he sees this side of me.

I turn to see Ntaba standing in the doorway, a

scowl on his face and hands hidden in the pockets of his pants.

“Let’s go!” He says.

I’m not okay with that order, he goes missing without an explanation, and this is what he says to me? It’s taken a minute to realize that the room has fallen into a deafening silence.

“Where...”

“Let’s go, Peaches.” He cuts in, firmly. Who is he raising that eyebrow at? I’m about to protest when Amafu’s tongue click reminds me that she’s still breathing and standing next to me.

This is the part where I show her that I’m not cursed like she thinks, I shove my stubbornness and questions, and follow Ntaba to wherever he is taking me.

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A/N: We're doing this again in the morning, see you then...

Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-one

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VUKUZAKHE-

He wanted to meet up with her, it drove him crazy that she wasn't taking his calls. She is his wife, does it matter that he has fallen in love with someone else? He doesn't seem to think

so, he loves her, as difficult and impossible as she is.

Till death do us part can be a forever thing if both couples are in it for the long run.

Now he is here, at a restaurant... waiting for her. He is not used to be kept waiting, it irks him, time is money—that's the rule he lives by.

“Would you like a refill sir?” He didn't see the waiter coming, his mind is with Bongiwe, wherever she is. He glances down at his almost empty glass, another glass of Amstel lager would be a bad idea. He shakes his head and trains his eyes towards the entrance, time is moving slow, or fast... he's not sure anymore.

He thinks of calling her, to find out where she is, if she is still coming.

An incoming call from his father takes his mind off Bongiwe for a jiffy, he can't possibly imagine what Vumile wants. He rubs his forehead,

exasperated and answers the call.

“Come to your in-laws, there’s a meeting.” He is not sure he heard right, he’d laugh and call his father bluff if he had a sense of humor.

“I... d... don’t understand.” Nerves have him stuttering, dammit! Why does Bongiwe choose to be difficult?

“You heard me, get here now.”

The command doesn’t blend well with him, a grumble rings from his chest as he stands to exit the restaurant. Bongiwe should have told him that she was not planning on coming, it’s childish of her to stand him up.

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In twenty minutes, he’s in KwaShoba knocking at her door. A little girl opens for him, she says nothing and runs off into the house.

He knows his way around here, it's his in-law's house.

Taking a corner towards the lounge, he braces himself and stops when he sees his wife seated on a reed mat at the end of a passage.

Today she looks like the woman he met over three years ago, a dress, head wrap and no makeup.

Their eyes meet in an instant, she clicks her tongue shooting daggers at him.

He wants to ask her what she's done, why she didn't wait for him to explain. But Vumile is watching him, he can see him from here.

He is standing in the door way between the lounge and the kitchen, eyebrows knitted deeply.

The presence of her father makes him nervous, the man does not play where his daughter is concerned.

“Sit down,” the chief has spoken.

Zakhe finds a seat, eyes kept on his father in-law. Seriously, there was no need for this. He just wanted to meet up with his wife and talk over a light lunch, he was going to explain and tell her he will never stop loving her and that he still wants a life with her.

“Bantu abadala.” He salutes the fathers and uncles, there’s a discriminating reply. He doesn’t have to be told to sit, he clears his throat and settles down on one of the chairs.

“Vukuzakhe!” One of the uncles begins, his eyes are soft at least. “I believe you know why you have been summoned.”

Sure he knows, there are pictures of him and a man circulating the internet. His reply is a nod.

“What do you have to say for yourself?”

Bongiwe’s father queries, his voice shaded with

anger.

Vukuzakhe has nothing to say, he did not prepare a speech for this ambush. The words he has are the ones he was to utter to his wife, not these people who are never present in their marriage.

“We’re listening.” Vumile is a little embarrassed, he hasn’t been able to look these men in the eye.

“I don’t know how those pictures were taken,” there’s a pint-size carelessness in the tone of Zakhe's voice. The men are dazed by his attitude.

“You’re sleeping with men, Vukuzakhe and this is all you have to say to us?” The father scoots to the edge of the couch, a black look aimed at his son-in-law.

“I’m not sleeping with men, baba. It’s just him, I love him.”

Abomination! That’s what their gasps shout,

one of the uncles stands to his feet, a headshake at play.

“What level of disrespect is this Khanyile?” He’s asking Vumile. “Is this what you meant when you said you will take care of our daughter?”

Vumile is speechless, he can’t speak for his son. He too has no clue why Vukuzakhe is the way he is. The uncle sits back down after bab’Mabuza tells him.

“It was never my intension to hurt uMabuza, she is my wife and I love her.”

“Nonsense,” the same uncle. He’s the eldest of the three, blunt as a fisherman’s knife and candid as an A student, he knows how to make this living room small for Vukuzakhe.

“Is this how you define love, by spitting on our daughter’s face?” He adds.

“I didn’t expect this from you of all people, you’re the eldest Vukuzakhe. What example is

this? What are your brothers supposed to learn from this nonsense?" Frankly, it's none of bab'Mabuza's business.

Irritation finds Zakhe where he is seated, it squeezes and tightens his chest.

"Say something Vukuzakhe," Vumile speaks. "How are you going to fix this mess?"

"There is no point in asking that, Khanyile. I want my daughter out of this marriage."

Vukuzakhe is sanding up, Vumile knows what's coming. His sons harbour anger, it's only a matter of time till all of them unravel. Vumile chides Zakhe with just a single look,

"I'm not divorcing my wife," he says, ignoring his father's heavy stare. "I want to extend my family, take a second life partner."

He is not asking them, and cares not about their shocked expressions.

Bongiwe peeks through the entrance. She's on her feet, unshed tears puddled around her pupils. A tear rains down her cheek, she swallows a sob and runs out of the house, banging the door behind her.

NTABEZIKUDE-

A world has been lifted off his shoulders, it happens a lot when he is around her. One would say it is love, and he would dismiss them without a doubt.

Not every beautiful thing boils down to love, he has never told a woman he loves her, he doubts he ever will. But there are things he would associate with the word, like her natural scent that embraced the inside of his car.

He would compare it to a light that chases away the bogeyman, today it has a foreign scent, a

strong smell of paraffin. He thinks maybe she was using it and had spilled some on herself. He would ask if it was a big issue.

“What’s wrong with you?” He’s been wanting to ask, he glances from the driver’s side, his eyebrows puckered up. She hasn’t said anything to him, she is just as upset.

He knows why he is upset with her, these fights that he keeps finding her in. What is her excuse for that pout and folded arms?

“Where have you been?” She asks.

His frown deepens, “I don’t understand your question, Khethi.”

He doesn’t, but he thinks she’s confessing to missing him. Khethiwe is silent a second, as if Ntaba should know why her lips are pulled up.

“You miss me when I’m gone, don’t you?” He’s

not being arrogant about it, it's just an observation. A smile surfaces on Khethiwe's face, it's normal for her to melt into a puddle in his presence.

"Don't be so cocky, it's ugly." Look who has grown some confidence, shyness is a disease and Ntaba is Khethiwe's cure.

"You're beautiful," the riposte is said absentmindedly, stolen from his deepest thoughts. He almost wishes to take it back, which woman has he ever thrown that word at? None...

Khethiwe's year is officially made, not even her mother can ruin this. Her mouth twirls and swirls into a smile, her mood changes as it should've the moment she laid her eyes on him.

"You think I'm beautiful?" Someone is happy.

Ntaba meets her unwavering stare as the car makes a stop at the traffic light.

He can't bring himself to understand why this word has made her glow like Johannesburg at night.

"You are right, I do miss you when you're gone. I also worry about you, don't stay away for too long." She whispers, then draws a trembling breath. He frowns because this is getting too deep, he thinks he likes her careless smile.

The car starts to move again, Khethiwe leans her head on his shoulder, risking an accident. He stiffens, clears his throat. Cuddling is nice until you want to scratch an itch. There is a long silence, he keeps his eyes on the road.

"You know, I was shocked to see you at my father's house." Khethiwe moistens her lips, and struggles to keep the excitement out of her tone. Maybe walking in without an invitation was not a bad idea, he wasn't thinking when he did that.

He had just arrived when he saw the parents leave, eager to see her, he rushed through the gate. The door had been left open, but because it's not his father's house, he knocked and waited.

It was a few minutes later when he decided to invite himself in, and was drawn by voices coming from somewhere in the house.

Khethiwe's voice was amongst them, and he needed to see her. That's when he heard the argument, he detests that she thinks she is a bullfighter.

"I can take you for boxing lessons if you like," he blindsides her with this reply. Khethiwe rips herself from him, and slams her back on the car seat.

"That's not funny," he never said it was.

"I don't like it when you engage in fights, you're

not from the streets Khethiwe. Why don't you try to be the bigger woman next time?"

He steals a glance, anger is found in her eyes.

"People provoke me, Ntaba, I'm not going to let them walk all over me." Her dispirited voice tickles his ears, maybe she's taking this the wrong way.

"What will you do when you have children?" Not the route he should be taking but... he continues.

"You're going to be a mother one day, what if it happens that someone provokes you? Will you fight them, in front of the children?"

"No," offense is there in her voice. "I will lock them in their room and beat the crap out of the person."

It's verified, she is from the streets. He is silent again, face exhibiting a furrowed brow.

“How is your behind?” He has been wanting to ask.

Her lips are parted, unsmiling but waiting to welcome a smile.

“Sore, but the jersey helps. Thank you for the consideration.”

She’s sitting on his hoodie, it was the only thing available to make her comfortable.

“So are we going to have sex today?”

“Huh?” He can tell by her response that he dribbled her with this question, a chuckle rolls from his chest.

“I’m horny, and I need to feel your warmth Khethi.” Need... the giant said need.

“You want to send me back to the hospital?” This is a nicer way of telling him she is not going to sleep with him, Ntaba rumbles with laughter. It echoes inside the car, the woman

beside him looks with adoration and a subtle twinkle in her eyes.

“Let’s get something to eat, then we’ll go to my place and have sex. I promise I will be gentle.” It’s possible that it’s all he’s ever thinking about, Khethiwe is defeated. She takes a vow of silence.

They make a stop at KFC, it’s not full so, they are out of the driveway in minutes.

“Are we going to the palace?” Her mouth is occupied as she asks, pap and two pieces of chicken are what she ordered.

“No,” he is not going to give a reason why they are not going there, and he is glad she’s not digging farther.

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“You brought me to a guesthouse to have sex with me?” She hasn’t moved from the door, antipathy has availed itself on her face.

“Yes,” he is telling the truth and that seems to annoy her more. He disappears into the bathroom to wash his hands. When he comes back, she’s still standing where he left her.

He is confused, the room is not dirty. There is no foul smell or anything that’s out of place, he looks at her, reading every flurry of emotion running through her head.

A smirk visits his mouth, it’s there to stay. He borders on her, his feet agreeing with every move he takes.

“Take me home, Ntaba. I’m not a floozy.”

He knows she is not, that’s why he whisks her in his arms and buries his face in her neck. The strong smell of paraffin pushes him away,

frowning.

“What were you doing with so much paraffin?”

Her arms are folded over her chest, she is not going to explain anything... so it appears. Ntaba walks them to the bed, kissing every inch of her body.

She’s melting, he can feel it. He drops her on the bed, and hovers over her body.

His hands cups her face, he’s gently stroking her cheek.

“This is where I live now, Khethi.” A need to explain has risen, yet he doesn’t say much. It only takes so little to appease a woman, her eyes reveal more than they should, they are the eyes of a young woman consumed by love—the eyes of virtue waiting to be yielded. No one would look at her and not be able to see that she is in love with the man before her.

“Let me shower first,” now she wants to give

herself to him. He's not complaining, this might as well be the best day of his life.

"That's not a problem," he says. They might get it on in there. He doesn't think he can wait anymore, he follows her to the bathroom.

He is standing behind her as he opens the shower after they have stripped naked, cold water takes first place, vicious drops hitting her body.

"Ntaba!" She screams, jolting back. She doesn't move that far, his arm is around her waist, grounding her.

"Sorry," he opens the hot water, and waits for it to merge with the cold one.

"Better?"

She looks up at him and shyly nods, he smiles at her innocence, letting his hands glide up to cup her breasts.

“Your skin is so soft,” he whispers into her ear before nibbling on it.

“I forgot to remove my bandage, it’s wet now and I don’t have an extra one.” Her breath is quickening, her eyes deny her of sight. She leans back, resting the back of her head on his chest.

“What about you Khethi?” These whispers... Khethiwe shivers. “I want you wetter than the bandage,”

That smile would be to welcome him, the acknowledgement is in her expression, long with the anticipation of something yet to come.

“Ntaba...” she chokes his name, body shuddering as longing and sensual tension come together and embrace her.

Their naked bodies press against each other, when he starts to turn her around, so she is

facing him, her eyes meet a frown on his face.

This is not his turned on face, he can't even fake it. Khethiwe would turn him on with just a touch, but now... now nothing is happening. His entire body is cold, his soldier is sleeping and it's starting to bother him.

"Kiss me," he's asking... argh shame... Khethiwe would never say no to that, her arms loop around his neck, parted lips meet. The kiss is slow, unrushed. His hand slips down to squeeze the butt that survived.

This is it, this should turn him on. It's dim, there's no one at home. Panicking is not his friend, but that's what is happening. It's frustrating that his rod is not getting up, it's up half of the time when Khethiwe visits his mind.

Ntaba pulls out of the kiss, he takes a step back, eyes on her naked body.

"What's wrong?"

“Nothing,” he lies.

How does he tell her that he is not hard for her, his dick refuses to acknowledge her?

“Khethi...” he murmurs, lifting his hand to touch her face. “I’m not in the mood today.”

Khethiwe stiffens and quickly scoots back, away from his touch.

“What’s wrong?” She asks, panicking. “You never say no to sex.”

Right on! Ntaba pauses, looking down at her body before bringing his gaze back to her face, his eyes searching hers.

“Nothing is wrong,” his voice has a quiet, final quality. “My mind is not with me.”

But his dick is not his brain... so...

“You finish up, I forgot I have a meeting to attend.” He’s kissing her again, fingers crossed that his erection will spring with excitement.

Nothing...

“Make yourself at home, I’ll be back.” He tells her after spotting her confusion.

In the bedroom, he changes into clean clothes. The door slams behind him after he steps out, he’s not angry but confused. This has never happened before, he is a man who loves sex, more with Khethiwe. What if something is wrong with his manhood? Where will he begin to ask for help? Where will he go?

He’s in need of someone to talk to, Khothama seems to be the right person—his brothers are going through their own things.

He’s rushing to his car, car keys making a sound in his pocket. Khothama is on the other side of the line, sending his greetings.

“I’m coming over ndoda, where are you?”

“I’m at the clinic with Zilile, but we’re almost done. Drive home and I’ll meet you there, step mom is visiting her family. You don’t have to worry about her.” He can do that.

4pm finds him at the house, the gate is not usually locked. It’s a good thing Khothama tied the dogs, he has a gun today... one move and Ringo and Cynthia will be going to dog heaven.

The kids playing on the streets open for him, he waves and drives in. The extra key is inside the flowerpot situated at the corner of the veranda, his first stop is the kitchen. In the fridge, he sees nothing that can put his mind in a better place. He’s looking for a distraction, something that will make him forget that his dick has fallen asleep.

He cringes as the thought visits him again, and grabs a bottle of beer from the six pack. The

liquid is bitter in his mouth, it doesn't stop him from taking a long gulp.

He doesn't consume alcohol, but he has seen men drowning their sorrows in it. Maybe it does help, he burps and finishes the bottle.

It's not really a bad taste but it's not something he would occasionally drink. A pair of footsteps are approaching, soft and slow. It can't be Khothama, that one stomps the ground when walking. Ntaba spins to face the entrance, his mood goes down the drain. She's smiling at him, eyes glistening with excitement.

"That's my stepson's beer," Thethelela says.

Khothama said she wasn't home, he wants to ask but that would be a meaningless conversation to engage in.

"I was sleeping when I heard your car pulling in," she's talking to herself.

Ntaba swooshes past her, with his beer. His

escapade is annulled by the hand she grips around his wrist, heat seeps through his body. His breath pauses as his dick twitches, coming alive.

Thinking it was a spasm of some sort, he twizzles back—their eyes meet and hold for a good second. His eyes team up with his cock, he is not thinking straight now.

Leisurely the windows to his soul move down her face to her busty chest.

His mind begs him to confirm this, pin her on the wall and go for a test drive. He folds an arm around her waist, pressing her body against his. It's crazy how fast his boner comes, making his erection strain against his pants.

There's nothing to the ravening kiss they share, he is a man who is out to explore.

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Please give me a boost for tonight, see you at 9pm.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-two

Sponsored by Angel Nkulu Khomo

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KHETHIWE-

I'm the girl who was ready to trade her vagina for KFC pap, I'm an idiot. Why am I even still here? That's right, I left my bag and do not have money on me.

It's late, the bastard is not home yet.

I would call Ntaba, but hey this genius also

forgot her phone at her father's house. I have to sit around like a bored housewife, waiting for her man to come home—it's past midnight... the least he could've done was call me.

Ntaba takes me for a fool, I can't be going around in circles with him.

The sound of a car outside gets me up, I don't know why because cars have been coming in and out of this place throughout the day. Not wanting to be disappointed, I decide to sit my ass down. I can't be dealing with disappointment at my age.

I stand with folded arms when he finally walks in, I don't know if I should be glad that he is still alive or stab him for having me worried for nothing.

"You don't pay me to breathe, Ntabezikude." A lump on my throat forces me to pause my

complaint, I don't want to cry but here I am, tearing up.

"Look what you're doing to me," I dab the tears away, they don't listen to me. "I told myself that I will never shed tears because of you, look at me now."

He's not saying anything, his head is slightly bowed yet his eyes are on me. A dejected look is seated on his face, I have never seen him this down before.

"Why are you crying?" What a stupid question?

"I'm hungry, you've been gone the entire day. I couldn't call you because I left my phone at home and this stupid place has no phone. Why can't I have peace when I'm with you Ntaba?"

It's when I take his name, do I realise that I have been shouting. He's staring, no emotion whatsoever.

"I'm sorry," it takes a real man to admit that he

has made a mistake. I secretly applaud him for that, but I refuse to let him know.

“Where have you been?” I need to know he wasn’t with another woman after what happened earlier.

“I was with Khothama,” he says.

I want more, I can’t keep letting him get away with keeping my heart on a hot grill.

“What if I don’t believe you?” I’m serious, I don’t have time to play house. I have cousins to prove wrong, and parents to shame.

“What?” He walks past me, drops the chicken-licken package on the small table, I notice a plastic bag from Spar beside it.

His feet are taking him to the bathroom, I’m sure he’s going to get rid of the evidence.

“Where are you going? We’re still talking.” I didn’t think he would stop, he tilts his head to

the side.

“I’m going to pee, do you want to join me?”

What is wrong with him?

The smell of Chicken is calling my name, I would rather focus on that now. I will ambush him when he comes back... He bought one box of Rock my Soul, argh Chicken Licken and their five chips. The Spar plastic bag contains Paninis and a two litre bottle of Sprite—my favourite.

When Ntaba comes out of the bathroom, I’m on my second piece of chicken. He’s rather too quiet, men like him are speechless when they have done something wrong. I don’t shift my gaze from him as he settles down on the bed and removes his shoes. That’s right, scratch that head Satan. I’m on to you.

“Is your head itchy?” I ask, letting my teeth play

with the bone in my hand. He looks up at me, and frowns. He is trapped in confusion, I'm going to burn this one.

"A little," he whispers, scratching the same spot again.

I nod in understanding, "That's what whoring does, you know. Her hands were probably dirty."

I don't know where this is coming from, what I know is that I'm willing to make him talk, tell me where he's been and why he's so quiet.

He is looking at me, narrowed eyes and shit. I'm upset, he should be on his feet telling me nonsense.

That's what Ntaba would do, he's a free spirit that talks and laughs at things that normal people don't find funny.

His lips part, whatever he was going to say dies somewhere inside him. He breaks eye contact and stands to take off his top.

“You’re hot aren’t you?” I ask.

The frown on his face lingers this time, he is looking at me like I escaped from a mental institution. The look on my face says I am waiting for a response, his head hesitantly bops. I have to feign laughing, I’m proving myself right, here.

“It happens when you’re sleeping around, your sins are burning you. How can you not feel hot?” He ignores me and lies down on the bed, I’m not letting him off the hook.

I’m hovering over him in a split second, his eyes are shut, arm used as a pillow.

I scan his body, maybe I will see something out of the ordinary. Women have that special power, we sense and see things men can’t see.

“Argh, you’re tired, aren’t you?” His eyes snap open at the sound of my voice, the scowl is there, deeper. He is getting irritated by me, I’m

pushing the wrong buttons.

“Is there something you want to ask me, Khethi?” He thinks I’m bullshitting him, that’s what I pick up from the tone of his voice and one wrong move will get me into trouble. Should I even care? I doubt it.

“Was she worth it?” I’m not usually blunt, but this man said he wants something with me. I can’t jump with him when he won’t catch me.

He sighs, as if things are okay. This gender is good at pretending, they have a master’s degree and all the degrees that are out there. This one is a professor, if he plays his cards right, I will be the one apologizing at the end of whatever this is.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” What did I say? He’s blinking innocently.

“I’m not going to play games with you Ntaba, if

this is what you're going to do to me, then let me go. Stop coming to find me, just leave me alone."

I can't find any honesty in his eyes, I can't find anything. He looks brutal, indifferent. It makes me want to give up, walk away from him.

My feet carry me closer to the bed, I position myself on the edge of it— far from him. We're looking at each other, I'm wearing my heart on my sleeve while he is... I don't know, I'm not getting anything from him but coldness.

"What are your intentions with me?" A girl must ask.

"I don't follow." He says.

Yeah, when has he ever followed?

"I made it clear what I wanted from the beginning and that is you. I don't play games

Ntaba, especially when it comes to you but you seem to have been playing games from the start." I know I sound like a guy, my father would be shocked. I'm looking for something here, a steady relationship. Amafu scared me to death today, I can't subscribe to the Madonsela curse. If that's a generational curse then it ends with me.

"Why are you talking like that?" The question is muttered inoffensively, yet resolutely. My heart jolts a beat, heat engulfs my body. He's the only man capable of making my body betray me, looking into his eyes is the same as signing my death certificate.

"Because I'm tired Ntaba, we're going around in circles like teenagers who don't know what they want."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Khethiwe. Plus, I'm not playing games." He scoffs, arrogance does not become him.

Although he wears it so flawlessly, I can't ignore how it annoys me.

"You are, Ntaba. It's all you've been doing and from where I'm standing, you are having hell of a good time." I snap, unintentionally. My God knows I respect this man.

His indifferent stare makes me breathless, I can't crumble, after working so hard to open this conversation.

"Watch your tone, KaMadonsela." He snaps, scooting closer to me. There is no regret or compassion in his eyes, nothing that reminds me that he is human and bleeds like the rest of us.

This takes me back to the day he gripped my neck and pressed me against the wall. This is the animal side of him, the side that wants to be in charge and control everything around, me included.

“What are you going to do?” Challenging him is stupid, I might not like the outcome. There’s that jaw clench, his stare is holding me hostage.

He chooses to ignore my question and stands, I stand with him and trace his footsteps to the door.

Oh no, he’s not leaving. I jump in front of the door, blocking his way. I’m a midget in front of him, his eyes are forcing me to stand down... recoil and let him do whatever he wants.

“We’re still talking, Ntaba.”

“If I wanted to date a guy, I would’ve. Don’t patronize me, Khethiwe. I’m not going to stand here and let you talk to me like I’m your child.”

I didn’t realise that’s what I was doing.

“Don’t you think you are being unfair? I’m here Ngwane, as per your request.”

He's smiling... what did I say?

"You called me, Ngwane." He grins.

I didn't notice, me and my big mouth.

"I'm not there Ntaba, can we please talk about this now. I need to know what you want from me, what am I doing here? Why do you want me with you? I can easily accept Bahle's proposal and..."

"I'd kill you." He interjects, and my heart cracks.

Fine, that's how he wants to play it. I don't see him changing, I'm clearly wasting my time. My heart is in turmoil as I spin and open the door, it's become windy outside. I don't have anything warm to wear, the only thing I have on is a t-shirt I borrowed from his suitcase and a pair of track pants.

His hand is on my bicep, clasping. It hurts, but bearable. I'm tired of bearing all this nonsense.

“Where are you going?” He asks.

“Take me home,” I would take a taxi if it wasn’t so late, my parents must be going crazy wondering where I am.

“Don’t go, please.” Again, that innocent mutter.

“I can’t stay with you, Ntaba. Especially now that I have realized the only things you’ll contribute to this relationship are threats. Do you know how that makes me feel? I am not your property.” I face him, hoping I’m sporting a bold look.

“You don’t respect me, clearly. Is it so hard for you to respect me, Ntabezikude?”

“I respect you, Khethiwe.” He mumbles, his hand claiming my cheek. I shrug it off, I always want his touch but not now. He shuts the door when I walk in.

“Then why do you treat me like I don’t matter to you? You don’t have manners, you do as you

please and are stubborn. Did I force you into this relationship? I left, you know that. I went back to my father and was willing to live without you, no matter how much it hurt. But you came for me, and made me love you more.”

These stupid tears are back, I shake my head and lift my eyes to send them back. But they want to be seen by this bastard in front of me.

“Usuyakhala manje?” (You’re crying?)

No, my eyes are peeing.

“Of course I’m crying,” I yell, swiping the tears away. I hate them for exposing me, the lump on my throat makes it hard for me to stop.

“I just don’t understand what I did wrong, you’re not making sense Khethiwe.”

He’s standing too close, he smells like the inside of his car. My nostrils do a little detective

work, searching for a woman's scent. He covered his tracks, or I'm insecure.

"I want you to treat me like your equal, show me that you want me with you. I'm not a blow-up doll you will have sex with whenever you're horny. I refuse to be disrespected, I'm not controlling you— I'm trying to build us. I need you to make a decision now. Are we in this together?"

He is frowning down at me for the duration of my unprepared speech, the outcome might make or break me. Stiffness engraves itself on his facial features, I can feel my heart wanting to leave my body and run out of here.

I'm following it, if that ever happens. My world comes crashing right before my eyes when Ntaba diverts towards the door, he's... leaving.

"Ntaba..." I breathe, shakily.

I want to scream at myself for being so

talkative and gambling with my heart, I will never see him again if he walks out the door. I take a step toward him, hand lifting to reach out to him. If he walks out on me, I am leaving this province.

He stops at the door and I hear a click... did he just... he locked the door. My ears are ringing as he faces me and for the first time ever, I feel his eyes on me. He's looking at me, not through me.

"I want this Khethi, I want you. I want us, I want everything you are willing to give." His hands are cradling my face, "You are my favourite person KaMadonsela. I'm sorry that I made you feel disrespected, I will never let you feel that way again."

He catches me off guard with an insatiable kiss, it lasts a second. Fear fills his eyes, it's that fear he was sporting in the bathroom before he

walked out on me.

He withdraws, creating space between us. What is with him? I know he loves touching my body, today he is different and distant. He pinches the bridge of his nose, blinking rapidly.

“What’s wrong Ntaba?”

I owe him, I want to pay back that pap and chicken.

“We don’t have to do anything tonight, let me fall asleep in your arms.” He says, pulling me towards the bed. I have to take my position after kicking off the shoes on my feet, and let him rest his head on my chest. He’s a heavy giant, I’m not complaining. I sniff around him, searching for the smell of sex and can’t find any. Ntaba walked in here with a guilty look on his face, I know something happened and I will find out what.

“You smell like chicken,” he says.

I happen to think it's better than paraffin.

"I didn't wash my hands," but I did lick them, can't be wasting spices by washing my hands. I hope he doesn't mind the circles I'm drawing on his head.

"Hold me, Peaches. I won't fall asleep if your arms are not around me."

This softness needs to be caught on camera, it's like Christmas—only comes once in a million years. I wrap my arms around him, my mind traveling to forbidden places. What did he get up to while he was away?

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Please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-three

VUKUZAKHE-

He managed to convince her to come home with him, her father was against it. He didn't care, he's not married to him but his daughter.

He walks into their rondavel, shoulders slumped and a dejected look on his face. It's a new day, too early in the morning, the roasters haven't stopped crowing, yet he is ready for the day. .

She's under the covers facing the window, he stands there for a minute, looking at her fragile body. He slept on the couch last night, she didn't want him touching her.

He takes his space in bed, shoes and all... wraps an arm around her and pulls her into him.

"Sthandwa sami," very rare.

Bongiwe snuffles, confirming that she is awake or it's her way of telling him to continue.

“Can we talk?” His face is on her neck, it’s been crazy long months since they have been in this position. If he must confess, it feels darn good.

“I want out, Ngwane.” Her voice is a tad bit husky.

“We’re married Bongiwe,” he reminds her.

“Funny how you forgot that when you were chasing that boy.” He hurt her with how he handled everything, how he is currently handling things. Turning back time is not even possible, but if he could, he would in the blink of an eye.

“I admit that I was wrong, I see it now.” Yeah! Bongiwe’s sigh surges through him, she has changed and somehow, he wishes she hadn’t. Can’t she be that old Bongiwe who complains and fights for everything she wants? It would make life easier for him.

“I didn’t do things right, I admit that as well. Please don’t go, don’t leave like this Mabuza.”

“Am I not enough for you Ngwane?”

“You are, you are more than enough for me.”

“Then why do I have to share you with someone else?”

How does he answer this? Yes she is tough but that does not mean she has a heart of stone.

“Look at me,” the magic word 'please' is kept away, however, his tone is respectful enough. Bongwiwe does not submit, tears have taken over her face.

“I want a divorce, Vukuzakhe.” She’s crying, Zakhe rises from his position, and kneels on the bed.

“Bongwiwe,” worry is there in his voice.

He places a hand on her hip, “Ngiyacela mkami, please look at me.”

Bongwiwe is listening, she hears him, she just doesn’t want to face him.

“My love for you is slowly dying, I don’t want you anymore Vukuzakhe. I’m tired of fighting for a man who has never fought for me.” She’s sobbing.

Vukuzakhe knows this is it, there is nothing he can say to change her mind. His sigh springs forth before he’s lying behind her and pulling her closer to him, leaving no space for side dishes.

NTABEZIKUDE-

“Don’t touch me!” He screams, bringing himself back from the dream world. He can feel his heart accelerating, nerves are kicking in. The back of his hand takes up the task of wiping the balls of sweat forming on his forehead.

“And then?”

Khethiwe is standing by his bedside, a question in her eyes. He cusses under his breath and quickly sits up. To avoid eye contact, he rubs his eyes.

“When did you wake up?” He’s asking without looking at her.

“Ten minutes ago,” she says, folding her arms across her chest.

He can tell she is upset from the tone of her voice, something he can’t understand. They were okay when they went to bed last night, she even made him confess to things he wouldn’t have.

Ntaba climbs off the bed, he’s doing everything to avoid Khethiwe.

“Were you dreaming about another woman?”
Khethiwe.

Women always continue from where they left off, and clearly this one didn’t have enough last

night... Ntaba thinks.

“I’m talking to you Ntaba.” That was snappy.

He steals a look, she’s staring with condemnation in her eyes. The staring contest holds for a minute before Ntaba takes his eyes to the suitcase he places on the bed. He’s picking something to wear for today.

“Why do you say that?” He’s left in his briefs as he strips off his track pants, after that dream he had, a shower would be nice.

“You were moaning in your sleep, someone was touching you.”

Ntaba breaks into soft chuckles, it’s forced and has a dash of nerves because Khethiwe is not far from the truth.

Thethelela was in his dreams, touching him and doing things that would make a man lose his mind.

“I was not dreaming about another woman, I was being chased by a dog.”

“But you were moaning,” she argues, moving to stand closer to him. His heart jolts, he’s heard that women can smell the truth. Not wanting to be exposed, he shifts a little.

“I was trying to scream for help, I don’t usually talk in my sleep Khethi.” That’s believable. “I’m going to take a shower.”

If he has to escape her the whole day, then he will. What has come over her? She was never this interrogative, relationships are too much work. He never believed in them and avoided them all his life. Khethiwe is making life difficult for him.

When it’s her turn to hit the shower, Ntaba takes this opportunity to get dressed, a call from Thethelela comes in just as he’s tying his shoe

laces. He ignores it like he did a million times last night, a message follows thereafter.

I know you'll be back, she will never be able to handle your high sex drive.

His jaw ticks as he reads the text, he clicks his tongue and deletes it. He is regretful, maybe if he slept with someone else. Why did it have to be Thethelela?

He's standing when Khethiwe walks out of the bathroom, the shape of her thick curves visible behind the white towel wrapped around her body.

"What?"

He's staring, it's getting awkward for her. He never stares without touching, he shrugs and

turns away.

“Are you done?” His question is like a slap in the face, he misses the hurt in her eyes caused by his silent rejection.

“Almost,” she mumbles.

He can feel her eyes burning his back and hopes she doesn't turn into that Khethiwe from last night, it's too early in the morning to be grilled.

“Why won't you look at me?” She asks.

Ntaba decides to play it cool, it can't be her fault that he is not feeling her anymore. He faces her, and invites a smile to his face. She returns an uncertain one, he can't blame her for it, really because he has been an ass.

“I am,” Ntaba.

“You're not looking at me, Ntaba.” She returns, confusing him.

“Unless I woke up cross eyed?”

Khethiwe does not find his retort funny.

“Something is wrong with you, and you’re hiding it from me.” An accusatory finger is pointed at him, irritation flocks Ntaba’s face, he is not used to being grilled.

In his irritation, he finds a way to her, “Don’t be that girl Khethiwe, it doesn’t suit you.”

His hands are all over her body, caressing and squeezing. His favourite parts are her love handles, she giggles when he touches those spots.

“I’m worried Ntaba, you’re acting different. It’s scaring me, I don’t want us to end.”

She’s suddenly crying, he thinks she’s playing with tears a lot lately.

“There’s so much going on in my family, I’m not myself.” He is half right.

There goes his phone ringing again, they both turn to the table where the phone is spinning in small circles.

“Are you going to take it?”

He would answer Khethiwe’s question if he wasn’t annoyed, he feels horded... it’s getting hard to breathe.

He quietly clicks his tongue when he sees Thethelela’s name flashing on the screen, Khethiwe will want to know who is calling. That’s how these relationships work, but he is not ready to go fully in, neither is he used to explaining himself.

“I’m going to get breakfast, I won’t be long.” He grabs his keys from where his phone was and plunges them in his pocket, he’s working extra hard not to look Khethiwe’s way. However, he sees her from his vintage view—she’s not

moving but looking at him.

“Khethi,” he says, eventually glancing over at her. “Thank you for being here.” It’s better than nothing.

She has no words for him, just two nods. He wraps his arms around her waist, hides his face in the curve of her neck. Jeer these tight hugs...

“This is where I would rather be, Peaches. Don’t ever forget that.” He whispers ever so gentle in her ear.

“Is it safe for me to say I love you?” She asks, he laughs and kisses her cheek.

“Come back soon, I’m sure my mother has told the whole church that I didn’t sleep at home.”

What does he say to this? If she permits him, he would take care of her mother the way he takes care of everyone who scratches him the wrong way.

“Kiss me goodbye KaMandonsela, hao ntokazi.” His hands are cupping her cheeks, a smile on his face. Khethiwe has become shy, she’s flapping eyelashes and drawing circles on the ground with her foot. Ntaba notices and entertains her with a low laugh.

“Ithi mbah phela!” (Kiss me.)

His lips are slightly brushing against hers, before he takes them into a slow, ghost of a kiss... lips barely touching.

In this moment, Khethiwe becomes exceedingly needy. Her arms are tight around his shoulders, face buried on his chest.

“What’s going on?” He knows what’s going on, this is one of the ways she expresses herself. She is a touchy person.

“This feels like a dream, Ntaba.” It might as well be one, he reserves his answer.

A brief kiss on her cheek and he’s out the door,

rushing towards his car. The sun is out, but it's a little windy. His lips quaver while he rubs his hands together to keep warm.

The dream he had about Thethelela haunts him more than what occurred last night, a man does not cheat and tell. It is better that Khethiwe knows nothing, lying is not rocket science for him, he does it so effortlessly and proudly.

He can lie about where he was last night and what he was up to, he can lie about not sleeping with Thethelela and get away with it.

What he's not sure he can fight is the urge to tell Khethiwe that she does not turn him on anymore.

He hasn't been naked in front of her since the shower scene, a good idea because his sleeping dick will surely sell him out.

In the car, he decides to call his cousin. He has some apologising to do, after Khothama caught him pounding his step mother.

“Sfebe sendoda.” (Man whore.)

Ntaba winces, sure he messed up but reminding him is cruel.

“I said I was sorry, give me a break ndoda.” He did explain himself last night, how he didn’t feel anything when he was with khethiwe but one touch from Thethelela woke every living thing in him.

“Sorry for sleeping with your dead uncle’s wife or for failing to keep your pants zipped?”

He's a track pants, wearing bastard, sir...

Khothama’s throwback stings, if it were someone else saying this, Ntaba wouldn’t care.

“So what, are you going to let this come between us?” Ntaba asks, he’s joined the main

road.

“I’m not the one who...”

“This is getting boring Khothama, I did apologise, didn’t I?” His voice jumps along with his last nerve. “I want nothing to do with Thethelela, but she won’t leave me alone. Please get her to stop calling me.”

“Fix your own mess, ndoda. I want nothing to do with any of this.” It’s so foreign for Khothama to throw him under the bus, but it’s okay. He’s Ntabezikude Khanyile, he knows how to make things disappear.

“The woman is insane, I don’t know what my father saw in her.” Oh! He’s team Ntaba now...

“What did she do now?” Ntaba.

“She changed her relationship status from widowed to in a relationship.” Khothama exposes but Ntaba is not there. He couldn’t care what Thethelela does, as long as it doesn’t

involve him.

“Okay, that’s nice.” Translated— ‘I don’t care.’

“She changed her profile picture and put your photo.” Khothama is laughing, he truly finds this funny. This one is caught in confusion, he’s not on Facebook so he wouldn’t know what that means. He waits for his brother to stop being a nuisance and explain what is happening.

“Now all her Facebook friends think she is your woman,” that should be enough explanation.

“She’s crazy, I never gave her that impression.” All he did was touch her and kiss her and bury himself inside her—nothing to print and place on billboards.

“Am I the only one who finds this odd? It hasn’t been six months since bab’omncane died and she’s flashing a new relationship, a non-existent relationship.” Ntaba.

“You’re not, my suspicions stand. Thethelela killed my father, it’s unfortunate that I have no way to prove it. We need to get to the bottom of this.”

Ntaba hears his cousin, but... “My life is a mess ndoda. Let me fix things then we’ll deal with that witch.”

There is an understanding between them, Khothama has a baby on the way... his hands are also full.

“Yeah, the Khanyile name is all over the place lately. Zakhe and his boyfriend are famous.”

“Koti?” Ntaba knows that Funokuhle is around, with how messy his life has been, he hasn’t had time to speak to Vukuzakhe.

“Who is that?” Khothama.

Ntaba takes no notice of the question, he’s fallen into a stream of worry. So much is going on with his family, one problem births another.

He makes a U-turn, taking the road leading to the palace.

“How did this happen? How can I be so careless?” His focus is lost that he misses a stop sign, he is driving faster than he should.

“I don’t understand why you are blaming yourself.” Ntaba can hear the confusion in Khothama’s voice.

“My brothers are my responsibility, I’ve always been taking care of them. I don’t want them suffering Khothama.”

A green light stops his speeding, the car halts with a screeching sound, earning him a couple of hoots from cars around him, he doesn’t bother with them.

“What about me? You’ve never cared for me like that.” Khothama twists the topic.

“I need to fix this, Vukuzakhe is a businessman. This scandal is going to destroy the company.”

The company means nothing to him, he's proven that over the years. It's his brothers he cares about.

"Too late, investors have started pulling out, if you're going to be unfaithful to your wife, do it privately. Most investors are family men, do you think they will continue working him after this scandal?"

Khothama is right, it will take a miracle to fix this damage.

"I have to go, I'll call you." Ntaba says, taking off in high speed again.

"Calling is a good idea, I don't want you anywhere near my house or I will feed your balls to Cynthia and Ringo, sfebe."

Khothama will never let him forget this, Ntaba will need to bribe him into forgetting lest he spills in front of Khethiwe.

"Don't worry, as far as Thethelela is concerned, I

am a blind man.”

Fingers crossed and pants zipped up...

MATHONGA-

Seventy-four

FUNOKUHLE-

Lately I haven't been able to go twenty minutes without fighting back tears, I'm starting to hate it here. I haven't spoken to Vukuzakhe since he booked me into this lodge, he would text asking if I'm okay— that's it. I don't know what's going on with him, it scares me to think he would detach from me.

His parents don't like me, what if they got to him?

I deactivated my social media account, I knew joining Facebook was a bad idea, I did tell Zitha

that I wasn't interested but she thought I needed to join the world and be normal. None of this is normal, private pictures of me and Vukuzakhe are all over Facebook.

Today I plan to visit my father's grave, I was going to do it with Vukuzakhe but he's not available. I'm not sure if he will ever make himself available, my patience is running thin.

The sound of my phone ringing fills me with excitement, it must be him. I have it in my hand in a split second, and in that same space of time, my spirit drops as I see Zitha's name on the screen.

"You move back home and forget your friend?" She's loud, like usual. Her voice cheers me up though.

"I'm sorry, so much is happening this side. I haven't had time to do anything."

“How are things? Have you been to your father’s grave?”

“I honestly don’t know, Zitha. At this point, my future is unclear.” I tell her, trying not to sound the way I feel.

“I saw the pictures, I’m sorry babe.” Yeah, so am I.

“What’s done is done.” I let the sigh I’ve been fighting fall out, the tears are close, but I’m able to keep them at bay.

“Who would do such a thing?” I hate being pitied, it makes me feel like an attention seeker.

“Can we schedule this call for later? I need to be somewhere.” I should not be lying to her, she has been nothing but kind to me.

“Wait, did you hear about the teacher?” There is a sense of urgency in the tone of her voice, I can’t fathom what she could be talking about. The only teacher I know is...

“Pule?” My heart is not meant to jump like this, I chide it, sending it back to its home.

“Yes, he was arrested for statutory rape. The freak was having a sexual affair with a fifteen year old. Turns out the girl is expecting his baby and she believes they are in love. Her parents were not having it, I don’t know how they found him because he was in Kenneth’s custody.”

Zitha’s voice starts to fade out into the background, I guess I’m shocked. I never really forgot about Pule, once in a while he pops by in my head, and torments me with the past.

“Listen, this is between you and me.” She pulls me out of my thoughts with her hushed voice. “I think Kenneth and Vukuzakhe set him up, I mean what are the chances of the girl’s parents finding a man who was kept hostage in a different province.”

“Can they do that?” I ask, scratching an itch on my arm. I would give the credit to Kenneth, he is a dark man. Zakhe appears dark around the edges, but I can’t see him harming anyone.

“Sweetie, those men can do anything.” She says, pride painted in her voice. “Are you going to testify? I think it’s a good idea, Pule belongs behind bars.

He does, there is no doubt about that. I’m just not sure I would like to see him again. It has taken a lot for me to accept that he is not who I thought he was, Pule was like a drug I couldn’t get enough of. I was addicted to him, I could see no future without him. Seeing him again will take me ten steps back.

“I’ll think about it,” I probably won’t.

“Do that, I have to go babe, Dlozi is giving me a headache.” I like how she is forever complaining.

“Uh! Okay, thank you for the call.”

Zitha’s timing is impeccable, someone is at the door. I get my feet tapping, thinking it’s Vukuzakhe and... I’m looking at a young, black woman standing at my doorstep, her portable body is tucked in a black and white lady suit. My eyes decide to be rude by drinking down her appearance, the cornrows on her head look brand new and tight as hell. She has a very simplistic look, neat straight-back... perfectly ironed formal clothes. What’s missing is that ‘stop nonsense’ wedding ring you see on ‘Our Perfect Wedding.

I don’t know what she is going for with that smile on her face. I don’t return it mainly because I don’t know who she is.

“Hi, Funo.” My... she knows me. Her hand is stretched out, I don’t take it... Who is she?

“I’m Dr Banami Fakude, a criminal profiler.” Her teeth parade behind full lips.

“I didn’t do anything, I’m innocent.” I defend myself, you never know with these things. The lady laughs.

“Relax Funokuhle, Vukuzakhe sent me here.”
First-name basis?

“Why? What do I have to do with a criminal profiler?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to confuse you. I’m a forensic psychologist, I work with law enforcement agencies, but I also provide one-on-one therapy sessions for my clients.”

“I’m still lost,” I say.

Amusement plasters on her face for a good few seconds, before she is gesturing that I let her in. The room is not that spacious, I show her a chair just not far from the door which she accepts with a wide smile.

“I don’t know if you’ve heard about Mr. Shabangu’s arrest, he’s under investigation.”

Huh! So this is what this is about? Pule?

My entire face changes, a need to be safe swamps my being and that has me hugging my arms around me.

“I want nothing to do with that man.” I inform the lady, does she know what he did to me? What he put me through?

“And that’s okay, we don’t have to talk about him. You can tell me about yourself” The smile on her face grows.

I see where she is taking this, she’s hoping I slip and mention my past with Pule.

NTABEZIKUDE-

The gate slides open making way for his car, he spots a few servants bustling around the grounds. Among them is Zamangwane, he doesn't fight the urge to click his tongue when he sees her talking to one of the herd boys, she's too close for comfort and it appears the two are engaged in a lover's quarrel. The car screeches, coming to a stop in front of them.

"Bhekile, wena Bhekile?" The relentless man-killer roars as he sprints out of the car, leaving the door wide open. The man in question is staggering back, eyes wide and lips quavering as he fights with syllables that refuse to leave his mouth.

"Mhlo... mhlonishwa..." (Boss.)

Shu! That was close, his voice is still there.

"What are you doing with my sister?" Anger takes over, he clutches his hand around

Bhekile's neck.

"Bhuti let him go," Zamangwane tries to pull Ntaba back to no avail, he is a brick.

"I... didn't do anything." Bhekile grumbles, fear has gone away, making space for anger. No man likes being manhandled by another man, there are days when Ntaba lacks respect for people.

"Don't tell me nonsense, I know what I saw." There is a good reason he is so defensive and overprotective, I mean his sister got married stealthily.

"Bhuti stop, I just needed his help that's all." Zamangwane allows tears to rain down her face, her brother is now grimacing at her, his curious scrutiny meeting her bloodshot eyes. Her t-shirt is worn inside-out, she appears run down and a bit out of touch with what's around her.

Observing her every whimpering move, his

brows crumple at how she's trembling.

"Help with what?" Ntaba pulls his hand back, his gaze lingers on Zamangwane. She lowers her head as she starts biting her nails.

This is a chance for Bhekile to keep a safe distance between him and his boss.

Because he can't trust her anymore, Ntaba turns to the herd boy and says, "I'm listening."

Bhekile grits his teeth, "I was passing by when she called me. She wanted me to call one of the Sangweni boys."

They are men actually...

This is not good news to Ntaba, it's his turn to grit his teeth.

"You don't learn do you?" He is disappointed in her, it's written all over his face.

Zamangwane is hurt but there is nothing she can do to erase the disappointment on her

brother's face. The need inside her is deep.

"What do you want from him?"

Hello, they are married.

Zamangwane's eyes glow with inquisitiveness, a smile twitches on her features but doesn't fully grow.

"You'll call him for me?" The girl wants to know but her query angers Ntaba, Vumile just had to let her out of her room. Maybe keeping her locked up is not such a bad thing.

"No," he has more to say but the unshed tears in her eyes stop him.

"I'm thirsty bhuti," she confesses under a quavering breath. The girl is scratching her body as if her skin is tormented by ants.

"Please tell Mfundo to bring me the juice." She grovels, pulling his arms, desperation visible on

her face. “Just a taste bhuti, and I won’t ask anymore. I promise I won’t ask again, tell him to make me that juice.”

Ntaba can’t be entirely sure what is going on, hence the cold look he regards her with.

“Tell him I’ll behave, please. I won’t drink more than I should.”

“Zamangwane?” Ah, there it is.

He thinks he gets what she’s talking about, but there is a need to dig deeper lest he jumps into conclusions.

“What juice is that? Do you drink alcohol?” His hands are on her biceps, he’s trying to get her to look at him. Zamangwane would, if she wasn’t too fidgety.

“No,” she pushes herself back, away from his tight grab. “Mfundo says alcohol is bad for me, so he prepares a special drink.”

The way she says this while biting her nails makes her look like a sulky child, Ntaba's anger knows no bounds. His sister is perishing right before his eyes, he can't resist pulling her into his arms.

"Does this mean you'll get the juice for me?" Her face is hidden on his chest, her arms hanging loosely on her sides.

"No, I'll get you something from the kitchen."

"No, it's not the same." She pushes him, panicking. "You don't understand, his juice is special. It gives me so much warmth and makes me feel good. It chases away the voices in my head, I just need one glass bhuti wami."

No, not his sister. He's on the verge of impatience, as he growls under his breathe.

"Are you on drugs?" Ntaba.

The question almost suffocates him to death, this is his little sister.

“Are you insane?” Not something you’d ask your big brother. “I’m not like that, I would never do drugs and why are you asking me these dump questions? You’re so mean.” She stalks off, away from his line of sight. Ntaba watches as she scurries into her room and bangs the door behind her.

Where to go? He’s conflicted, does he go after Zamangwane, or find someone around here. These people live here with this girl and none of them have noticed her strange behaviour.

He finds Mathonga and Nandi in the kitchen engaging in a light conversation, he stands at the door and frowns.

“When last did you see Zamo?” He interrupts their conversation, he is not easily angered. The Ntaba they know would have walked in here singing one of his old, boring songs of struggle.

Nandi shrugs, she is currently not on speaking terms with her daughter.

Ntaba walks a little further in, he leans against the edge of the table where Mathonga is seated.

“I don’t want to talk about that child, she...”

“Zamangwane is on drugs ma,” Ntaba cuts in.

The news has come as a shock to Nandi, this child is trying to kill her. When did she become so unruly?

“That’s impossible, Zamangwane wo...”

“Mfundo has been giving her a special juice, she was desperately asking for it just now. She looks like a junkie, I have never seen Zamo that needy. Kanti ma, when last did you see her?”

It’s not like she was spending time admiring Vumile’s face... Nandi has been wallowing in sadness, a lot is sitting on her shoulders. She’s having a hard time carrying the load. Maybe if someone had offered a hand, just maybe she

would've seen how disconsolate her daughter has become.

"Ma?" He's raising his eyebrows at his future stepmother, clearly demanding answers. Nandi uses the edge of the cooktop for anchor, her knees are forgetting how to hold her legs steady.

"I ca... can't... breathe" It's only a matter of time, she is human after all and not Wonder woman. Mathonga rushes to her side, he helps her to a chair.

"I'll get you some water," he offers.

"Are you okay?" Ntaba asks.

She has to teach herself how to breathe, till her lungs are normally pumping air.

"I don't understand what I did wrong," Nandi hides her face in her palms, letting the kids see her vulnerable and defeated. "God is punishing me for something, Zamangwane is a child. Why

is she being crucified for my sins?”

She leans back on the chair, hands on her head and teary eyes skyward.

“I knew there was an agenda behind marrying Zamo, ma that man is old. He has kids and a wife, he trapped our Zamo and she fell for it. I’m certain that he has been drugging her without her knowledge.” Ntaba is crouching before her, his tall build does him no justice, he is still a tad bit taller than a sitting Nandi.

“But... could it be that she’s been starving herself. That’s why she looks...” Nandi.

Ntaba has to disagree, “I know a druggie when I see one.”

“Then something has to be done, we can’t sit back while things fall apart.” Mathonga chirps in.

“Something will be done, alright. I’m going to kill

him I swear to God, I will kill that man.” Such solutions are not a biggie for Ntaba, eliminate the problem so your enemies don’t plan your murder.

“I say Mfundo should be summoned, he needs to come here and tell us what he did to her.” Mathonga suggests.

Ntaba makes an annoyed face, he goes through his thoughts for a second then he smirks.

“That bastard is disrespectful, let him come here. I swear he is not going to leave this place alive.”

“Bhuti, I understand your anger. You have every right to be angry, but the time of spilling blood is over.”

Boring... he refuses to agree with what Mathonga is saying.

“Says who?” Ntaba questions, killing is a hobby he enjoys. What will he do with himself if it’s

taken away from him?

“Your ancestors don’t like what you do Ntaba, as it is you reek of blood. Your hands are stained with it, it’s all they see on you. ”

Mathonga.

Bloody hell, “That’s nice, it’s so like them to come after so much damage has been done and dictate our lives.”

Ntaba inclines his head, a childlike smile unveiling his face. Mathonga can talk for all the ancestors, Ntaba’s selfish side won’t let him care.

He kills because it makes him feel alive, he feeds off of the fear he sees in his enemies. No dead person will tell him how to live his life, he’s not denying their existence, nor is he giving his life to them.

He is simply god himself, fate bows before him and the devil follows in his footsteps, not the

other way round.

“No one is going to tell me how live my life, if they don’t like the smell of blood then they need to stay clear of me.” Pride wraps around him, most of the blood in his hands is the blood of the people who hurt his family, he’s proud of the work he’s done and nothing will change that.

“Ntabezikude!” Nandi can’t be shocked now, can she? The man is infamous in Izingolweni, ask anyone about a certain Ntabezikude and they will tremble in their boots.

“I’m only relaying a message, no one is trying to change you bhuti. You don’t belong to yourself, the Khanyiles have come to claim you, to claim all of us. It’s only fair we accept them and do as they say. How will they protect you when they hate the way you smell? No offence.” Mathonga argues, his voice is practical, his face undeniably calm.

“Hao, kanti cha khululeka, none taken.” (Don’t worry.)

Ntaba runs a line between his brows as his eyes burn into his little brother’s, tension hovers. It’s not Mathonga he is challenging, it’s the stubborn woman who lives in him. The one who is almost similar to Ntaba, perhaps she will understand that he is an untameable beast.

Ntaba pops the fridge open, it’s not even a week since he moved out and they have stopped stocking Mageu. A banana is what his eye catches next, it will do. Khethiwe suddenly visits his busy mind as he peels the fruit, he promised the lady breakfast.

“I need to go, I have throats to slit.” Did I say his mind is busy? Poor Khethiwe gets to share a space with the likes of Mfundo’s dead body.

“Ntabezikude!” Mathonga’s authoritative voice

startles him a little, he's smart enough to realize that Nomkhubulwane is close by.

Disposing of the half eaten banana into the trash can, he cradles Mathonga's face and smiles widely.

"Tell them I'm going to need them to cover their noses, their son is craving for blood and I'm afraid it's about to stink in this place."

He's an animal, he'd fit in perfectly in the jungle. Mathonga dodges the kiss that's headed for his forehead and shifts to move away from him, and that has Ntaba frowning. He washes the frown with a soft chuckle.

"Don't be offended Thonga lami, the underground residents can be dramatic. Qinisela is forever slaughtering in their honour, none of them complained about the smell of blood." He goes to bid Nandi goodbye with a kiss.

“Nothing will stop me from eliminating my enemies, even in my grave I will still spill blood. Please Thonga lami, tell them to kindly stay out of my way.”

Frustrated and browned-off, Mathonga shakes his head. It’s hard to believe Ntaba defies the ancestors in the same tone he might threaten his enemies with.

“Zamangwane will never forgive you if you kill that man.” What Nandi should rather be saying is “bring me his head on a silver platter.”

“She’ll get over it,” again, he gives no fucks.

“Vukuzakhe!” They hear a sharp scream coming from the lounge, the voice belongs to Bongwiwe. With no words, everyone runs to the living room. They find Bongwiwe seated on the edge of the couch, balling her eyes out. There’s a second voice, dominating over many background voice,

they derive from the TV screen.

The headlines read 'KHANYILE HOLDINGS ON FIRE!!!

“No, oh God no.” Nandi cries, her hand slowly pointing at the TV screen. “Yo... your father and Vukuzakhe had a breakfast meeting with the board members.”

Nandi presses a hand on her chest as she feels it curving in, she holds on to the armrest of the sofa and lowers her body on it.

Bongiwe looks over at them, tears have made her face a playground.

“The reporter said everyone is trapped inside, no one has been rescued yet. He’s going to die, Vukuzakhe is going to die.” Nandi swiftly pulls her to her chest as the young wife wails for her

husband.

“What the hell?” Ntaba clenches his fist, his nails digging into the palm of his hand. “How did this happen? Don’t the elders show you everything?” He’s talking to a distraught Mathonga.

With a deep inhale of a breath that’s infested with uncertainty he answers, “Not everything, or I would have seen this coming.”

“Dammit!” Ntaba sputters, taking his anger out on the innocent couch by throwing a punch. Things are getting out of hand, his family is off limits. Be it his enemies or ancestors, his family is off limits.

Upon their departure, Bongiwe insists on going with them while Nandi is told to stay behind and keep an eye on Zamangwane.

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A/N: My apologies for the delay... please like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-five

MATHONGA-

“Mathonga drive faster.”

Bongiwe should have stayed back, or taken her own car. I don't mean to, but between her loud cries and her telling me how to drive, is sending me to the brink of insanity.

“I'm trying to get us to the hospital, not the mortuary.” The frustration in my voice is palpable, our eyes clash in the rear-view mirror. She rolls her red rimmed eyes and looks away, sniffing.

“Look, I understand your frustrations. No one

here is calm but you don't see us biting your head off." That came out wrong, I was trying to pacify her. I hear a tongue click from behind, I won't read much into that. She's not thinking straight, none of us are.

Well... I don't know if I should speak for Ntaba, he's too quiet for an extrovert.

"Ndoda, are you okay?" I ask.

He nods, not removing his gaze from out the window.

"They are going to be okay," I think they are. The ancestors can't be so cruel, taking my brother and father after I have accepted whatever it is they want me to do.

"I know," a flat response which births shivers down my spine. I know this brother of mine, baba and Vukuzakhe are the last thing on his mind right now.

Stealing a glance at Bongwiwe, I come back to

Ntaba after noting that she is far in thought.

“Whose murder are you planning this time?” I ask.

That smirk slowly forming on his mouth brings a sense of mischief.

“I’m not telling you shit, you have more than two ears.” What’s that supposed to mean?

“Should I be offended?” I’m not really offended, Ntaba is his own person. We figured this out when he was a teenage boy, he hates being told what to do and follows his own rules. God knows what’s going to happen when the ancestors start demanding things from him.

People answer questions with shoulder shrugs lately, that’s alright.

An abrupt hazy feeling of exhaustion hits me,

my eyes flicker into darkness. I force them open, and terribly fail.

“Bhuti,” I can hardly recognise my voice, nor make out the word that just left my mouth.

“Mathonga, drive carefully.” Bongiwe scolds, I don’t pay her any attention. My main goal is keeping my eyes open, the road ahead has become darkness clothed with heavy fog.

“Stop the car,” my brother says, I can’t see him anymore. I can’t see a damn thing but this heavy mist before me. I feel hands lace over mine, the person is trying to control the steering wheel—to stop the car.

“Oh my God, I don’t want to die.” Bongiwe’s frantic.

What is going on, can’t they see what I’m seeing?

“Thonga stop the car,” I hear Ntaba’s voice again.

Why am I not able to stop? In the midst of the fog, a figure of a woman emerges in front of the car. Time seems to slow down, everything around me ceases to exist.

She's looking straight at me, it takes a minute for me to recognise her.

"MaCele?" I manage to voice out, shocked and afraid I might run her over. I grind my teeth, a soundless curse coming through them as I direct the car away from her. The wild steering causes tire squealing, a bounce or two that scares the shit out of me. At this point I'm thinking death, I can't imagine myself in a coffin—buried six feet underground.

"Mathonga!" Bongwiwe's screams bring me out of what I guess was hallucination. I gain control of the car and manage to stop it. My first instinct is to check if everyone is okay.

“Are you insane? You almost killed us.” Bongiwe doesn’t give me the chance to ask, I guess she is fine if she can scream like a lunatic.

“I’m sorry, are you guys okay?”

Ntaba looks fine, he’s looking over at me, eyes searching through my body.

“What was that?” He’s too calm for someone whose life flashed before his eyes.

“I don’t know, I couldn’t see anything anymore.”

“You fell asleep, Thonga. I tried waking you up but you wouldn’t.” Okay daddy! If I wasn’t looking at him, I swear I would mistake him for baba.

“Why did you sit behind the wheel if you were so tired?” Bongiwe won’t stop screaming, I have the urge to yell back. I’m frustrated enough as it is, dammit—I didn’t choose this life.

“I said I’m sorry okay, quit yelling at me, will

you?" I bite her head off, not a usual trait, she is my brother's wife and way older than me. I want to send an apology, I guess Ntaba sees the regret on my face because he shakes his head no. He doesn't want me to apologize.

"That's enough sis'Bongi," Ntaba calmly says, her reply is a sigh.

"What happened to you?" I'm glad he's asking, I wish I knew what happened.

"I saw Amandla's grandmother." His eyes bolt, what is wrong with him?

"Which one?" What does he mean which one? We only knew one.

"MaCele."

"The dea..." he gulps and I'm confused. "The dead woman?" He finishes his question, wide eyes searching around.

"Yes!"

Ntaba is acting weird, I can...

“Drive.” I’m startled by his abrupt instruction, he faces forward, unblinking.

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Thonga lami drive, get us out of here.” He snaps at me, is he terrified of ghosts?

“What are we waiting for? Get us to the hospital now.” Bongiwe.

None of these idiots offer to drive to the hospital, “If I fall asleep again and we wake up in heaven, I don’t want to hear stories from any of you.”

They don’t say a word, I’m in this alone, so it seems. My brother is probably afraid he will see the ghost if he takes over, I don’t know what Bongiwe’s excuse is.

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“Are we there yet?” Impatient people should be kept away from society, Bongwiwe is too much.

“We’re there sisi,” I quip, looking up at the banner Netcare Margate private hospital.

She’s the first to exit the car, leaving us behind. Ntaba has not uttered a word since I told him about Amandla’s grandmother. He’s like a frozen flake dunked in an ice cream cone, I need a word with God for giving me such a brother. I’m not happy about this.

“Ndoda let’s go,” shaking his shoulder actually helps. He sucks in a breath that shocks the living elders in me.

“Were you holding your breath this entire time?” I probe. “Are you afraid of ghosts?”

Finally, I get his attention. An offended frown

sits on his face, yeah it better make a home there because I'm not done with him. He's still going to hear from me.

"I am never travelling anywhere with you again...w and your crazy ancestors." Is that a mic drop? I think it is, with how he jumps out of the car and slams the door after him.

I need a good laugh and this is it, the timing is just bad.

Bongiwe has gone ahead and found the room Zakhe is in, apparently baba is next to it. I'm surprised to see Ndleleni in the corridor, I thought he was in Joburg.

"Bhuti!" He accepts my handshake, and right after, Ntaba attacks him with a hug.

"And then?" Ndleleni doesn't return it, and Ntaba is not fazed. He kisses him on the cheek, and fishes the PDA with a pat on the shoulder.

“What’s with you? I’m not the one who almost burnt in the building.” Ndleleni is a little traumatised by the affection, I don’t blame him. I was the only one subjected to Ntaba’s hugs and kisses... I’m not complaining, sharing is caring.

“Don’t mind him bhuti, I saw a ghost, told him about it and he hasn’t been the same since.” The laugh I’ve been wanting overtakes me by surprise, Ndleleni is not getting the joke.

“Shut up wena, before you become a ghost yourself.” Ntaba grunts, smacking the back of my head. It hurts I won’t lie but I’ll live.

“How are they?” Ntaba adds.

“They will be fine, ubaba got away with no injuries. It’s Zakhe who was a little bruised, apparently he was playing hero, trying to get everyone out of the building.” Is that disappointment I sense in the tone of Ndleleni’s

voice?

“Uyisyoyo uZakhe, why didn’t he grab his father and run?” (Zakhe is an idiot.)

The same disappointment I heard in Ndleleni’s voice is found in Ntaba’s voice.

“Bhuti’ Zakhe did nothing wrong, how is he stupid for helping out?” I need them to balance me, find me or something.

“He risked his life, that’s stupidity.”

Did they just say this at the same time?

The shocked look I give them should make them feel ashamed—oh!!! A waste of sight, they are far from being ashamed. I do not associate myself with these men, I don’t know them or who their father is.

“You shameless fools, I can’t believe you have no regard for people’s lives.” I call them out on their behaviour, Ndleleni is frowning— shame...

my brother is caught in confusion. He doesn't understand why I have become hostile towards them. Ntaba is not even here, his entire focus has shifted to the phone in his hand.

The bastard is planning something, I just know it.

"Where is Hlabela? When did you arrive?" I thought they'd come back together.

"He's gone." Ndleleni says and that quickly catches Ntaba's attention, mine as well.

"What do you mean gone?" Ntaba.

"Hlabela got married last night after we rescued his girlfriend from her brothers-in-law and uncles, those bastards were hard to kill. They gave a good fight, before we slit their throats." His chuckle is cold, lacks amusement.

"I'm deeply hurt Ndleleni," Ntaba says, and what

do you know? He looks hurt, I don't know why or what he means by that.

"You went on a killing orgy and didn't call me, I thought we were brothers." Oh okay!

Ntabezikude has a mental disorder, this has to be the only explanation. And Ndleleni... how can he talk about killing people so lightly?

"Where is Hlabela?" I blindsided my psychopathic brother who is now sulking like a child because he didn't get to kill people.

"They boarded a flight to Botswana, they'll be travelling around Africa. I don't know when they'll be back."

"What are you saying?" I ask.

"It's a long story, I need to call a family meeting ASAP. There is something important I need to tell you all."

Whatever it is must be big, is he going to

confess that he killed men? I don't see him doing that, not with how remorseless he looks.

"We should go in and see them," I suggest, I'm eager to see if baba and Zakhe are okay.

"You two go in, I've seen them. The doctor will discharge them today." Ndleleni explains as he moves to lean against the wall, it's the nonchalant expression that worries me while I'm still on panic mode.

"Was anyone else hurt?" I'm the only one who cares enough to ask, Ntaba is lost in his own world.

"Not really," he shrugs his shoulders ranking this a trivial matter. "Only three people died, a cleaner and two men."

A cleaner and two men? He might as well be saying a dog and two cats, what am I doing brothering with these fools.

“That’s really sad, we have to visit their families and pay for the funerals.” I offer, it is the right thing to do.

Ndleleni shrugs, his demeanour tells me he doesn’t care.

“Well, I guess.” He guesses? Oh wow. My brother is a guesser. “You do that, you’re a good boy anyway.” He taps my shoulder and I’m tempted to bite his hand. Soulless bastard.

“Bhuti’Ntaba, you’ll come with me, right?” I might be wasting my time.

“No, I’m busy.” Soulless bastard number two, the devil must come and fetch his children.

“You two will burn in hell, I’m going to see my brother.” I tell them and begin my walk.

My feet are alive until my eyes catch a glimpse of Funokuhle heading toward us, he’s with a short woman.

“Oh shit!” This is bad, Bongiwe is here.

“What’s going on?” Ndleleni asks, I believe he’s looking at the same thing. I doubt they have met.

“Koti,” Zakhe welcomes him with a hug and a kiss.

“What is he doing here?” Ndleleni growls, eyeing Funokuhle coldly. I’m guessing he’s seen the trending pictures.

“Not now, ndoda please.” I have to put him to order, he hated that I got involved with Nala and by the looks of it he doesn’t like Funokuhle.

“I don’t understand how...” Ndleleni...

Okay, who am I thanking for shutting my brother up? He’s looking at the woman with Funokuhle, the idiot is captured by whatever he is seeing.

Is it safe to tell him to close his mouth? I think I should let him act a fool for a while, serves him right for being a dummy.

“How is he?” Funo asks for my attention. If I’m not mistaken, he is blushing. It’s Ntaba’s fault, that hug and kiss he gave him. My brother needs help.

“He’s fine, but you can’t go in there yet...” I say only to be cut short by Ntaba.

“And why not? You can go in Koti.” What is he trying to do?

“Ntaba, sis’Bongiwe is in there.” I’m not good at whispering, Funokuhle heard every word.

“So?” Ntaba.

I hear they are in need of tall men in Malawi, I’m selling him.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking straight when I came here. I saw the news and my first thought was...” Funokuhle.

“Don’t worry about it,” I butt in. “You don’t have

to explain yourself, thank you for coming.”

He nods, and shies away from my stare. The woman with him looks uneasy, I’m faulting Ndleleni for this. He’s been staring like a serial killer that has spotted his next victim.

“This is Banami, she was with me when I heard the news.” Funokuhle introduces and guess who pushes me aside to greet the lady?

“I’m Ndleleni, nice to shake you...” Yeah, these are the consequences of being forward. The poor lady is traumatised, no I’m serious—she will need therapy after this.

“I mean... nice to have you...” He repeats his mistake, blinking like he’s losing his vision.

There should be an option for dying, either be killed or the heavens should open up and rapture us. My brother needs to be raptured right at this minute.

“It’s nice to meet you sisi wami,” Ntaba to the rescue, of course he’ll rescue his partner in fool. She forces a smile, it’s not fake though.

“I’m Banami Fakude, it’s finally nice to meet the rest of the Khanyile brothers. I’ve heard a lot about you from Vukuzakhe,” she says, kindly taking her hand back from Ndleleni’s grip.

“Zakhe speaks about us?” Ntaba asks, I’m shocked myself. Banami laughs, heartily. I have to look at Ndleleni to see if he’s fallen for this young woman and... yeah, he’s gone. I don’t think he ever wants to come back.

“Not really,” she says.

Go figure.

“So...” Ndleleni starts, what a way to put himself on a spotlight. “Are you married?”

Ah Ndleleni! Dig deeper my brother, that grave should bury every inch of your shameless body.

“What?” She’s gobsmacked, her eyes flatter to Funokuhle—confusion lurking closely.

“You know... do you... have a man who comes home to you, or warms your bed?” Ndleleni.

“Do you need a bigger shovel, since you’re about to bury yourself?” I steal a moment to whisper into his ear, he flatly ignores me. So much for trying to help.

“No, I don’t.” She’s reluctant, probably not sure why she is being asked such a question.

Ndleleni goes for a smile which I highly do not recommend, it’s not him. It can never be him.

“Me too...” Ndleleni says...

Is he sweating?

“You too what?” She entertains him, I don’t recommend that as well.

“I don’t have a man who comes home to me...” I hear a laugh coming from Ntaba, why is he not

rescuing his brother? The lady finds him funny too.

“I mean, I’m not married. I’m single...” he clears the blockage in his throat, his voice is trying to warn him to stop talking. “I’ve been single for six months.”

Mmh! Starting a relationship on lies, not a good idea.

“Abort mission.” I whisper again, he’s ruining his life.

“Twenty-nine years.” Ntaba coughs, as if it should be a secret that Ndleleni has never been in a relationship. “What my brother is saying is that, he thinks you’re beautiful and he will like to take you out some day, before you officially become Mrs. Khanyile.”

Only Ntaba... only Ntaba. Banami is one audacious woman, I thought I’d see a black woman blushing but not this black woman.

“I’m not looking for a husband.” Ouch, I felt that. She turns to Funokuhle and tells him she needs to be somewhere.

“I’ll go with you,” Funokuhle says. He looks like a wounded animal, I feel sorry for him. He must be desperate to see Vukuzakhe.

His farewell is acknowledged by Ntaba and me, Ndleleni is engrossed on Banami.

She bids us goodbye and turns to leave, Ntaba wraps an arm around Ndleleni’s shoulders. He’s clearly bruised, his eyes are following the lady. He’s about to say something stupid, it’s evident with how he’s blinking and gulping.

“Can I ride you there?” He shouts after her, Ntaba face palms himself and I hear Funokuhle crack a chuckle.

I wish Banami didn’t hear Ndleleni, but her stopping means she did. She turns back around,

thank the gods there's a smile on her face.

Ndleleni gulps, he's suddenly at a loss for words.

"I mean... Can I drop you where... wherever you're going?" Ndleleni.

Run Banami, run and never look back. She shakes her head and continues stalking away.

The second she is out of sight, I collapse in laughter.

"Ndoda, are you a virgin?" I'm curious, his gaze is steady, sullen.

He clicks his tongue, "Your father is a virgin." He spits, pushing Ntaba off him.

"You're sweating ndoda, let's go get you some ice cream before you faint and maybe we can do something about that virginity." Ntaba says, throwing his arm back around Ndleleni's shoulder.

"Ungazong'bhedela wena!" (Don't talk

nonsense.)

The anger in his voice seeks attention, he glares at us before walking away.

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Please don't forget to like, comment and share...

MATHONGA-

Seventy-six

MATHONGA-

Baba and Zakhe are home, you can barely tell they almost joined the underground family today. I'm glad they both have people to take care of them, I thought Bongiwe would fuss over my brother, but no... she's as chilled as a

cucumber.

I don't blame her, he has put her through a lot. Nevertheless, it's not my job to criticise him or the decisions he takes. It's his life.

Ndleleni has gone from stone cold to timid, he's not the Ndleleni I know. I can't imagine what it could be that has him walking on egg shells. Ntaba had to leave us at the hospital, he didn't mention his destination.

I need to talk to him, get him to move back home. It doesn't feel right when he is not around, same as Hlabela. I miss him so much, it freaks me out. We have never been apart, all of us have never lived separately.

I'm on my way to the throne room when I receive a text message from Nala's therapist, Dr Jarman. She says Nala missed two sessions this week, I forgot to do a follow-up with her. I

haven't spoken to her in a while. I've been so caught up with family matters that I couldn't find time to attend to her.

"Sthandwa sami," I say in greeting, hoping the guilt in me won't expose me. Her soft giggles put me at ease.

"I saw the news, is everyone okay? Do you want me to come down there?" She says very subtly.

"They are fine, you don't have to come. How is Thobani?"

"He's improving, he's even talking."

"That's nice," good news is always nice to hear.

"So I just got a text from your psychologist, he said you missed two sessions this week.

What's going on Nala?"

Silence welcomes and worries me. She recently started therapy, missing sessions would pull

her back into that dark place.

“Are you still there?”

“I am,” she says, a little less hesitant. I get the feeling that she doesn’t want to talk about it.

“It’s the only way you can heal.”

“Who said I need healing?” Ridiculous, everybody needs healing from something.

“I’m not going to answer that, you are not a child Nala. What you went through...”

“What I went through has nothing to do with anyone, it’s my business. Why must I sit on a sofa and tell a stranger that I’ve been having sex with an older man against my will since I was a little girl.”

She’s burning bridges, scraping wounds that have mucus.

When Nala told me that Petros had been

sexually abusing her, not once did she use the word rape. She's not comfortable using that word, instead has used the language such as, "I had sex with him and I didn't want to... he touched me without my permission I guess."

"Sthandwa sami, I know you want to forget it happened, but it will keep screaming louder until you acknowledge it. Keeping it bottled up will breed anger, and that anger will eventually eat you up inside. The last thing you want is to take it out on the people you love, on Thobani."

"It's not fair Mathonga, it's not fair that I have to relive those years. I don't want to talk about about him."

"You're right it's not fair, but you can't run away from your problems. They will always find you. You're still young Nala, you have your whole life ahead of you. Harboring it will only hinder you,

if not for yourself then do it for Thobani. You're the only mother he has, how will you love him right when you're carrying so much on your shoulders? But doing it for yourself should be your biggest motivation, you deserve a better life."

She sighs and holds the silence, Nala has an eerie knack for keeping things in.

"Nala, I'm trying." I introduce, not sure what my brain will spew to my mouth. "I might have been brought up with a silver spoon, spoiled by my father and brother. But I never had the love of a mother. My mother ran from me the day I was conceived, she made a decision then that she will not be in my life. I had to address her by name, as per her request while my brothers had the privilege to call her mom."

Despite everything, I smiled and pushed with each day. It was impossible to drown into depression when my brothers were around, I

couldn't have asked for better siblings.

"Why are you telling me all this?" She asks.

"Maybe this is my chance to share this with you, there is so much you don't know about me. So much we still need to learn about each other, the road is long Nala and we have to walk it together. Or we will lose each other along the way, I wouldn't want that to happen."

Who said life's easy? Of course I want us to be in a better place, we both have so much going on in our lives that we don't have space to accommodate a relationship. Perhaps when everything is said and done, we will start to enjoy each other.

"I'm sorry Thonga, I'll call the psychiatrist and reschedule." she says.

A branch of hope coils inside of me at her words.

I snap my eyes toward the gate to see a police car driving in. Curiosity seeks my attention, and I instantly lose focus.

“Mathonga.” Nala calls, forcing my ears open with how she snaps over the phone.

“I’m sorry.”

I apologise before she tells me about a woman who claims to be her sister, I’ve met Zithobile once with her husband Kenneth. She has a wild personality and is unapologetic about it.

“We did a DNA test today, we’re waiting for results.” Nala continues, she sounds happy about having a sister.

The police vehicle stops right in front of me, a menacing lanky, officer steps out. With him are two policemen in uniform.

“Nkosana.” (Prince.)

With a grin he sends his greetings, I have to cut

Nala short and bid her goodbye after promising to call her later. There's a strange man smiling at me like I promised him the country's billions.

"How can I help you?" I ask.

Just as he is about to say something, my father materialises from the main house with Dalisile by his side. She looks miserable, lost and powerless.

No one wants to see their mother in such a state, evil or not, she is still my mother. Had she given me a chance, I would've been the best son she could've ever asked for. I try for that thing people call eye contact, she's not focused. Her gaze is on the men of the law, her questions are probably the same as mine.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming."

I'm confused by baba's words, why would he call the police?

“Here’s the woman you’re looking for.” Baba hands his wife over to the two uniformed men, cold dread splashes over me like iced water. Vumile should’ve lived during the times of Hitler, he would have fit perfectly. When did he get the time to come to such a decision?

“Baba, what’s going on?” The old man blatantly ignores me, I’ve suddenly become air, invisible but useful. I want to intervene when one of the policeman begins to handcuff my mother.

“Ndlunkulu, you are under arrest for the murder of Sakhile Khanyile and Vimbela Khanyile. Anything you say...”

The superior is reading her, her rights, things are happening too fast. Vukuzakhe and Ndleleni emerge from around the house, in time for Dalisile to shout... “They are lying Vumile, those kids lied.”

She’s resisting arrest, I’m as startled as her?

What on earth is going on?

“You will never find peace Vumile Khanyile, do you hear me?” These are her last words before she’s forced into the van, if this was the Apartheid era, my father would be swimming in his own blood for shaking hands with a policeman.

“What happened?” I need to know, these two brothers don’t look as lost as I am. I’m going to lose my mind if they don’t find me.

“Your mother is evil, Mathonga.” He sounds like a bitter father who hasn’t been receiving pap geld from his rich ex. (Child maintenance.)

“Okay, is anyone going to tell me anything or will you let me walk around in circles?” Ndleleni looks at me like I’m going crazy.

“Your mother manipulated Ndleleni and Hlabela, she used them for her evil deeds.” Ehh! This

father is still not making sense, I'm getting tired of talking. He gestures with his head that we go into the throne room, and leads the way. He takes his place and by that stern look on his face, he wants us to sit as well.

Ndleleni clears his throat, silently seeking my attention.

"Hlabela and I started the fire that night," for the first time in my life I see him drop his head in shame. "I was young and desperate for her attention, I needed a mother. I would've done anything to get her to see me. It wasn't hard for me to do what I did, I hated my brothers. I hated Sakhile even more, he came and took my mother from me." His voice cracks, he's looking at baba now. It's easy to see that he's fighting back tears.

"Mother fetched us from our rooms and dropped us outside Sakhile and Vimbela's room. She gave us a box of matches and a bottle of

what I know now was paraffin, because Hlabela was older, he had to light the match stick. My job was to spill the liquid on to a curtain. She said it was a game... that no one was going to get hurt and that she will put the fire out. She told us to wait for her, that she would come for us, but she never came. We were kids and didn't know better."

Oh my God, I don't know why I'm surprised. Dalisile is the devil's right hand-man.

"You were the target Ngwane," my father glances over at me. It's not really news that my mother has been trying to kill me. "She thought you were in the room, had she checked, she would have stopped everything."

That doesn't make me feel better, does it?

"I killed my brothers," Ndleleni turns to Vukuzakhe. I hadn't noticed him with how quiet he's been. My brother looks disconsolate, for

years he blamed himself for their deaths. He went as far as cancelling his birthday.

“Bhuti,” Ndleleni stands only to kneel before Vukuzakhe, the big brother doesn’t move his gaze from the top of the table.

“You must hate me right now, I hate myself too. I didn’t know better bhuti, I was an angry child in need of a mother’s love. Ubaba was distant too, no matter how hard I tried to get them to notice me, they wouldn’t.” Ndleleni.

Vukuzakhe is not saying anything, why is he quiet? Ndleleni is apologetic, he has accepted his mistakes.

“Bhuti Zakhe.” I’m about to call him again when he lifts his eyes to me, they are moister than I thought possible. “You’re not at fault bhuti, none of you are. Vimbela and Sakhile will

understand, they loved you both.”

Without a word his shoulders drops, he breaks the eye-contact, the confidence he usually wears deflates. Without a word he wipes away tears that have the audacity to trespass on his face. Without a word he hides his tear drenched face in his hands.

His confidence has shrunk.

Ndleleni is closer, his arms go around Vukuzakhe, holding him firmly. Zakhe’s body begins to shake, he’s crying.

“I’m sorry bhuti, I would turn back time if I could.” Ndleleni says gripping one hand around Vukuzakhe’s head.

A minute later, they break the embrace.

“I will never forgive myself, for what happened.” Ndleleni tears up, burying his face in his hands. I can’t watch my brothers like this, I can’t bear it. Baba stands and places hands of comfort on

both their shoulders.

I can almost feel the heaviness in their hearts. I knew Zakhe was hiding so much pain behind his overriding personality, I didn't think Ndleleni was in the same boat.

ZAMANGWANE-

She hasn't slept in days, so the start of her days have no clear beginning. She's pacing up and down in her room with her arm held above her head, before collapsing onto the floor. She's on her hands and knees with her face two inches from the floor, she clutches her arms on her stomach and tries to take a deep breath. It's midday, windows are closed, the heat in the room feels uncomfortably hot on her aching body.

“Zamangwane!” The call comes from outside the door, it’s her mother. She’s not in the mood to see her, she thinks of getting up and locking the door but can’t move. She is too weak to respond beyond mumbling for her not to come in, the door opens anyway and Nandi invites herself in.

“Oh, Nkosi yami, my child.” A panicking Nandi cries after seeing her daughter curled up on the floor. “What’s wrong Zamo?”

Nandi helps her up, her eyes water when she notices her trembling.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” She knows what’s wrong, Ntaba told her. However, it’s hard to believe that her little girl could be on drugs.

“I’m going mama, you can’t stop me from leaving.” That’s so random of Zamo, she’s in tears, teeth shattering.

“What are you talking about?” These questions

though.

Nandi is not as gullible as she makes herself seem, she just needs time to adjust to this... crazy life.

“I want my husband, I’m going to him.” Zamo grunts, tightly hugging her stomach. She hunches over and winces as pain discharges through her entire body.

“Zamo, you’re not okay. Sit down here and I’ll get someone to take us to the hospital.” Nandi ushers her to the edge of the bed and helps her sit, it’s not what Zamo needs though.

She has a craving, the child wants juice made by her husband. Plus, she is a married young lady, shouldn’t she let her go wherever she wants? As Nandi turns to leave, Zamangwane grabs a lamp on the bedside table and with great force smashes the object on her mother’s head. Nandi falls face down, and immediately

goes into unconsciousness.

Zamangwane would care, shed a tear for her mother. But right now, getting that juice is the most important thing. Giving her mother a final impassive look, the young lady runs out into the sun.

Till this day, she is still wondering why she was born. She didn't sign up for this, for an absent father or a mother who chose to be a man's mistress her whole life, depriving her the chance to have a complete family. All she's ever wanted was a father not a weekend-special dad who kept her existence a secret as if she were some kind of plague or an abomination.

Vumile was there when she was born, the future looked promising for little Zamo at least for the first five years of her life.

Vumile would make it to every birthday and she

was content with it, until she grew up and started noticing his nonattendance.

“Your father is a business man, he travels a lot.”

Nandi would lie to cover up for Vumile.

Zamangwane saw nothing but a load of bullshit, the more he stayed away, the deeper her hatred for him became. Growing up meant finding out the truth, her father was part of the church board, a respected chief that everyone looked up to, plus he had sons whom he didn't hide from the world. Loving Vumile would take a miracle. She thought things would change after moving into the palace, that Vumile would try and fix what he broke. Boy was she in for a big surprise.

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She arrives at the Sangwenis in less than five minutes, she drives her father's car into the dusty premises and parks under a tree. The yard is empty, it's always empty whenever she comes here.

Mfundo ambles out of one of the houses, he must have heard the car. A frown jumps on his face when he sees her exiting the vehicle, he marches toward her and bangs her back against the car. Zamangwane yelps in pain.

"What are you doing here?" He hisses, tightening his grip on a squirming Zamangwane's arm.

"I miss you, I had to come." She misses the juice and she's here for it, not him.

"Does anyone else know that you're here?" He knows he's dead meat if her brothers knew.

“No,” she manages a whisper.

He grabs her jaw and presses his fingers into it,

“Are you sure?”

“I swear no one knows that I’m here.”

“Good girl,” he pats her cheek like a good puppy.

“Now go back home, I will come with my uncles to fetch you.” Zamangwane doesn’t want to go back home, after working hard to escape, he can’t be sending her back.

“But they’ll lock me up again after what I did.”

Her face sinks to the ground, Mfundo grabs her chin to bring her face up. It hurts, but she doesn’t complain. She’s used to his rough sides, him manhandling her and controlling her like a puppet.

“I do it because I love you.” He would say.

“What did you do?” He goes back to her last half-confession, her tears find an opportunity to see the light of day.

“I hit my mother on the head with a lamp, I think she’s dead.” Only now she’s remorseful, Mfundo cracks a smile and wraps his arms around her.

“My little tigress, I’m proud of you for standing up for yourself. This is why I love you.” It’s words like these that always bring her back to him, Zamangwane finds her own smile, it’s full of uncertainty.

“I’m a good girl for you, right?” She needs validation and the nod from Mfundo confirms it, she’s content. “Will I get the juice as a reward?”

“No,” he shakes his head and creates distance between them. “I can’t give you the juice, remember your punishment? You betrayed me Zamo, I loved you and you broke my heart.”

The need for the next fix has her insanely

distracted that it takes her a minute too long to catch what he's talking about. Feeling alone and needy, she wraps her arms around her middle.

"But we spoke about this and you forgave me."
Zamo.

"I can't stop thinking about it Zamo, it angers me so much."

"Mfundo, I tried to fight them off but I was too weak. The juice made me weak that day... and... y... you," she wars with her words.

"What did I do?" He becomes defensive, jaw ticking with anger.

"You gave me more than two glasses, I wasn't myself." Right! That sounds like an accusation.

"What are you trying to say, huh? Are you blaming me for sleeping with my brothers?" He snatches her bicep that it causes her to scream briefly.

“But you were there Mfundo, you said it was okay. I didn’t want to do it, you saw how hard I tried to fight them. And... that made you angry. I wanted you to stop them, they were hurting me. I wanted to die, do you know how hard it is for me to pretend to be okay in front of my family? I’m doing it for you, you made me promise not to say anything and I didn’t. But not a day passes without me wanting to die.”

She has said too much, it takes a light push from Mfundo for her to fall on the hard ground. She’s shocked by his sudden viciousness, Mfundo might be verbally abusive. He might rough her up once in a while and that’s just it... yet here she is, unable to stay away from him.

“Well, maybe you should die.” He spits coldly, breaking Zamangwane into a million pieces.

“People will find out that you slept with three men, they will talk Zamo.”

She shakes her head, eyes wild and flowing with tears.

“You said you won’t say anything, you married me to protect me. That’s what you said Mfundo.”

That was his promise, he sat there, watching his brothers take turns with the girl he claimed to love. A sane Zamangwane would have never agreed and Mfundo knew that. For his plan to work, he had to make her high—rob her of strength and rationality.

“I did,” he crouches in front of her and cradles her cheek with his hand. “I would never hurt you Zamo, I love you.”

It’s easy for him to say these words when they mean nothing.

“I can’t vouch for my brothers, they can be ruthless. If they start going around talking about sleeping with you, then it will be over for you.

Baby you made matters worse by getting yourself pregnant.”

“I didn’t get myself pregnant Mfun...” she defends herself but Mfundo cuts in.

“You are a woman Zamangwane, you control what goes in and out of your womb. That baby is all on you, and will people mock you. You had sex with three men, what kind of a woman falls pregnant for three men? That’s an abomination, they will call you a prostitute, a characterless woman.” But she’s a little girl who is oblivious to the ways of life, he’s got her under his heel, she’s his footstool. Thanks to the juice, it was easy to manipulate the child.

“And the baby... it will never be accepted by society. You will both be outcasts,” a sigh of pretentious worry kisses her face as he leans closer to kiss her lips. “My brothers are men, no one will point a finger at them. Only you will be made the bad guy.”

She's terrified, how can she not be when he's painting these terrible pictures for her. She sits on her knees, curls her hands around his arm. The shedding of tears is accompanied by loud sobbing.

"They raped me Mfu..." he cuts her off by sealing her mouth with his big hand.

"Don't ever repeat those words, no one will ever believe you. But I can help you, there is a way out." Mfundo.

"You can?"

He nods, crowning her temple with soft kisses.

"You can kill yourself, it's the only way out." He says.

Zamangwane wails, and hides her face on his chest.

"I'm scared Mfundo, I don't want to die." She feels ridiculous but she needs him, his help.

One part of her wants to get rid of him, never lay eyes on him. But another part needs him, in a way that almost terrifies her. She's aware of what she's doing to her family, how their marriage has hurt her mother.

"It's the only way out dali. I don't want you to suffer, we can even do it together. We'll drink some of that special juice, it will give us courage. We'll be together in the next life, I promise."

He's stroking her back, drawing small circles. Zamangwane leans into him as she cries her life away.

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A/N: 250+ comments unlocks tonight's chapter, 9pm sharp.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-seven

SABUSISWA-

Anger and bitterness can be weapons of destruction, she is living proof. Housing these two emotional feelings from the day her boyfriend denied her pregnancy. He was a wealthy man and had the money to support the baby, but he became part of the statistics of fathers who went to buy milk and never came back.

It wasn't supposed to get this far, her daughter was the reason she sought for riches in the first place. She wanted to give her a good life, a life better than hers.

Things got out of hand when she joined a church introduced by a friend, it was in the dark corridors of Hillbrow.

Sabusiswa was out looking for a miracle, deliverance from poverty and stagnation. Who wants to be a maid their entire life, anyway?

Armies of God Ministries seemed to be the right place for her, Qhaga was a promising man of God, a man with a vision. That's what he came across.

Sabusiswa thought her chance to a better life had finally arrived when her one-on-one with the pastor was approved. She was in deep, so when she was told to make a sacrifice in order for her life to change, she saw nothing wrong with it.

R5000 was no big sacrifice compared to what the man of God was about to do in her life.

The following month, the amount had doubled. There was no way she could gather R10 000, when Qhaga mentioned a blood sacrifice, her heart flew to the clouds. At first they wanted a sacrifice of a chicken, then a goat, things

started getting weird when their thirst for blood grew. Animal blood was not enough anymore, she had to give away one of her family members. Having only her daughter and mother, she knew MaCele was the better target, seeing that she was a living ancestor.

The hat was a special gift from the pastor, it put MaCele to sleep making her appear dead. Her body was given to the church, she too has no clue what they did with it. Sabusiswa's job was to make her daughter believe that she had cremated the body.

A week had not passed and Qhaga was demanding that she gives him her daughter, he wanted her with him. No reasons were given to Sabusiswa only promises of money in the bank, he asked for one of Amandla's underwear and with no questions asked, Sabusiswa delivered.

When Amandla started complaining about sleepless nights and seeing her grandmother coming to her at night, Sabusiswa knew it had to be Qhaga using her mother's body as a disguise to do despicable things to Amandla. There was no other explanation.

Now Amandla is gone, Sabusiswa's bank is overflowing but her hearts is empty. She's in her fancy house, bathing her lungs in alcohol all day long just to forget her loss.

There was no white husband to begin with, behind that flashy lifestyle, the long nails and long weaves is a woman consumed by greed for money. She's blinded by it.

The devil is always prowling the earth, looking for whom he may devour and Sabusiswa has fallen prey to him.

AMANDLA-

Qhaga is he's somewhere in the house—I've heard him conversing with the butler.

The butler brings me food whenever he feels I'm hungry, I have tried to strike a conversation, hoping he might slip and tell me something I can use as a weapon to escape this place. But he'd ignore me and leave the room.

Early this morning a make-up kit and attire were delivered by the butler, he didn't say what they were for. But hey, I can make use of the eye pencil. It can't only be useful for drawing fake eyebrows.

The door is always locked, I'm stuck in a place I don't know with no way to communicate with the outside world.

The sound of voices outside the door brings me to my feet, if my plan works, I will forever praise

God.

I'm facing the door as it pops open, he's here, I can't comment on the look on his face—there is nothing there. But he gives me the creeps, I can sense the evil lurking around him. My body is slouched, shoulders hunched and eyes droopy. I'm pretty sure I don't look as strong as a poor man in bed with a rich woman.

“Have you come to a decision?” He frowns, stepping closer. There's a drive to stumble back, I don't know what he's capable of, anything can happen.

The pencil is on my waist, with the help of my underwear. I just need to make sure I play him good.

“A decision?” My voice is diluted, a dash of Oros on Christmas day.

“Yes, are you going to obey or continue fighting me?” I wish him nothing but death.

My lips quaver, following my command. I shut my airwaves, so I choke on a breath. This has me heaving and teary, he can see something is wrong. What's left is for him to ask.

"Do I have a choice?" I shrug. "It's not like I'll be getting out of here."

I sound like a drunk person, it brings a frown to his face. It still lacks worry though.

The fool welcomes a smirk, "Sabusiswa did say you are a wise woman."

Damn you and Sabusiswa to hell.

"I have a meeting with one of my associates, you will be joining us." A meeting? Is he talking about his cult members?

"What is the meeting about?" I try not to sound terrified, I know how these things work.

"That's not for you to know, your job is to look pretty and make my associates happy. Clothing

has been provided...”

It's time to put my plan into action. My body begins to shake, dropping me on the floor. I'm convulsing, but I don't know if I'm doing it right. It has to be believable. When the man doesn't move, I level it up and make gagging sounds. To make it more believable, I bring saliva to play.

“What the hell?” I hear him, he's coming closer to inspect. This is where I want you, you son of a bitch.

He kneels, and places a hand on my chest. The bastard does not bother to ask anything, nor is he concerned.

“Dammit, Sabusiswa gave me a weak one.” He mutters, disappointedly. I'm thinking he's going to walk out, leave me here to “die.” So I let out a shrill scream and continue with the screaming before feigning a blackout. The man clicks his tongue, I can feel his breath on my face. He's

probably checking if I'm still breathing, this is my chance.

Cunningly, I reach for the pencil. Flick my eyes open and use every strength in me to plunge it deep into the side of his neck. Blood spews and paints my face, I want to vomit from the smell. He gasps as he stumbles backward, and presses a hand on the wounded area. His eyes are bulging in disbelief, while he tries to pull out the pencil. I stand to my feet praying that he takes his last breath. My hands are trembling from fear and the blood on my hands.

"Bi... bitch..." God, let this be his last word.

"Go to hell." I mutter, interposing on his compliant. He drops to his knees, making spluttering sounds. The second he falls lifeless with a thud, I take off running out of the room. God guide me out of here, so I don't bump into the butler.

KHETHIWE-

If my father could see me now, he would wish he froze his sperms before I was conceived. I'm standing outside the manager's door, ready to make a fool of myself.

After two knocks the door opens, a white woman appears. She flashes that smile that white people think owe us for what they put us through during Apartheid. It's always hard to return that smile, you can't even fake it to save your life.

"I'm sorry, we don't have left overs."

Degraded already? Do I look that poor? It must be my hair, I never pay much attention to it.

"I'm not here for food Madam," I will not be

explaining why I addressed her as madam, maybe I'm trying to score points. I'm a desperate poor, black girl standing in front of a privileged white woman about to ask her for money so I can get out of this place. My so called boyfriend left me without food this morning and hasn't come back since.

Of course I'm not about to tell her all of that.

"Would you mind sparing a R20? I need to catch a taxi home, my boyfriend has a room booked here. He left this morning for a family meeting, my purse is in his car. I have nothing with me, but a bank card." My bank card is at my father's house.

If the lady doesn't believe me, I will have to take her to Ntaba's room for her to see that I've got keys to one of the rooms here.

"You can always request an Uber, I hear they've got a speed point."

“Me, I just want money to catch a taxi home. That’s all.” It doesn’t have to be complicated. She gives a long stare before telling me she’ll be back, I’m kind of offended when she shuts the door to my face. Don’t Ntaba’s clothes add a little Kardashian to my crustiness? The woman thinks I’m going to rob her.

She’s back with a R20 note and a few silver coins, I thank her with a smile—it’s genuine. I’m just so happy I will be leaving this place.

I leave with Ntaba’s room key, he knows where I live. Finding a taxi at these high gated places is always a struggle, there are three people waiting for a taxi at the robots. In due course, the taxi arrives.

I’m home before I can count 20 robots, I’m hungry so the first place I visit is the kitchen. The kitchen door is never locked, aunt Rebecca

is forever warning us about leaving the doors unlocked. I prepare myself bread and Jam, as if there is anything else to eat here.

There are voices emerging from the kitchen, talking about Lethiwe's children. I don't know why he took those children to their mothers, he will want to go crazy when they decide they don't want their kids visiting.

With my plate in hand, I trace the voices to find my father engaging in a conversation with the twins. Sono greets with a smile while her sister looks at me like I should not have come to my father's house.

"Khethiwe, where have you been?" He asks.

It's good to know the twins didn't snitch, I'm surprised though that Amafu didn't say anything to my parents.

I'm glad he's not looking at the clothes on my

body. My mother would have recognised them instantly.

“I had gone with a friend baba, her grandmother was admitted to the hospital yesterday. I couldn’t leave her alone.” The liars association owes me money.

I place myself on an empty seat beside him, and feast on my bread.

“When are you going back to work?” My father.

“Next week baba,” I’m not enthusiastic about it.

“Do you think they need extra hands? I’m ready to start making money.” Sono says.

There’s no money there, “I can find out for you.”

She can have my job, I need something new.

“Find out for Amafu too, the girls need to start making an income.” My father is right, we would be eating nice things if everyone was employed in this house. Amafu makes an annoyed face,

she's not a worker like some of us but she won't say anything.

"You girls should get your outfits ready for Sunday church, it's about time you start asking God for big things." It's easy to see where my father is directing this, it's about the meeting they had with the pastor. I'm changing churches.

And speaking of asking God for big things, "Baba, is it true that the Mandonsela women are barren?"

Amafu gasps, and gives me a cold stare. She didn't tell me this was a secret.

"You wouldn't be pregnant if that were the case." He says, absentmindedly and loses me all at once.

"Who is pregnant?" I ask, a bit stunned.

"You're pregnant?" I'm startled by Amafu's outburst, she's on her size seven feet, eyes ready to pop out of her head. She retreats and

sits back down when she sees confused faces staring at her. What is her problem?

“Khethiwe is pregnant, didn’t she tell you?” My father.

Oh no, I forgot to clean this white lie.

“How is that possible? Who is the father?” Amafu is starting to freak me out.

“What’s with you? You’re acting weird.” Thank you Sono for pointing that out, the rudeness in Amafu has her rolling her eyes.

“Nothing, I’m just surprised.” Yeah, sure she is.

“If you must know, I’m not pregnant.” I should be ashamed of myself, my father glowers at me. To say he is disappointed would be an understatement.

“You lost the baby?” Yoh, this is what I get for lying.

“No baba, I lied.”

“Khethiwe?” I should hide from that stern face.

“You wouldn’t listen to me when I said I didn’t want to marry Bahle, I had no choice baba.”

“So lying to your parents was the only way out?”
Well yeah! Or I wouldn’t have lied. I keep the answer to myself, taking small bites of my bread. It suddenly tastes bitter.

“I’m disappointed in you Khethiwe, you are not the daughter I raised.” He stands and storms into his bedroom, I hear Amafu grumble from across the room. She wants to say something, if she opens her mouth, I will slaughter someone today.

“I don’t think you should worry about that Bahle guy, I heard aunt saying he left for Europe. Apparently he’s finding it hard to deal with the death of his uncle.” Sono.

Bahle’s uncle died?

“Which uncle?” Not that I know his uncles, Bahle and I grew up together but I never knew most of his family members. If Nomsa hadn’t come to my house, I never would have recognised her had we met elsewhere.

“Patrick or Petros, I don’t know. What I know is that Bahle almost lost his mind. His parents decided to take him to a holiday, to get his mind off things. Must be nice, I wish I had parents who would take me to a vacation to distress. Being unemployed is depressing, you know?” Sono continues.

Yeah... I feel for Bahle, clearly the uncle meant the world to him. How do you get the government to close the airports? I don’t want him to come back.

MATHONGA-

Nandi was found unconscious in Zamangwane's room, she's nowhere to be found. I had an unsettling dream about Zamangwane, it's only now that it has come to me.

We were at a mall with Nandi, Zamo had just bought a shiny car, gold in colour. It looked like a Limo and had no seats at the back. A man in a black suit got in her car, I remember telling him to get out of my sister's car and he wouldn't.

When I told Zamo about him, she said, "I'm leaving now, bhuti. You will be okay without me, please take mom home and take care of her."

I tried stopping her, to get her to wait for us but she got into the car and they drove away.

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Zakhe parks his car outside the Sangweni premises, outside are three men. I'm not familiar with the two, but Mfundo. The bastard who preyed on my little sister. We had no choice but to come and look for her here.

All three of them meet us at the gate, unfriendly faces, pot bellies and Shembe hair. I'm not intimidated by the likes of them, they think they are daunting yet they are far from it.

"Madoda, to what do we owe this unpleasant visit?" Mfundo has the nerve, after what he did to Zamangwane.

"They are here to finish us off bafo, killing our father was not enough for them." I don't know which brother is this one, but he's earned himself a spot on my 'people that annoy me' list.

"We're not here to fight," Zakhe says.

Sometimes he reminds me of baba with how respectful he tends to be, shouldn't he be trying

to climb over the fence to get to these men? I'm not promoting violence but if it's the only way we can get Zamangwane then why not? Nomkhubulwane will have to shut her eyes on this one.

"The last time one of your people was in our premises, he killed our father." That annoying brother again, he looks the oldest.

"The problem started when you people started believing that this is your land, show respect wenja, you're standing on Khanyile grounds in the presence of royalty."

Ndleleni just had to, I like it though... and I can't believe I'm actually saying this.

"What did I say bafo? The other one, who's been quiet says. He sounds the most arrogant.

"These people will never show us respect."

"I don't see a point to any of this, just give us our sister and we will be on our way." I have to

step in, seeing they are starting to scratch all the wrong places in me. Mfundo cracks into laughter, he's followed by his brothers. I don't know if the two men emerging from behind one of the houses are looking to fight as well, they are just as big and menacing.

"She's my wife, she belongs here with me."
Mfundo is brave, I give him that.

"You boys are brave, you're still standing yet you are outnumbered." The annoying one says, turning to the others for support. They all nod while their eyes spark with danger.

I take a moment to calm my breathing, I usually don't react with anger. But these people have completely turned me into a raging bull.

"That's because we know who we belong to," I have confidence we are protected.

These men think I'm joking, they are laughing.

"My wife is not here, I don't know where she is.

Now get the hell out of here before we start serving your royal asses with bullets.” Mfundo barks arrogantly.

The men with him pull out guns, their confidence confuses me. It’s as if they are certain nothing will be done to them.

“Uyakhonkotha mgodoyi? Do you know who you’re talking to?” (You’re shouting?)

When did Ndleleni pull out that gun? He has it aimed at them, Zakhe has a gun too. Why didn’t I get the memo? These people want me to fight guns with fists? The Sangwenis are not fazed by the guns aimed at them, it’s five against two gunned men and a defenceless me.

“Put those guns away madoda or the little one gets it.”

Just who is this fool calling a little one?

“Hand over our sister.” I yell, banging my hands on the gate. I’m trying to jump the fence, and no one is trying to pull me away. I want them to pull me back, I’m not about to jump into the lion’s den unarmed. My ancestors don’t shoot lightning with their hands.

“Why are you people so stubborn? Zamangwane is my wife. You have no right to come here and demand to see her.” Yet he says she is not here. His words say otherwise.

“The Khanyiles refuse to recognise the marriage, you think we don’t know what you’re up to Mfundo? This is your way of avenging your father’s death.” Ndleleni is right.

“Your opinions don’t matter to me, she is a Sangweni by law.” Stubborn idiot.

“My ancestors will never accept this marriage.” I fire, boldness banging against my chest.

“I think you didn’t hear me,” Mfundo hisses through clamped teeth. “Zamangwane is a Sangweni, your ancestors have nothing to do with her.”

“I think you didn’t hear us,” Zakhe drops in. “As long as we didn’t receive any lobola from your family, my sister remains a Khanyile.”

“Be careful mfana wami, you’re poking a snake in its hole. Uzolimala.” The tone I use is unusual, pin-drop silence breaks forth. That was a weird moment for me, the ancestors are forever trying to take over my body.

“Your sister is not here, get out of here.”

Mfundo growls, he’s become agitated. “Go back to the palace, you’ll probably find her there.”

He’s smiling, it’s creepy and definitely not easy to the eye.

“Don’t tell us what to do msunu,” yep Ndleleni

has it in him. I stand behind my brother when he cocks his gun, and points it straight at Mfundo ready to shoot.

“If you want to go back to your father with one of you dead, then I dare you to pull that trigger.” Mfundo.

I hate that these men are threatening us, it's unfortunate that we came outnumbered.

“You bloody outcasts, we're coming back for you.” Yoh, Ndleleni.

Walking away is best, we won't achieve anything like this.

The cursed bastards watch us as we drive off, Ndleleni and Zakhe are in the front. It's strange how I can hear his shabby breathing; Ndleleni. He's livid and refuses to calm down when Zakhe tells him.

“We should’ve shot one of them at least.” He says with a tongue click.

“We were outnumbered,” Zakhe.

“So? I don’t waste bullets bhuti, if I’m going to shoot at someone, I do it right.”

Ndleleni sounds like an assassin.

I’m too worried about Zamangwane, my mind has trailed off to her. Something is terribly wrong, I can feel it, and that dream I had troubles me.

We’re home, the gate slides open but Ndleleni doesn’t drive in. They are looking at something, I have to follow their line of sight to see what the matter is. My whole world crushes underground. Zamangwane’s naked body is hanging on a tree rooted by the gate.

“No, no, no.” I hear Zakhe release a shaky

breath. He steps out of the car, and falls on his knees, eyes held on Zamo's lifeless body. I'm too numb to move. What went wrong Zamangwane?

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MATHONGA-

Seventy-eight

NTABEZIKUDE-

Luck is always on his side, he thinks this is it when he sees her walking down the street. He didn't think she would leave the lodge, it kind of stung when he got home and she wasn't there.

Khethiwe spots his car and paces toward the gate, if she goes in there he will lose his opportunity.

The first time he entered her father's yard was to convince her to go with him, so she wouldn't have to sleep outside. The second time he was too snoopy and possessive and the third time was by chance because the folks were not around.

"KaMandonsela," he's out of the car, rushing after her. "Mana phela, Khethi." (Please wait.)

He has her wrist in his hand, and spins her around with just a swipe, Khethiwe welcomes him with a look of disgust.

"Don't touch me," she tugs her hand back.

"Peaches please, listen to me." Begging is not his strongest point, but beggars can't be choosers.

"I'm listening." She places her hands on her waist with a disinterested look on her face.

"I was going to come to you, but something happened..."

Excuses, excuses!

“What, you had to fly to Johannesburg for a meeting?” She’s being sarcastic, relationships are a full time job that doesn’t come with a salary but 99 problems and a potential heart attack.

“No, I...”

“I’m such an idiot Ntaba,” Khethiwe throws her hands up. She keeps finding herself in such situations with this man, when is it going to stop? “I don’t know why I’m holding on to the hope that you will one day change. Why are you this person? Is this your way of retaining me?”

This is a question she asks herself every night when she’s lying in bed, she loves this man and would move mountains for his.

She would kill if he were to ask her to, is it so hard for him to see her? She's here offering her heart on a golden platter, she's here wanting to be his everything and give him a beautiful life. If only he could let her.

"Why would you say that?"

"You leave me alone the entire day with no money or food. A phone would have been nice too."

"Okay, you want a phone, I'll buy you a phone." He'll do anything to have her with him, he just has no clue how to navigate around a relationship. Communication is a language he is not fluent in.

"No, I have my own phone. It's at home, and it works. I don't mind you buying things for me, I love people that are willing to spend money on me. But that's not the case, you don't take me seriously Ntaba."

She's said these word before, how serious does she want him to take her? He's trying to be the person she wants him to be, it's not like he will wake up one day and suddenly be the best man she's ever known.

He takes her hands into his, "I really adore you KaMandonsela." Yeah who doesn't? That's not something she wants to hear, sweet nothings lose taste along the way. Khethiwe pulls her hands back and turns to leave.

"What did I do?"

What did he do besides being himself? She stops and turns back, the grave expression on her face has him feeling overwhelmed. How does he juggle between his family and this woman whose attention he so desperately needs?

"I don't know how to be a lover, I don't have

experience in loving a woman. The only love I've ever craved in my life is the love of a mother, my own mother. Not the woman my father chose to love, it was Dalisile or no one."

"Ntaba..."

"Look, I walk around acting like everything is okay. But nothing is, this is something I will never confess to anyone." He can't look at her when he says this, he wants to be vulnerable but there has to be a limit.

"When I found out about Nandi, I started visiting her. She was warm and homely. She treated me like a mother would her son and that felt damn good, she made me feel like a little boy again. Took me back to the days I was lonely and needed the attention of my parents. She dusted me, Khethi and I warmed up to her. But she wasn't Dalisile, she will never be the woman that gave birth to me. Sure my mother is evil and everyone hates her, but she's my mother

Khethi. She nurtured me while in her womb and brought me into this world.”

“Ntaba, she’s toxic. It’s okay to hate her.” His thoughts are different from hers, a slight headshake tells her.

“But that’s not what I want. I don’t want to hate her. Can’t I give her a second chance? Can’t she be a good mother and have me and my brothers again? I need that, I need to at least put my head on her chest and have her sing me a lullaby. Am I weird for craving such?”

“You’re not Ngwane, you’re not weird at all.” He can hear that her articulation is not thoroughly thought of.

“Should I get her out of prison?” He’s asking because he doesn’t trust his decision regarding Dalisile, when he thinks about his uncle Phumlani, how he was banished from his own family for years because of this woman. He

can't help but curse the day she was chosen to mother him.

Phumlani lives with Qinisela now, the only brother who cared enough to not send him to a mental hospital. Vumile's hands are tied and full.

"Do you want to get her out of prison?" Sounds like a challenge, it lingers in the air, sizzling with tension.

"I don't know, I think I do. What I'm hundred percent sure of is that I want her with us. I want her to play a role in our lives, she owes us." He states.

It requires effort to keep silent, he knows she has no right answer for him. No matter what she replies, it won't make a difference.

Exhaustion forces him to lean against his car, taking a deep sigh. Khethiwe takes note of his fatigue, she comes closer until their bodies are flush together.

They share a long look, his hands are around her, rubbing and squeezing his favourite parts. It's a blissful moment until it's taken by the sound of his ringing phone, Mathonga's name flashes on the screen.

THE KHANYILES-

Ntaba arrives with Khethiwe, there are cars and people outside the gate. He spots his brothers standing in the compound.

He's already been informed, so the first thing he does is avert his eyes toward the tree. She's still hanging there, her body has been covered with a white cloth, but her face is in full sight.

His heart grows cold, his knees grow weak. But he soldiers on, he can't break down in front of people. He's stronger than this, however Zamangwane hanging on that tree is proving

him wrong.

“Ntaba,” Khethiwe murmurs beside him. He ignores her and dashes out of the car, why is his sister still hanging on that tree? The entire neighbourhood is out here, watching.

Nandi is on her knees wailing, beside her is a sjambok. Vumile is a few feet behind, hands on his head and shoulders convulsing.

“Why is she still hanging there?” His voice is so loud that it catches everyone’s attention, he’s marching toward the body. There is no answer to his question, Nandi weeps louder upon seeing him. “Ma, why is my sister still hanging there?”

He yells, sounding far from his usual self, he’s never spoken to her with such disrespect. Nandi can’t look at him, she’s too occupied with crying.

“Ntaba,” he startles at Mathonga’s soft voice behind him.

He turns to Mathonga and says behind clenched teeth. “They killed her, they killed my sister.”

Mathonga’s tears are always on standby, waiting for their opportunity. He’s trembling, that’s how he cries. Like a child who needs a mother’s arms to feel better again. His relationship with Zamangwane was not rocky, neither was it smooth. They were still getting to know each other, he needed more time to build that brother-sister relationship. In the times he spent with her, he had learned to love her. She made it easy for people to love her, Ndleleni himself was finding his way to her.

“They wanted to humiliate her,” Mathonga chokes on a sob. He drops his head on Ntaba’s shoulder, it’s easy to let it all out with his face hidden like this. “We found her... naked... what

did they do to her?”

Mathonga is weeping loudly now, it fuels other cries around. Nandi is heard above every bereaved person.

“Someone get her down, now!” Ntaba exclaims, his focus has been on getting his sister down.

“Baba or Nandi have to give her a hiding to prevent umkhokha.” (Bad omen.)

Bongiwe explains, she’s the only one who looks normal. It’s not easy shedding tears for someone you don’t know, for some people apparently.

“There is no such thing,” Ntaba argues. He’s angry beyond explanation, tears are seated behind his pupils. It’s getting harder to stop them from falling.

“Sis’ Bongiwe is right,” Khethiwe says. “If they don’t thrash her body, bad omen will follow the family. Someone else will die in the same

manner she did. It will never stop until...”

Someone needs to act now, the scene of the child hanging is troubling.

“I’ll do it,” Nandi steps up, standing to her unsteady feet. Her face is suddenly cold, jaw ticked and eyes hard. Anger is pulsing within her, memories of her daughter threatening to unfold from where she keeps them behind countless doors.

Vumile walks away crying at the first whip, he’s not weak. He’s just broken and doesn’t know what to do with himself. The brothers watch with clenched jaws, and fiery eyes. Vengeance callinh their names.

After three flogs, Nandi’s eyes roll to the back of her head before she falls into a blackout.

Someone yells, “Take the mother inside.”

Vukuzakhe tasks himself with the job, it's left to Ntaba and Ndleleni to bring the body down. They use the white sheet to cover her. The brothers surround her body with heads bowed in respect.

Ndleleni has not shed a tear, his heart is heavy nevertheless. He recalls how Zamangwane had tried to bring herself close to him, if only he had opened up and accepted her.

Mathonga has not stopped crying, guilt is pouring in him like a flood. If only he took that dream seriously, this would've been prevented.

Ntaba is fuming. There's no air, they are outside but his chest is tightening. He exhales once... twice, it seems futile. Anger has come alive in his veins, he clenches his fists and releases a growl from his chest. His feet are itching, urging him to get the hell out of here. His mind has shown him the destination, where he should be.

“I know what you’re thinking,” says Mathonga beside him. “They deserve death for what they did to her.”

Shocking! Ntaba’s eyes hesitate when they meet with Mathonga’s... vengeance. He can detect it from where he’s standing, he no longer sees the little boy he raised but a grown man.

“I say we do it tonight.” Ndleleni says, their voices are kept within them.

The brothers share a look, they are all thinking the same.

“We shouldn’t talk about this here, not in front of her.” Ntaba dismisses his little brothers, no way is he going to let Mathonga take a soul. He keeps his thoughts to himself though.

“Do you think she suffered?” Mathonga asks.

It’s obvious that she suffered.

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It didn't take an hour for villagers to crowd their space and ears with heart felt messages. The body has been taken to the morgue.

Pastor Khuzwayo arrives with his church choir, he's walking tall waving back at every hand that acknowledges him. The man is led into the living room where the family is gathered.

He approaches Vumile and offers a hand shake which Vumile ignores or he's too weak to raise his hand. He hasn't said a word to anyone for the past hour.

"Be strong Khanyile, God will never give you a burden you can't carry." Says Khuzwayo.

"Awusho, where is Hlabela? I haven't seen him around." He's looking around, hoping to catch a glimpse of his asset. Marrying his daughter to Hlabela would put his family on the map. It's a matter of his dignity.

Vumile is absentminded that he doesn't provide an answer, Hlebala's whereabouts are the least of his worries.

"Eh, it's not the right time to bring this up but, is he still going to marry my daughter?" A chuckle follows the question, Khuzwayo places his hands on his knees and rubs them. It's clear that he's nervous, perhaps this is why he's here, to make sure his daughter's bag is still secured.

Feeling a drop of irritation, Ntaba stands and leaves the room. He's headed to Zamangwane's room, there must be something in there that will confirm what he already knows. He knows not of Khethiwe's whereabouts, she might be around somewhere because she would never leave without letting him know after they patched things.

Ntaba finds Nandi seated on the bed, she's

going through pictures of Zamangwane. Tears have come to keep her company.

“Ma.”

He feels his throat closing up, and disposes of the feeling. His gaze is kept on the mess she’s made on the bed, Zamangwane’s clothes are scattered everywhere.

“Ma, what’s going on?”

Nandi looks up at him, tears trickling down her face.

“My heart is broken Ntaba... I don’t know how to fix it.” She grabs one of Zamo’s clothing and presses it against her chest. The act is a recipe for more tears.

“I thought going through her things would make it better, that I would feel her close to me. It’s not helping... I can smell her in this room, she’s everywhere. But I can’t see her... my baby is not here with me. I will never see her again...” She’s

a crying mess, she clenches her trembling hands into balls of fists before a heart wrenching cry overtakes her whole entire being. It's physically impossible to stop crying at this point, Ntaba has no experience in comforting a grieving person. He has no idea what to do, or what to say. He knows a hug should follow, and for a man who goes around throwing free hugs and kisses, Nandi should be in his arms and almost done crying.

It feels awkward... standing there... hands in his pockets, watching her pouring everything out. It takes almost forever for Nandi to get a hold of herself.

“Did she... perhaps leave a note that explains why she did this?” Wrong question but because it's Ntabezikude...

An inaudible no comes from Nandi before she

breaks into another painful sob, “She didn’t think I would want to know why she decided to take such a painful way out. Zamangwane has ripped my womb in half, she has destroyed me.”

“She was murdered.” He mutters to himself, rage pouring through his veins for the umpteenth time. Nandi misses it, she’s curled up on the bed, weeping.

“I’m going out ma, please give me your blessings.” Leaning over, he places swift kiss on her cheek. Now, what was so hard about comforting her? Nandi pats his shoulder and out the door he goes to do what needs to be done.

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The plan was to speak to his ancestors when he got to his room, find answers as to why they have let this happen. What’s this score they are

so bent on settling, first Khanyile Holdings burns down to the ground, and now this? All in the same day.

Lately, there's a way he speaks to them. He doesn't have to burn impepho not when Khahlamba and Nomkhubulwane are a call away. They see and know everything, so how is it that they failed in protecting the only Ngwane princess? Mathonga settles down on the bed, and tries to tap into his spirit. But it has shut down, he's too heartbroken to connect with them. Failure has him lying on his back, it's not enough to get him to relax.

His phone disturbs his alone time, a grumble resounds from his throat as he reaches for it in his pocket. Bambindlovu is calling, they haven't spoken since he left Johannesburg. Not that there was a reason for them to speak.

"Ndoda." A humble greeting from Mathonga.

“Stay home tonight, don’t follow your brother.” Bambindlovu states, there’s a sense of urgency found in his voice.

Mathonga is shocked a second, until it all processes.

“They killed my sister, I can’t sit back and do nothing.” It takes very little to provoke a bull and this calf is growing into one with each passing day.

“Listen, your ancestors will turn their backs on you if you stain your hands with blood. They will take everything that belongs to them and leave, you and your family will lose everything.”

“I don’t think I care at this moment, I want the people who killed my sister to pay.”

He hadn’t had time to spend with her, but the moments they shared together were special.

“Don’t ruin your life because of one moment of anger, stay home Mathonga. Let your brother

do what he has to do.” Again, Bambindlovu mentions one brother, which brother is he talking about? The one audacious enough is Ntaba, although Ndleleni is not far behind.

“But why did they not show me this was going to happen? I could have protected her.” His wrath is not only targeted towards the murderers but his ancestors as well.

“You’re not fully garbed, there’s a lot that needs to be done. They will show you in a dream or vision. After that, you will see things happening before you, in broad daylight. They will show you whatever they choose to show you.” Bambindlovu explains.

It kind of makes sense, it doesn’t heal his broken heart though.

“Your guardians are not seeing eye-to-eye, one is extremely happy that you have accepted them and the other is seething with rage

because of your father. He made a promise to your father that he will destroy everything he touches. The chief needs to do right by his ancestors, one child has paid for his sins. Warn him before the wrath of the ancestors fall upon his other children.”

Great, just when will all this stop? He thinks to himself.

MATHONGA-

Seventy-nine

NTABEZIKUDE-

It's easy to get into the Sangweni premises.

They don't own dogs, nor do they have a lock on their gate. Not that it would've stopped him. The compound is not that massive, there's a main house neighbored by two rondavels on each

side.

He starts with the one on his left, it's by instinct. He's just doing what he must.

His brothers have no idea he's here, he wanted to do this alone. He's the one norm to killing after all.

Humans don't have buttons where they can switch their humanity on and off but Ntaba seems to switch his off so effortlessly. He walks into the rondavel, armed with a sharp knife. The lights are off but because of the moon, he's able to see two little girls from the ages of nine to twelve; sleeping in one bed.

"What a waste of human," he mumbles under his breath. Oops, one of the girls stirs and pops her eyes open.

A grin cracks Ntaba's lips, he waves. But the child looks terrified to death, she jolts up and

releases a light scream. Ntaba slits her throat without a thought to it, she falls back on the bed, lifeless.

The minuscule noise wakes the younger one, the giant hides the knife smeared with innocent blood. He cracks a grin again and accompanies it with a chuckle.

“Baba?” The child’s tiny voice mingled with fear should make him squeal. He can’t bring himself to care, not really.

By nature he lacks empathy and remorse. People don’t matter, it’s the sensation of the blood. The rush itself is the high.

Ntaba puts his finger to his lips, “Stay quiet little girl.” He whispers, his voice rustling like paper.

“Who are you?” The child has been brought to tears, why not, when there’s a strange man in her room?

“Pinky-Pinky,” he chuckles lightly, it fades as

fast as it came.

“I want my father.” The little girl has become a victim to tears.

“Baba is my friend, he sent me to get you. They are having candy and ice-cream in their bedroom. Let’s go.” He’s giving her what she wants to hear, he’s the type of person who gets in your head. He knows what to say, it’s a sick game of his.

The little one ogles down at her lifeless sister, it’s hard to see the crimson colour under the moonlight.

“What about Mabusi? She loves candy too.”

“We’ll take her with us, come on down now.” He lifts her up and places her on the floor.

Mabusi is carried in his arms like a special child who has lost the use of her legs.

It must be the darkness that makes the girl hold

on to his pants, trusting a man who has her dead sister dangling in his arms.

“Baba’s room is this way,” she directs him.

Another strategy of his.

Ntaba wastes no time in kicking the door open, the lights are on this side and the couple is sitting on their bed. By the looks of it, they were having a private conversation before they were rudely interrupted.

Mfundo jolts up, seeing Ntaba with his daughters. For a second he zooms in on the child in Ntaba’s arms, her head is loosely hanging and eyes closed.

Blood dripping red and heavy through her open neck, like wax from a burning candle.

He sends his eyes to the man standing by the door and meets a sadistic smirk and an

amused expression.

Someone screams, it could be his wife, he's not really sure. The world seems to have stopped.

"Baba wasendlini! San'bona." (Man of the house.)

Ntaba sings.

It has come to a point where he doesn't experience emotion, he's fearless.

"What did you do? What did you do?" Mfundo is screaming under a shaky breath, his head is spinning. He doesn't know what to do with himself. The woman is screaming with him, one would think they have lost their minds.

"Baba, something is wrong with Mabusi." Says the little girl still standing beside Ntaba.

"I just thought heaven is a better place than this hell you and your wife brought her in." Ntaba utters, tilting his head a little to the side.

“Noooo! He killed my baby, he killed my baby.”
The woman wails. “Za... Zanele... come to me...
come to mama.”

The hysterical mother’s voice trembles as she desperately calls for her daughter.

“Zanele is not yours anymore, she belongs to God. He did say let the children come to me.”
Ntaba.

What do you know? The man did learn something in church. “I don’t know how such a powerful being entrusted his children with a man like you. But no worries, I will rectify his mistakes.”

Ntaba adds.

“What are you talking about?” Mfundo is moving closer, a hesitant step at a time.

“One more step and I will slit her throat so fast your head will explode.” The Khanyile freak holds the knife close to the girl’s neck.

Mfundo steps back, hands raised in surrender.

“Call your brothers.” An instruction Mfundo is not willing to obey. “Call your brothers or I’m sending baby Zanele on a first flight to heaven.”

“No, no... please, not my baby.” The mother’s cries are a waste,

Ntaba’s level of depravity boils and breaks the scale. Guilt should be pouring inside him but his sadistic tendencies have taken a diabolical turn.

He places Mabusi’s lifeless body on the cold ground and with gentleness pulls Zanele to his side, a hostage situation this has become.

The mother jumps from the bed. The woman is with child, round as the Oros man.

“Stay back mfazi, your time has not come yet.” Ntaba warns the pregnant mother.

She freezes on the spot, body trembling from

fear and grief. Her knees seem to give up on her, she's on the floor weeping with her hands on her head. No one pays her any attention, Mfundo's priority is to get his family to safety, save them from this lunatic.

"Shout for your brothers, I want everyone here. Goats, chickens, even your fucking bedbugs. Call them." Ntaba's calmness is too much to handle, it's dangerous and unsettling.

Mfundo moves closer to the door, cracks it open and beckons the rest of his family.

"Scream for them, scream like your life depends on it."

It does...

"Nsizwa, Mfaniseni."

This is the loudest he can go, but Ntaba does not seem to think so.

"Come on Sangweni, I want to hear you scream."

Scream like a bitch.” Ntaba barks, giggling like a deranged man.

“Mfaniseni, Nsizwa.”

“Louder wenja, louder.” Ntaba’s thunderous roars are scaring little Zanele, the child has fallen into a lake of tears.

“Please... please don’t do this.” That’s Mfundo with his hands joined together.

His pleas for some odd reason are a trigger, this must be how Zamangwane pleaded before they killed her.

“Call them,” this time Ntaba keeps his voice low and waits while Mfundo continues to call for his brothers.

“Bafo yini?” One of them snaps from outside.

“What, are you deaf? Bring everyone here, we have a meeting.” Irritation has gotten under Mfundo’s skin.

“Haibo bafo, in your bedroom? Since when?”

The same voice questions.

“Just get everyone here, the children as well.”

Mfundo.

He forgot the goats and chickens and... sigh!

“I’ve called them, let my daughter go.” His voice has turned to pleading, his teeth are clenched and his hands are shaking. The sight of Ntaba makes him sick of

Ntaba sits on the bed, and pulls Zanele to his lap. The candle flickering between him and the couple.

“Did you love her?” His eyes stare into Mfundo’s, rage meeting grief.

“She was my daughter, of course I loved her.”

Mfundo.

The vengeful sheen of Ntaba’s stare making

shivers dance down his spine, he averts his eyes to his still Mabusi on the floor.

His body trembles as he tries to be a man by fighting back tears, he badly wants to hold her in his arms, say goodbye or apologise.

“Focus Sangweni, I’m talking about my sister.” Khanyile won’t repeat the question.

Mfundo grows nervous, he steals a glance at his wife and practises his right to remain silent.

“Fine, one of you will talk tonight.” The giant.

He wants the whole confession. He plunges a hand in his pocket and reveals his sister’s phone, the girl was quiet an Instagram person. Over 7000 followers. He adjusts the child on his lap before playing around the screen. He finds what he’s looking for, Zamo was obsessed with social media and her followers seemed to have loved her.

“Wipe your oily faces people, the whole world is

watching.” Ntaba’s announcement shocks them, he goes live on his sister’s Instagram. In a minute, there are 85 views.

That’s more than enough, they will spread the word. He lifts the phone to his face and giggles with a sly grin. Views increase, comments start to come in, followers asking where Zamo is.

*Blaq doll can wait, who is this fine gent?’

*Is he married?’

*Is he her boyfriend?’

There is no time for that, he turns the camera around at the sound of the door opening. Mfundo’s brothers are here along with their partners and kids.

“Let’s get this party started bafana.” Ntaba sings and graces them with his famous spine

chilling giggle.

The brothers go insane when they see him, “What the hell is he doing here?” One of them shouts, Ntaba is not sure who is who. He has never taken time to know them.

“Bafo what happened to Mabusi?” This is the brother that was shouting outside, the women have gone to comfort the grieving mother. Surprisingly, they are afraid to approach the body.

“She’s gone to heaven,” at Ntaba’s reply, the women break into loud sobs. One of the brothers grabs the door handle, probably going to get his weapon.

“If anybody moves, I will slice this pretty princess’ neck.” Ntaba hisses, waving the bloodied knife in the air. “Everyone straight line and get on your knees now.” Ntaba.

The instruction is ignored.

“I said on your knees or we’re going to have a double funeral in this family.”

Shit is about to happen, he has a fearless urge to kill without empathy, he lacks normal emotional response. The look of sheer terror on their faces drives him, he’s proud of himself and what he is about to accomplish.

Everyone is on their knees, but one of the brothers.

“Nsizwa, get on your knees.” Mfundo snaps at his brother, Nsizwa looks like the stubborn type. He shrugs, veins throbbing violently on his head.

“No bafo, he’s going to kill us.” Nsizwa.

Ntaba’s chuckle rings aloud.

“He will kill my baby if you don’t get on your bloody knees, don’t annoy me please. Get on your fucking knees.” Mfundo roars.

It’s up to Nsizwa to save Zanele’s life, that’s if

she will be spared. He glares at Ntaba, unfortunately his eyes are not meant for killing.

With a deep grumble from his throat, he slowly goes down on his knees.

Their wives are confused and crying and trembling. No sound has come from the four children, they are too young to understand fully what is happening.

Boys and girls under the age of ten.

“Good, now who is willing to tell us how Zamangwane died?” Khanyile is on his feet, he keeps Zanele close to him and the phone aimed at the family.

“We didn’t kill Zamangwane, she committed suicide.” Mfaniseni, the youngest of the present brothers says.

Ntaba snorts, the idiot just gave themselves

away.

“Word has not been sent out that my sister committed suicide.” It is not grief that flashes in his eyes, it is anger, all the fury of a raging beast.

The mistake maker gulps and drops his gaze.

“Somebody better tell me what happened to my sister before I start dropping bodies.” He’s not bluffing and they can see that.

“Baba, what’s going on?” Baby Zanele’s voice shakes, she’s tearing up, poor thing.

Ntaba presses the knife to her neck, he’s a daredevil.

“Mfundo tell him, tell him what you did.” The mother of the child scream-cries as she grabs her man’s shirt. “Tell him what you told me, tell him how you killed that innocent girl. If anything happens to my baby I will never forgive you, do

you hear me Mfundo?”

She slaps him after her screams have depleted, she covers her head with her hands and mourns for the child she has lost, and for the one she is about to lose.

“Fine, I’ll tell you. Just don’t kill my child.” The old man has been brought to tears, he sniffs and heaves a sigh.

“Bafo don’t do it, this is a trap.” The stubbornness of... who is this third brother again?

“I got her hooked on drugs without her knowledge, it was easy to do it. All I had to do was add the drugs in her juice, she was desperate for love. She would tell me how her father was not there for her, I knew that was my chance to avenge my father’s death. I wanted to destroy you and I succeeded, I killed five birds with one stone.” There’s a smirk on Mfundo’s

face, he's proud of himself.

"Five birds with one stone huh?" Ntaba.

There must be a way to release the anger eating him inside, it's suffocating him and if he doesn't do anything about it, he will lose his mind.

"What else?" Ntaba.

"Your sister was not as innocent as you people thought, she would make moves on my brothers. Get in their beds when their wives we're not around, that little slut finally won. She slept with my brothers all at once and got herself pregnant."

The pregnancy is news to Ntaba... there is so much to grasp. These animals raped his sister and got her pregnant?

He hands the phone to Zanele and tells her to keep the focus on the kneeling family, being a child, she does as told.

In hind sight, had he known Mfundo would go to such extents, he would've killed him the day he found out about their affair.

In the blink of an eye, he pulls a gun out and executes the three women on his far left and one of the brothers.

Each received a fatal bullet to their temple, blood splattering on the people close to them. Silence joins in on the fun before horrific screams erupt, the children, Mfundo's wife and brothers.

"Continue," Ntaba orders, top lip pulled up on one side.

The anger is still heavy and seething inside him. If Mfundo does not say anything, he will have to take it out on someone.

Mfundo gulps, shooting fiery daggers at Ntaba. He wants to comfort his sobbing brothers. They have just lost their wives, his nieces and

nephews have lost their mothers and him... he has lost a brother. But there is no time for that.

Droplets of sweat are soaking his face, he thinks he has fallen asleep and having a terrible nightmare. He thinks he will wake up and tell his family that they are fine, that there was no intruder.

“I said continue or your wife and unborn baby get it!” Ntaba is basically holding back screams of frustration, his stomach clenches, twists and turns. “If I were you, I would count my words carefully. I want the truth you son of a bitch, nothing but the truth.”

“Fine, I told them to sleep with her. She was a stupid naïve girl who would do anything I said, then we killed her. I wanted her humiliated, I wanted the whole village to see the Khanyiles for the scums they really are. So we stripped

her naked and hung her on the tree. Getting into the premises was easy with her around, no one saw or heard a thing. I guess it was to our advantage that the homestead is so bloody big, you greedy sons of bitches. It was fun watching her whimper and beg me not to do it.”

Rage has taken over Mfundo, he’s singing like a canary. The deafening cries of his family must be the cause.

“I see, I guess it’s time to send these little innocent souls back to the sender. You bastards don’t deserve them,” Ntaba tells them.

He’s pointing a gun at the children.

“No, no please.” The brothers have become hysterical, none of them came armed. They were getting ready for bed when they heard Mfundo calling for them.

“It’s not your fault children, tell God to give you

better parents next time.” This he says to the children before lodging bullets in their heads, execution style.

The cries spiral It’s getting too loud and depressing up in here. Ntaba sighs, exasperated by the grieving family.

“Will you all shut up? You’re giving me a headache.” They don’t hear him, each is trying to grab their child. Gather their brains splattered on the floor.

Chuckling seems to put Ntaba at ease.

Mfundo’s wife charges at him, open claws ready to scratch him. She freezes and gasps as soon as her body presses against Ntaba’s, something is wrong... there’s blood dripping from her mouth, her eyes are wide and filled with tears.

“Mka... mkami?” Mfundo bawls, afraid of the

worst. He carries his hands on his head, his muscles are on strike. He can't move.

Ntaba curls an arm around her neck, a knife dripping with blood on its surface is held up before he slits the groaning woman's throat. She falls with a great thud.

There's a wound on her stomach— because of his desire to annihilate, he plunged a pregnant woman, killing her unborn child. To most people these acts are incomprehensible, but Ntaba... there's no guilt pouring inside him.

"No, no, no. Oh God, what have you done? What have you done?" Mfundo is going out of his mind with grief, it feels like death itself.

"Mama," Zanele is still alive? Ntaba looks over at her, he takes the phone from her and directs it toward her mother and all the dead bodies on the floor.

The blood tells a gruesome story.

With a gun still pointed at the brothers, Ntaba goes down on his knees, takes the phone back and hugs the child from behind.

“I want mama,” she cries.

“Shhh! It’s okay, you’re going to see uMah soon.” He’s promising the child and this man does not make empty promises.

Mfundo’s eyes widen, the brothers have not stopped crying.

“Not her, please spare my baby. Kill me instead, don’t kill my baby.” Mfundo’s voice has turned to pleading.

“We’re sorry, please. Stop all of this, you’ve taken enough.” Nsizwa’s voice is a broken record.

The Khanyile giant is not touched, he raises his eyes, kisses the child on her forehead and

smirks.

“Oho mtwana, umama kekho. Uyothengi sinkwa, ang’shaye ngaso. Athi ngidla amaasi.”

Ntaba sings the Zulu lullaby to the child while he presses a gun to her back, he makes sure to aim where the bullet will pierce through the heart. The gun goes off and the child tumbles to the ground like a bag of rice.

His eyes were on Mfundo the entire time, a sadistic smug on his face.

On the surface, he is a normal citizen, on the core he’s a murderous killer. His unrelenting urge to kill spikes his adrenalin.

It’s too silent in here, the brothers seem to have lost their strength. They are sitting on their asses, hands on their heads.

“Well, gentlemen.” As Ntaba stands, Mfaniseni

stands with him. His feet carry him towards the door in full speed—the black Oscar Pistorius.

It appears bullets are faster, he's hit on the leg twice. He screams as he falls to the ground.

“Why are you doing this? Haven't you had enough?” Mfundo growls.

The Khanyile giant giggles like a hyena and releases bullets on Mfundo's legs, his agonizing screams echo in the room.

He shoots Nsizwa next, his knees becoming the target.

Among the brothers, his first victim is Nsizwa. He leans over, places a lethal kiss on his forehead.

“Khothama Mntungwa, you have served your purpose.” Ntaba welcomes the man's death.

Swiftly, he slits his throat and leaves him gagging.

“Help, Help!” Only now Mfundo thinks of shouting for help, it’s funny to Ntaba, that’s how he’s able to laugh.

Mfaniseni receives the same affectionate farewell before his throat is slit. He’s twitching and heaving and staring at Ntaba, while trying to grab him.

With each throat he slits, he releases that anger eating him inside. It’s like a drug, a rush of actual pleasure.

Cutting the throat takes more suffering, he loves knives and despises guns. There’s something about the blade, seeing the gap opening. The person gagging, choking in their blood. He’s become addicted to that.

“Kill me already, just kill me.” Mfundo grovels weakly, he’s heaving. There’s no air in this place, it reeks of blood—evil.

“No. You’re going to keep me company while we watch your brothers take their last breaths, it’s going to take a while before they eventually choke in their blood.” Ntaba laughs and crouches on the floor, a few feet from Mfundo.

The recording hasn’t stopped, this is what he wanted. For the world to see what happens to people who touch his family. Consequences be damned, he will deal with them when they come.

“I hope it won’t be crowded when we get to hell, so many bodies?” Ntaba sighs, admiring the dead bodies. “Save space for me when you get there, sbari.”

He’s telling a man who just lost it all and is half way to his grave. He chuckles at the sound of police siren outside—somebody called the police?

“Looks like we’ve got company.” Ntaba.

His plan to inflict prolonged diabolical torture is working perfectly well, Sangweni is sinking in agony.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-

MATHONGA-

Ntaba is live on Instagram, he's killed the Sangweni family.

The giggling giant is what the viewers call him, some call him a monster while others commend him for what he has done.

I run out of my room to show everyone what I have just witnessed. They are all gathered in the lounge, Vukuzakhe, baba, Bongiwe and Khethiwe. Some of the servants are here as well, it's a pretty crowded room.

My father looks like his heart has been ripped out of his chest, my guess is that they have seen the live. He's on the phone shouting orders, "I want you at the station before my son gets there, do you hear me Ngubane?"

That's the Vumile I know.

Ngubane is his lawyer, thirty years of experience. I hope he's not rusted, Ntaba will need the best lawyer money can buy.

"Baba!"

All eyes turn to me, wide and curious.

"Ntaba is in trouble," I say, nearing them.

"We're watching the video, it looks so surreal."

Her face is surreal.

Why does Bongwiwe sound so excited about this?

"You know Ntaba will go to jail, right?" I'm asking Mrs Surreal, she huffs and waves me off.

"The police just got there," oh! I almost forgot

about Khethiwe, her eyes are housing tears.

“How can Ntaba be so stupid, why would he go live? There are more than 10 000 views now, people are spreading the word. It’s going to go viral before morning.”

Tell me something I don’t know.

“At least he’ll be famous after this, they have given him a name. They call him ‘The giggling giant’. You’ll find a way to excuse his offense. He is a prince, he can buy the country if he wants.” Stupidity does not suit Bongiwe.

“Bongiwe!” Zakhe rebukes her, good for him.

She doesn’t care though, they are watching on her phone, I’m sure she’s the one who called baba. I’m glad Nandi is not here, I don’t want her to know what really happened to her daughter.

“Bhuti,” I’m talking to Bongiwe’s husband now. Stress is going to kill him at a young age. “Bhuti we have to help him.”

He's typing something on his phone, striding towards me.

"Let's talk in the kitchen." Okay, he wants privacy. A second later, he places the phone against his ear, big brother is sweating goat dung.

"Who are you calling?" I'm anxious to find out, I have never seen him this terrified before.

He looks at me and with a low voice says, "Funokuhle."

"Oh shit!" I completely forgot about him. "Do you think he has seen the video?"

"I hope not," he keeps his voice down. "Thonga, he's alone."

"Let's hope he's sleeping, besides, he doesn't look like the Instagram type. Let us fix Ntaba's mess before umjolo bhuti." I might get a slap for this.

A sigh slips past his lips, "You're right let's go."

He's already headed to the door.

"Where are we going?"

"To the Sangwenis, he'll need to see a familiar face."

Well, Ntaba is not about that. I doubt he ever feels alone, he's on a high right now and the last thing he cares about is seeing a familiar face.

I follow him out regardless, time is of the essence.

"Did you know about this?" He's asking me, perks of having a spiritual gift. People think you know everything, if that were the case, I would've prevented Zamangwane's death. I steal a look from the passenger side and meet his stern gaze.

"No!" That's considered a lie right? I knew Ntaba

was going to pay them a visit, and maybe kill one of them. Wiping out the entire family is new to me.

“Mathonga wait.” Where is Khethiwe going? She’s running towards the car, I have tell Zakhe to stop.

“What’s happening?” He asks.

He doesn’t know that his brother has a girlfriend.

“That’s the woman who warms your brother’s bed.” I’m stupidly smiling, anticipating a Ndleleni response from Zakhe. He’s so boring, his face lacks a reaction. Aish! Old people.

“We can’t take her with us, it might be dangerous.” He says.

Too late, the door opens and in hops a breathless Khethiwe.

My brother is giving me a look, he wants me to tell her to go back into the house. I’m not doing

that.

“Drive bhuti.”

His eyes rebuke me, he’s internally complaining. I’m not bothered really, as long as we get there before the police take Ntaba away.

It’s awkward in the car with Khethiwe sniffing like that, I don’t know about my brother but I’m not about to comfort her. Comforting a crying woman takes a lot from you, telling her lies; that everything will be okay. Not. In. The. Mood!

Zakhe keeps side eyeing me, he wants me to do the honours. It’s not happening. He should answer his phone and leave me alone.

I check the name flashing on the screen, Styles is calling. He hands me the phone, “Put him on speaker.” He says.

Mmhh!

“Zakhe!” People like Styles don’t greet, I lived

with the man, okay.

“Styles, my brother is in trouble.” He’s not about to cry is he? Or his voice has dropped to the lowest common denominator?

“Yeah, I’m watching the news. The kid is not so careless, he has unravelled.” Styles.

Ntaba has made it to the news? Trust social media people to spread the word, this is a disaster. He will never get out of this mess.

“I don’t want him going to jail. The police are all over the place, he’s killed everyone. If he walks out of that house, they will shoot him on the spot.” Zakhe articulates, I keep checking for tears in his eyes.

Nothing.

“Let me see if I can make some calls, I’m not promising anything.” Thank you Styles, maybe he knows people who know people.

“Please help him,” Zakhe’s final words before he drops the call.

“If Ntaba gets arrested, I will never speak to Khahlamba and Nomkhubulwane again.”

No, I’m highly upset.

How can they let this happen to their own? Are they not ashamed? Other people’s ancestors are sweating blood, helping their people.

“Where is Ndleleni anyway? He should be here,” in addition, I ask.

As useless as we all are, we need to show our brother that we care.

“He had something to do, we’re going to need all the help we can get.”

This brother is not going to tell me what that something is, is he?

There is nowhere to park, police cars are

everywhere. I see an ambulance, and... a TV news van. There is no rest for the wicked, they are going to humiliate my brother.

Neighbours in their night wears are here too, hurdled like a herd of animals. Heavily armed policemen have taken positions on all corners, the bloody sherbets look well trained and determined to come out victorious. How is Ntaba going to escape them?

“Hey, hey! Are fucking blind? This is a crime scene, you can’t park there.” A white policeman barks while approaching us.

“I can park wherever the hell I want, this is my town.” I don’t know Zakhe to be this person, but this idiot deserves it.

The cop laughs, “Move your car boy or I will handcuff you, jail is not a nice place for a pretty boy like you.”

What? Vukuzakhe Khanyile? A pretty boy? This

cop has no respect.

I want to intervene, but Zakhe is on his face, towering over the scrawny white man.

“I am not your boy,” he bubbles with anger.

“Take a look around Simon, I’m surrounded by my people. Just one word from me and mob justice will be the last thing you utter out of that dirty mouth of yours.”

Sheesh!

“Is that a threat boy?” The officer mumbles, his neck must be hurting from looking up.

“Call me boy again and you’ll find out,” Zakhe.

The officer is not fazed, he slams his hands on his chest to push him back. Zakhe doesn’t move an inch and that has the cop widening his eyes in anger.

Zakhe is boiling with rage, his fists are clench so are his teeth. I see a punch coming and

stand in between them.

“We don’t want trouble sir, we’re...” I raise my hands to pat the arrogant cop’s shoulder, but he tackles me, knocking me down to the ground. His whole body is on top of me, restraining me.

“A little help here,” he’s calling for backup.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I’m doing everything I can to pull away.

“Stop resisting arrest sir, or you will be charged with resisting an officer in the lawful execution of a legal duty.” He’s shouting.

A knee is pressed on my neck before I can comprehend what is happening. He pulls my hands to my back and begins to handcuff me.

“Mathonga!” Khethiwe yelps, it doesn’t help me, does it?

“What are you doing?” I hear Zakhe shout, I

want to know the same. What did I do to deserve this humiliating treatment?

“What is happening?” There’s someone else here, another white man if I’m reading his accent right. I can’t see a damn thing from down here.

“He attacked me sir,” says the violent cop. He’s lying, all I did was brush his shoulder.

“That’s a lie!” Zakhe spits out the words. “There are witnesses, everyone saw what happened.”

The spectators agree with Zakhe, there is no case. I’m innocent.

“You better let my brother go, or I will personally see to it that you’re both removed from your positions.” Zakhe’s threat must be sinking in, the officers have gone quiet.

“Let him go,” the second one commands. He must be the commander. The idiot on top of me

takes his precious time to remove the handcuffs, Zakhe helps me up. I'm livid, I want justice. I was wrongfully handcuffed by this racist lunatic glaring daggers at me. Zakhe presses a hand on my shoulder and squeezes, he's trying to calm me down.

"What are you people doing here?" You people?

"If you're not going to address us with respect, then please let us talk to a man of colour. My brother is in that house, we have the right to know about his wellbeing." Zakhe.

The cops share a look, if only I can read minds.

"Is your brother the one who has slaughtered the whole family?" The superior ask, his badge reads SGT. Van Schalkwyk.

"That's your word against his," I sizzle.

It's pretty obvious that I am still fuming.

"In that case, I can't allow you to go through the

caution tape,” he says, nudges his partner before they walk away.

“How are we going to talk to Ntaba? He’s alone in there.” Khethiwe’s cries elevate, maybe bringing her along was a bad idea.

“I’m going to try his phone,” Zakhe says.

We wait as he dials the number, it’s ringing.

“Bhuti,” he answers just as we’re about to lose hope.

“Tell me you’re okay.” Zakhe’s first words.

“There are police outside,” Ntaba states the obvious.

He does not sound like someone who is in trouble.

“I know, we’re here as well. Why did you do it? You murdered the entire Sangweni family.”

Has he forgotten about Funokuhle?

“They deserved it, I would do it again given a second chance.” I agree with Ntaba, they deserved it. But the kids, he should’ve at least spared the kids.

“Not the children, those were Funo’s nieces and nephews.” Just when I thought he’s forgotten his person.

“Don’t you think I know that?” Ntaba.

“He will never forgive me for this, what am I going to say to him?”

“Why are you blaming yourself? I killed his family.”

Why are they debating? They should be talking about getting him out of there.

“Khethiwe is here,” I jump in. Little Miss has not said anything. Was she not the one who wanted to come here?

“Ntaba, please stop. We need you back home, please Ngwane.” Worry cloaks her voice, she’s a mess of tears. Ntaba is silent, he has nothing to say to her and that breaks Khethiwe because she burst into cries.

I look around, in search of a woman who will be willing to lend a shoulder to cry on.

“Is Mfundo still alive? Release him and let the police take you in. I’ll take you out of prison bhuti wami, I promise.” I believe Zakhe, if anything, he takes care of his own.

Knowing Ntaba, he is going to take what Zakhe said with a grain of salt.

“Take Khethiwe back home, I don’t want her to see me like this. I’m not done with Mfundo bhuti, I will give myself in once I finish what I came here for.” The phone goes dead, he dropped the call on us. Ntaba is too stubborn to listen to anyone.

NTABEZIKUDE-

He does not have a particular preference for gender, if he did, the women and children would've been spared from his wrath. He lacks compassion, and at this point it's safe to associate him with one of the world's notorious serial killers.

He's not a highly egocentric murderer who kills for narcissistic reasons, his heart has been torn in two. This is the only way to mend it, give the perpetrators a taste of their own medicine.

"I would build a man cave in here if I could, but I don't like the smell of death. Law enforcement is outside, we can't stay away for too long." He tells a weak Mfundo who is lying on his back, strength has been drained from him.

“Before we go, pull down your pants.” He makes sure the camera is directed at Mfundo.

“Fuck you!” The man on the floor spews spit at him.

“Argh, Sangweni. You should be wishing that for yourself, one last fuck before you meet your demise. Unless, there are she demons in hell, then no worries.” There’s that giggle that makes him seem crazy and out of touch with reality.

Mfundo is too weak to move, so it’s left to Ntaba to pull the darn pants down exposing the man’s manhood.

“Wh... what are you doing?” Mfundo’s voice is on the verge of extinction, he has finished his crying bundles. He’s waiting for his death now, there is nothing left for him.

Ntaba pulls something from his pocket, a small white bottle.

“Time for the climax,” he winks at Mfundo,

twists the lid open. A barbaric act of physical torture, he empties it on Mfundo's nether regions. Some spread all over his body. This is one of the sickest element of his sadistic game. His tormenting screams echo, the Khanyile mad man poured acid on his penis.

Ntaba stands back, watching the man suffer from deep burns. His harboured anger has unleashed, he viewed the Sangwenis as objects he wanted to destroy and the results are grisly.

The giggle attacks him again, he derives pleasure from his sadistic torture methods.

He has degraded Mfundo and enjoyed every second of it while displaying a reckless disregard for his suffering.

“Let's go give the people a show, shall we?”

The pair of pants lying on the dressing table catch his attention, what he needs from them is

the belt. He strings it around Mfundo's neck and drags him out of the bedroom like a dog with no legs. Mfundo is groaning and screaming and drooling.

They arrive at the sounds of guns cocking, they are pointed at him.

"Wow, smile Sangweni. All these people are here for you."

"You are surrounded Ntabezikude, step away from the victim." One of the commanding officers shouts.

"What about my show stopper?" Ntaba mumbles enough for him and Mfundo to hear... oh and the audience across the world. His mind is flooded with dark thoughts, he is a monster, worse than evil.

"Step away from the victim now," sounds like a final warning.

He lets go of the leash, and the phone, lifts his

hands and goes down on his knees. The police start moving in, as slow as they can.

A smirk stretching at the corner of his mouth, Ntaba side eyes his right hand and right there is a lighter. Acid and fire are not the best of friends.

This man came prepared, a premeditated murder might get him the death penalty. Then again, this is South Africa.

There is nothing outside of his outer appearance that makes one extremely afraid of him— he can easily draw you into him, charming like a snake.

So, what's his excuse for these multiple vicious acts? He can always tell the judge he was high on Mageu and toppers.

“Kiss Satan for me Sangweni, don't have too much without me.” He sends the message and drops the lit lighter on Mfundo. Lying down on

his stomach to avoid being shot at, he laughs, eyes on an enflamed Mfundo as he runs around like a headless chicken.

Gratification is the sense of control he has gained and the pain he instilled on this family who fell prey to his anger. Motivated by revenge, Ntabezikude Khanyile has wiped out the entire family.

“Go! Go! Go!” A sense of emergency lies in the voice of the one who gives an order.

Khanyile is handcuffed and taken out of the premises, he keeps looking back at Mfundo. The man is still on fire, the police are trying to get him to stop, drop and roll.

Blinding lights flash the moment he is taken out the gate, the media bombards him questions he does not answer.

“Ntaba!” He hears Khethiwe scream his name, his eyes search until they find her. She’s in tears, he wants to tell her not to cry, that she looks ugly when she cries. Vukuzakhe and Mathonga are here, amid the crowd, trying to push their way through, to get to him. The police push back anyone who’s attempting to get through, including the TV media. Ntaba acknowledges his brothers with a smile.

“We’re right behind you Ntaba, I will get you out. I promise.” Now Zakhe’s promises can be legit, but this is a tough one.

The cop ushering Ntaba pushes him in the back of a police car, when the door shuts, he sits back and heaves a sigh.

“You boys think this country belongs to you, there is no getting out of this one.” The driver sneers. It’s an Afrikaner, disgust is marked on his face.

“You’re going to spend the rest of your life in prison boy.” He finishes.

Ntaba giggles and shuts his eyes, it’s been a long day.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-one

NALA-

Had I known the intimate moment I had with Mathonga would be a trigger, I never would have allowed him to touch me in that way.

It started with the dreams, then flash backs of the nights Petros would force himself on me.

He's back and haunting me.

He's everywhere, his thick scent on my skin, his soul is tangled with mine and his body is pressed against mine. I can still feel him, especially when I lie in bed at night.

How do I get rid of him?

Talking to a qualified stranger about it is not helping, it might work for others. It takes me back to those nights, sometimes his scent randomly swooshes past my nostrils, and I instantly become paranoid and attentive to my surroundings.

Ninety percent of the time I keep myself busy, it works as a defence mechanism and helps me forget a little.

Zitha is driving me back home after a day spent with her, we haven't received the DNA results yet, but she treats me like her sister. I'm

enjoying the attention I'm getting from her.

"I had fun today," I introduce.

"We can do it again tomorrow." Zitha has so much time in her hands, she's not like any other ordinary mom. Perhaps it could be that her husband is hands-on with their kid.

"I can't tomorrow, Thobani has a therapy session."

"Oh, I can take you guys. What time is it?"

I want to tell her to stay home and spend time with Buhle, I've been too selfish with her. I haven't met him yet, she's shown me pictures. The three of them look like a happy bunch.

"Don't worry about it, transport is sorted." I kindly decline her offer, I don't want her family thinking I'm taking her from them.

"Where is he?" I ask, and the smile on her face disperses. She knows who I'm talking about.

Curiosity has not let me rest since I found out that we could be sisters, Zitha hasn't said anything about the man who might have fathered me, so why not ask?

"He's around and not worth it," she says it like he is a huge obstacle in her path.

"Why? What did he do?"

"Tshilidzi is a closed subject, we don't talk about him." The tone she uses is infinitely dismissive.

Tshilidzi must have messed up to be hated by his own daughter. My mother never talked about my father, maybe I was too young to remember.

Suddenly we hear a loud bang, Zitha instantly stops the car.

"What was that?" I'm panicking, while she looks

relaxed. I don't remember her having a strong drink today, why is she so calm?

"I think I hit something, I'll go check." She dashes out of the car, the road is not so busy. Rush hour has come and gone with the hours.

After checking for any incoming cars, I leave the vehicle to join Zitha. I find her standing in front of an unconscious woman on the ground, there is so much blood on her I can't tell where the wound is. It can't be from the accident, it wasn't that loud a bang.

"I think she's dead," she's panicking now.

"We have to get her to the hospital, let's bring her to the car." My idea could get us into trouble with the police, but it's the only way to find out if the woman is still alive.

"Okay, you grab her hands and I'll take her legs." Zitha.

As I move closer, the lady's face comes to light.

“Wait a minute, I know her. I know this lady.”
This is Amandla, the woman I met at the
restaurant.

“We’ll do the reunion later, I don’t want to be
charged for murder.” She bends over and grabs
her legs, gosh it looks so wrong carrying an
knocked out woman to the car.

VUKUZAKHE-

He couldn’t stay away anymore, worry for
Funokuhle wouldn’t let him rest. He uses his
keys to enter the apartment, Funokuhle should
be sleeping in bed but it’s empty and made.

“Hey kid,” he calls out to him.

He must be in the bathroom, “Funokuhle, are
you in there?”

Zakhe knocks on the bathroom door for a while,

it's too quiet in there. He has to check though just to make sure, maybe Funokuhle is upset and doesn't want to see him.

Slowly he opens the door and his heart sinks to his stomach when he sees him in the bath tub, buried naked in the water.

Zakhe can't say when he got Funokuhle out of the water, the next thing his minion is lying on the bathroom floor while he's performing CPR.

"Come on kid, breathe for me." Desperately, he pleads with the unconscious man. "Please breathe... please."

There is no progress after a few attempts, his body lies still and cold on the wet tiles.

Feeling helpless, Zakhe stands and stumbles back, unshed tears threatening to expose the pain in his heart.

What he's feeling is unexplainable.

His back hits the wall, he falls flat on his butt. It's the shock that has rendered him weak, he covers his mouth with his hand as tears rush down his face.

Funokuhle can't be dead, he can't be.

"Funokuhle, no." A trebling whisper.

What is he going to do now? How will he live without his minion? The image of Funokuhle's body lying there will be engraved on his mind forever.

The kid's ancestors must have rejected him, he coughs once before he starts choking.

"Kid," Zakhe hurries to his side, his eyes are slightly open giving him a glimpse of the terror and fear in Zakhe's eyes. Only when Funokuhle sits up is he able to catch his breath.

“It’s okay,” Zakhe assures him.

Hurriedly he grabs a bath towel and covers Funokuhle’s nakedness.

“You’re okay, you’re okay my love.” Zakhe repeats with a shaky voice, his arms are tight around the young man.

“I’m fine.” Funo is pushing him away, his gorilla won’t let go though. “I’m fine Vukuzakhe.”

He manages to push him, his head is spinning and heart pounding many beats a minute. Thinking he’s strong enough, Funokuhle stands.

“It’s not what you think.” He’s trying to explain what Vukuzakhe saw.

What else could it be? He came home to find his minion buried in the bath tub filled with water and not breathing, for a moment he thought he was dead.

Stopping his heart from racing will need doctors,

it feels like it's about to drop out of his chest.

"Don't look at me like that." Funokuhle commands, noticing the intent stare from Zakhe. Fear does not come easy to this giant, but now, he looks like he has seen a ghost.

"Why are you doing this? Did you even stop to think of me Funokuhle?" He is fighting back tears.

"I wasn't going to kill myself, I was just sleeping."

That was a strange sleep.

"You killed me today, you have killed me."

Zakhe is still in shock, he has lost the ability to move. Getting up from the bathroom floor could be a risk, he is not sure if his legs will support him. What the hell did this boy just show him?

"I told you I was sleeping, I don't know how I blacked out." With these words he walks out of

the bathroom, the towel wrapped around his waist.

Zakhe's tongue click tails Funo, he needs answers. Why would he want to commit suicide? How could he be so selfish? Is he not worth living for?

If this is his plan to hurt him then it worked.

In a fit of rage, Zakhe marches out of the bathroom, he finds Funokuhle sitting on the bed. He can't read anything from that blank stare.

"What was that about? Why would you do that nonsense?" He's never yelled at him like this, Funo should be recoiling and hiding under the sheets. But he remains steady, a blank expression on his face.

"I told you I was not trying to kill myself, what do you want from me?" Funokuhle keeps calm.

“The truth,” is said with a demanding tone.

“It’s fine if you don’t believe me, there is nothing I can do to convince you.”

Actually there might be something, at least look apologetic.

“Do you have any idea what finding you like that did to me?”

There is no answer from Funokuhle, he questions Zakhe with the look in his eyes.

“Say something dammit!” Zakhe needs to calm down.

“What do you want me to say?” The minion shrugs and takes his gaze away.

“I am nothing without you Funokuhle, it all means nothing without you.” He’s wearing his heart on his sleeve.

Funokuhle shrugs for the second time, there is no ounce of emotion on his cold face.

“I wanted to hear my heart beating.” He finally speaks after a stretched moment of silence. “I felt lifeless I guess. I wasn’t going to kill myself, I would never do that.”

It’s so hard for Zakhe to believe him, no one falls asleep in a bathtub filled to the brim and does not realise they are drowning.

“I have never been so scared in my life,” Zakhe strides up to his minion. He kneels in front of him, and rests his head on Funo’s lap.

Funo’s body tenses at the contact, he shifts uncomfortably when Khanyile wraps his arms around his waist, pulling the younger man closer.

“I know you’re hurting and I am so sorry kid.” Oh, he knows why he did what he did.

“They are dead... my family is...” The rest of his words flat out, he breaks into sobs. Zakhe holds him tighter but Funo is on a mission to push

him away.

“I’m sorry Funokuhle, I’m so sorry.” Repeating these words is not helping at all, the last Sangweni kin won’t stop bawling.

This means he saw the news, he knows what Ntaba did. There has to be a way to turn back time and change today’s happenings.

NDLELENI-

He didn’t think she would keep him waiting, women are unpredictable and crazy sometimes. The restaurant is not so crowded, thankfully and there are no TVs. The place is occupied by people who came to eat while enjoying each other’s company.

He checks the time on his wrist watch, and realises he’s lost ten minutes in this restaurant.

He wants to log in on Instagram and see what's happening now. However, it could be risky, someone might catch him, say... a girl he's looking to impress.

That's right, he came with the desire to seduce.

'Do you feel what I'm feeling?' Is the first thing he should ask her.

"Ndleleni." His heart almost escapes his chest, he recognises her voice even though they met once.

Nerves attack him, he stands and tries for a smile.

"Banami, you made it?" Relax Ndleleni, you'll give yourself away.

The smile she returns is legit, his gaze is all over her body. Tonight she looks different, a red dress that rides up her thighs ever so slightly. The fabric tracing her figure.

Her lips are tinted with red lipstick, that's all the make-up she could get on her face. The smell of her perfume is mesmerising, in his eyes she looks perfect. This must be the only woman in the world, the rest are one of the guys. Never has he ever felt this way for a woman.

"Yo... you look... red." Okay, rewind.

The fool blinks as if Banami's giggle served as a go ahead.

"I mean, stunning. You're beautiful Banami."

She keeps the warm smile, "thank you."

Silence is golden, but not always. It's strange standing in the middle of the restaurant, lost in someone's eyes. Banami clears her throat, a way to snap out of it and pulls a chair. It's cue for Ndleleni to wake up and unfreeze himself, his hands lace hers when he grabs her chair. It's by accident that his face is so near to hers, she's such a short little thing that he has to

almost hunch to get closer.

Wait a second! Is he going for a kiss? Too soon.

“Ndleleni,” Banami breathlessly takes his name. Her warm breath touches his face, he feels the hair on his nape stand and his dick twitch—just a fraction.

Definitely not the time.

Ndleleni pulls the chair for her, she takes a sit after a confident ‘thank you.’

Vukuzakhe gave him her numbers, it was after they saw the video of Ntaba assassinating innocent people.

“You know what you must do,” Zakhe had said.

At first, Ndleleni was dumbfounded until he remembered that Ntaba or Mathonga must’ve told him about him meeting a girl and almost making a fool of himself.

“I didn’t think you would come,” he starts the conversation on a light note.

“Why?” She asks in a voice so sweet that he forgets the way her eyes are adoringly staring into his.

“I... I don’t know, most girls like playing hard to get. We barely know each other, but...”

All this stuttering! Come on Ndleleni, get your head in the game.

“But I’m here,” the confidence in her voice is highly palpable. He could get used to this. “I’m not a child Ndleleni and I’m a busy woman, I don’t have time to play hard to get.”

This should be fun.

He likes the way she speaks, it brings a smile to his face.

“You’re smiling?” She wears a smile so bright.

“I am?” Of course he knows he’s smiling.

“Not to come across as forward or anything,” she takes the menu and pages to the wine section. “When I first saw you, you came across as intimidating. Arrogant if I may put it clearly.”

“Okay!” That’s all he can say.

“I saw the same expression and demeanour when I walked in here, you don’t have an approachable face.”

Judging the guy on a first date? Wrong move Banami.

“I... didn’t know... that.” He clears his throat again. It’s too soon to let her know she makes him nervous.

Dinner passes through a light conversation, she makes him laugh and that’s something many have failed to do. Most of the time he’s too serious that Banami holds back from being herself. It has to do with his daunting character.

“Would you like another glass?” He’s already pouring the wine in her glass.

Banami reaches for his hand to stop him, “No, I’ve got work tomorrow.”

Their gaze lasts a full second, enough for each to take in the face of the other. Nothing needs to be said, the universe has taken care of the message.

“Wanna dance?” Ooh! Zakhe will be proud, this is what a man on a mission does. Ndleleni has found a way for their bodies to communicate without the need of words.

“I don’t dance, I suck at dancing.” She replies, a smile in her voice tells him she’s a warm woman. Just what the doctor ordered.

“You won’t have to do anything, just hold on to me and I will lead you.”

This one reads Mills and Boon.

Banami cracks with laughter, “That’s so cheesy.”

He means it though.

“I’ll dance with you,” she gobbles down the wine leaving the glass empty. He’s not about to judge her, people are going through shit out there. A glass of something strong to numb the pain can’t be so bad.

“Just don’t let go, I might fall if you do.” Banami.

He stands and takes her hand, “You’re allowed to fall Smurfette. I am here to catch you.”

Banami moves into Ndleleni’s personal space with just the right amount of heat in her eyes. She’s not just looking at him, she is looking into him as if she knows his desires.

“Really dude, you just called me Smurfette.”

“You just called me dude.” He challenges her with a raised brow.

“Ndleleni!” How does she fight this smile attacking her.

“Banami!” Ndleleni is trying to be indifferent, she can never find out how much power she has on him.

His heart is beating fast, in their eyes there’s an invitation to learn about the other.

For heaven’s sake, Park Hyoshin’s The Dance is too deep a song for these two. They just met, good-god.

On the dance floor, even before he touches her, she feels his hands and her lungs expand with salty air. His hands fall down her back, he presses her body against his. This closeness comes with electric tingles and the desire to play.

“You’re so warm,” he whispers into her ear.

“It must be the heat in here,” her voice has the rhythm he would love to hear now and again. She needs strepsils, this is the umpteenth time she’s clearing her throat.

“The air conditioner is on,” Ndleleni reminds her.

He brushes a strand of her braids from her shoulder and moves in so close she can feel his lean body pressed up against hers. Just the right blend of relaxation and tension.

Ndleleni lifts his hand to caress her neck, slow and gentle. He’s making himself wait for their lips to gather and he can hardly bare it. He wants her lips now, but he has to play this right lest he comes across as a pervert who is out to dip his dick in someone’s cookie.

With a gentle touch, he cups her face and connects his lips to hers, Banami responds with no hesitation.

“Let’s get out of here,” this man is taking chances.

“My place?” Oh, wow. She’s a chance taker too.

Seduce the forensic psychologist... Mission in progress, hopefully his dick will work wonders and get Banami on their side. Ntaba’s life depends on it.

MATHONGA-

Bonus-

NALA-

Amandla suffered from multiple stab wounds, that’s what the doctor said. She lost a lot of blood, there’s a long list of people waiting for donors. I offered mine, Zitha did too; out of guilt I presume.

Amandla is in theatre, the wait is agonising. I

don't know her but my heart goes out to her.

Who would want to hurt her?

"Zitha!" Kenneth is here, she called him on our way to the hospital. I watch as she throws herself in his arms, he's holding her like he never wants to let go.

"Are you hurt?" He queries, inspecting every inch of her body. Zitha nods and goes back into his arms.

Kenneth is turning fifty years old soon. He does not look a day older than 35, what do these rich people eat that has them looking young?

This black don't crack thing is playing with our emotions, black people need to decide if they want to age or not. You can't be growing in age and not in body.

That aside, I was blown away when she told me she's twenty-four. A whole twenty-six year gap between her and Kenneth.

Zitha is a year older than me, if we are sisters then I will have a big sister. It will be nice to be taken care of for once.

“Where was Mandla when all of this happened?” He’s not letting her go, yet anger is visible on his face. I would be recoiling if I were Zitha.

“I gave him a day off, I wanted to spend time alone with Nala.” Zitha explains and his eyes find me, I think I’m going to pee on myself.

“Zithobile, I told you never to drive yourself.” He releases her and shoves his hands in his pockets, he’s chiding her with an intimidated stare. Zitha is not fazed, in fact she wraps her arms around his waist and lays her head on his chest.

“I’m know Kenny, but Mandla is a family man. He deserves a break too.” This must be how she softens him up, the man is melting under her touch.

“Where is Dlozi?” That’s their son’s name, it’s similar to Mathonga. Although they have different meanings.

“He’s sleeping over at Liyana’s, she will bring him home tomorrow.” Zitha.

Kenneth frowns, I don’t understand how he switches from soft to hard in the blink of an eye.

“We’re fetching him on our way home, he’s my son.” He says.

Dramatic!

From the corner of my eye I see the doctor striding over to us, saving me from the two love birds.

“The doctor is here.” I alert them.

The first thing I do is look for any dejection on his face, that’s where doctors carry the bad news.

“How is she doctor?” Zitha asks, wrapping

herself around Kenneth. They seem like the clingy type.

“Please tell me she’s okay.” He turns his gaze to me.

“The surgery went well, your sister will be fine.”
My sister?

Zitha and I share a muddled look, “she’s not my sister doctor. I only met her recently.”

He probably thinks we look alike.

The confusion has transferred to the doctor, he glances at me then Zitha, then back at me.

“But we did some tests before the blood transfusion and your blood DNA matches with hers, she is your sister.”

No, this must be some kind of mistake.

“Wow, to go is to see.” Zitha claps her hands as she cackles shockingly. I’m just as taken aback, I mean what are the odds of meeting your

sisters all in a space of a week? Life will surprise you.

DALISILE-

“Ndlunkulu, you have a visitor.” Such respect coming from a warden to a prisoner? Must be nice.

A few days in and Dalisile has gained herself some loyal followers, must be luck or her mother is watching over her from above.

She has not been taken to trial yet, she shares the cell with a bunch of aggressive women who are frustrated by the mere fact of being locked up.

A holding cell is hell for a woman who lived like a queen half of her life.

She stands, rushes towards the cell bar, and

grabs it with both hands.

“Who is it?” She asks.

It’s shocking to her because no one has visited her since she’s been locked up, friends, family, or the lawyer she so desperately wanted to meet.

“Omunye umagriza, jeer that old hag smells of impepho.” The warden makes a disgusted face. Dalisile is not there, her mind has gone with the wind to find out who the old hag might be.

It can’t be Mgobhozi, that one loves herself too much to go around smelling of muti. Besides, the last time she saw her, her foot was decaying.

“How come she gets visitors after hours?” One of the cell mates complains.

“Voetsek sboshwa,” (Piss off, prisoner.)

The prisoner grumbles at the guard’s barking.

That was a good question though, how is the person who came to see Dalisile allowed to see her this late at night?

She's in the visitor's room, there is no glass separating them, only a table. The woman is not as old as the warden made it sound, but the strong smell of impepho lingers about. Dalisile frowns at the sight of her, nothing in her appearance looks familiar.

"I'll give you some privacy Ndlunkulu, you have less than five minutes. I'll lose my job if the superiors find out about this visit." This warden deserves a lil' something in her account, but dear Dalisile is broke.

The guard shuts the door behind her.

"Who are you?" Dalisile does not greet, she never does. The old woman sneers at her, her gaze fixed on Dalisile till she's seated opposite

her.

“This is not a social visit, your sister sent me.”
This gets Dalisile’s full attention.

“How is she? How is Mgobhozi?” Her sister is the only one she has left, losing her will be devastating.

“Don’t worry about her, I’m taking care of her.”
That should be good news, Dalisile’s face lacks a smile though.

“She asked me to give you something.”

“Is it money? I need money and a lawyer. My useless husband turned our lawyer against me...”

Her complaint falls midway when the old woman stands, she digs a hand into her panties. God knows what she’s doing, horrified, Dalisile looks away.

“What are you doing?”

“Here!” Dalisile looks back to see her holding her a small black plastic tied in a knot.

“I’m not touching that, where did you store it?”
Yes, she is still queen.

“Do you want to get out of jail or not?”

That’s a rhetorical question.

“What’s in the plastic?”

“Don’t ask me questions I cannot answer in here, make sure you swallow this. No matter what happens, don’t spit it out. Or you will never get out of here.”

Dalisile uses the sleeve of her garment to take the packet, she’s scrutinising the woman under her gaze, not sure if she should trust her.

“My name is Nyoni, Mgobhozi has told you about me. I’ll see you on the other side.” She leaves without any goodbyes.

Dalisile cannot trust this Nyoni woman, but

Mgobhozi has all her trust.

MATHONGA-

We were not allowed to see Ntaba, Styles had said he was pulling some strings. How long are those strings? I need to make sure that Ntaba is doing okay, physically and mentally.

“The criminal is a high risk to society.” These were the state attorney’s words.

Imagine calling my brother a high risk to society, nonsense. The ancestors are too quiet on me. Not only that, they have decided to take my sleep from me.

I tossed and turned in bed till taking a walk was the only option I was left with. Yeah, Yeah, it’s

after midnight but who cares?

I haven't spoken to baba about the funeral, Bongiwe had mentioned that it's on Sunday. We don't bury on Saturday in the Sabbath.

It's a sad moment for us, losing Zamangwane.

Nandi was admitted at the hospital, I don't know how but the old lady collapsed after she saw the Sangweni massacre, I'm talking confession and all.

She will never come back from this, she's supposed to be here, mourning her daughter. The mattress was prepared for her to sit on, I hope she comes back in time for the funeral.

I see a car driving in and instantly recognise that it's Ndleleni's, today he will tell me where he's been.

"Ndoda," I'm going for a handshake.

Okay, so he's going to ignore me like that? He's headed to the kitchen, someone pissed him off or is it Zamo's death?

"Who ate your cake?" I ask as soon as I find him gulping down a bottle of beer. He shoots me a cold stare, I know when to back off but today... today he will not intimidate me.

"More like whose cake did I eat?" Oh now he's talking, or scoffing rather.

"I don't understand," Ndleleni never makes sense when he speaks. It could be that he's not a talker.

I'm given the second glare when he settles down with two more bottles, a drunkard in the making? Only a woman can make a man drink this much.

"Alright, come out with it. Who broke your heart?"

"Who said my heart is broken?"

“You’re grumpy, that’s the only thing that makes sense. Or you are sexually frustrated, it has that effect on people.” I’m a pro at this, I’ve been having sex since my high school days. Pastor Khuzwayo would call it fornication, who ever invented that law was single as fuck.

The sigh Ndleleni emits answers me, he’s sexually frustrated. I should not be laughing at my brother.

“What happened?”

“Uhlekani shlama?” (What’s so funny?)

Why so violent? I’m trying to lend a helping hand.

“Listen Ndlela. I’m your brother, the only friend you have. You need to speak to someone about what you’re going through, or you will explode.”

I say.

I don’t want him feeling alone, he isolates himself too much. This brother of mine needs a woman, someone to keep his heart on the edge.

“That’s my problem,” he takes more than many sips. “I didn’t explode.”

Confusion loves me, or these brothers love it when I’m in the dark.

“Why do you want to explode?” I question him, it’s what people do when they are not sure about something. I don’t get why Ndleleni is looking at me like I’m not human.

“Bhuti, I don’t...” Wait, that raised brow and the shame in his eyes. “Ndleleni, why are you telling me that you were masturbating? That’s disgusting, I don’t want to...”

“Voetsek, mhlathi wakho. I was not doing that nonsense.” He calls it nonsense?

I beg to differ, sometimes a man has to do what a man has to do.

“I was out on a date with Banami and...”

“Wait, Banami the criminal profiler?” I’m beyond

shocked, I thought he was terrified of her.

“Yes, Zakhe wants her on our side. If she takes Ntaba’s case and proves that he was not in his rightful state of mind when he killed those people, he might get a lighter sentence or become a resident in the looney house.”

That is a good idea.

“But why use her? You can’t play with her heart Ndleleni.”

He’s going for beer number two, I have to make him a strong cup of coffee.

“I’m not entirely using her, I like her and I think we might have something.” Nice. “We just need someone on our side, I have to convince her to take Ntaba’s case. She will evaluate him and prove to the court that our brother is insane.”

“What if the court doesn’t believe it?” I ask.

“She’s a forensic Psychiatrist dummy, whatever

evidence she brings to the table will be considered legit.” Ndleleni.

I can only wish him good luck, he’s an educated fool who only knows how to run a business not people’s lives.

“I hope it won’t backfire on you, bag yourself a woman ndoda. You need one.” I pat his shoulder but he shrugs my hand off.

“Yeah, if having a woman requires faking an orgasm, then I’d rather not.” What is he saying to me?

“Ndoda?” Is this what he meant when he said he didn’t explode?

“Banami and I have great chemistry, everything was going well. We connected and decided to take things to her place. The car ride was torture, it was hard to keep my hands to myself. We didn’t make it into the house, we did it there in the garage. On top of the boot of her car, I

could tell she was enjoying me man. She would call my name, I loved that because we don't know each other that well but she called my name."

"Okay Shakespeare, you are great. I get it, take it easy on the graphics." I have to pause him a little, he is still my brother and I'm not about to watch Ndleleni having sex in my head.

He clicks his tongue, decides that I'm talking rubbish and continues with his story.

"There was a bit of hesitation from my side before I entered her, she had to direct my dick to her hole. She thought I didn't know which hole..."

"Hayi, hayi Ndleleni man. What is your problem? The only thing I want to know is how you didn't explode, I didn't ask for details on how you get it down." He's traumatising me, I will never be the same. I move to get something to drink, dammit.

“Yey wena doti, you asked and I’m telling you.”
He stands with his beer to meet me by the sink,
why is he coming close?

“Move to the back a little, you were having sex
and have not taken a bath.” I think I can smell it
on him.

“Mathonga, something is wrong with me. I was
able to satisfy her but I couldn’t cum, I kept
going until she started yawning.” Banami didn’t.

I move to the fridge and get him another beer,
“Here, drink my brother. You need it.”

He takes it and goes for it, I’m not laughing at
him. He’s my brother, we don’t laugh at each
other.

“It’s not funny Ngwane, you need to fix me.
You’re a sangoma.” The desperation in the tone
of his voice.

“Haibo ndoda, I’m not a sangoma. What you
need to do is find whoever has the key to your

virginity and unlock it.” He needs the virgin fairy, I’m not getting involved.

“You’re taking my suffering as a joke, today was my first time with a woman and I felt nothing but pain. It still hurts.” He grumbles.

Why are my eyes going down to his pants? My word, he’s still hard. What kind of a family was I born into?

“Please tell me Banami believed your fake orgasm,” it’s a matter of his dignity.

“I think she did, she wanted to go for round two.” He’s cringing.

“And?”

“I had to give her oral sex, I’ve never done it before, so Google was my only way out. No way was I going to shove my painful dick inside her...”

“I’m not listening.” I cover my ears, it’s too much.

“Mathonga, I really like this girl.”

“Okay, we can phahla and ask them why you can't cum.” I tell him. “Plus there's a death in the family, you were not supposed to be having sex to begin with. Maybe the ancestors locked your dick.”

They are capable of anything, they do have the power of life and death in the palms of their hands.

“I think we should watch a bit of those explicit videos first, I want to see if it still works.” We? What does he mean, we?

“I'm not watching that with you.” I protest his crazy idea.

“Ndoda you have to help me cum,” huh?

“No, I don't have to help you cum. It's not my job.”

“You're my brother, no one else can help me but

you.” He’s using emotional blackmail. “Please Thonga, all I want is to cum. This thing is stressing me. Am I asking for too much, I only want you to make me cum.”

God, he’s like a broken record. The words don’t make sense in my ears anymore.

“Hayi Ndeleni, make you cum for what now? What the hell are you saying to me?”

Banami is driving him crazy, she needs to fix this.

“Sorry I meant help me cum.”

He’s standing too close now, when I shift back he shifts with me. Social distancing is important at this moment.

“Okay, fine. We’ll watch only one together, then see if your member still works.”

This is a recipe for bad luck, Zamangwane’s spirit has not been collected yet and we’re

turning this house into Ndleleni's brothel.

He wraps his arms around my shoulders,
"Thank you so much, I will pay you for your services, I promise."

Services? I'm not a prostitute.

"Ndoda stop touching me, someone might walk in." I try to push him off but he places his head on my shoulder.

"Thank you Thonga lika Khanyile." He is dead serious.

But, what on earth is he thanking me for? We haven't done anything yet... Okay that sounds wrong too.

"Mathonga," Oh shit! I thought Khethiwe went home. Hastily, I push Ndleleni off of me and create a massive distance between us.

“Khethiwe, why aren’t you sleeping?” I mean she has Ntaba’s room all to herself.

“I couldn’t sleep, the room smells like Ntaba. I keep thinking he will walk through the door.” Her inquisitive gaze moves from me to Ndleleni. She’s judging us.

“Do you brothers play with each other?” She asks, keeping the look of condemnation.

“Play with each other?” I don’t get her question.

“You know, touch each other’s genitals?” Khethiwe.

I’m out of here, Ndleleni will answer her.

“I’ll be in your room,” I tell him and leave. He started it, he should fix it.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-two

KHETHIWE-

The Khanyiles have been the talk of the country for the past two weeks, their faces are plastered on almost every paper that delivers news. A royal scandal is what has been leaving people's mouths.

From the eldest son's sexual preference to Vumile's love affair with a woman from his church. The giggling giant slaying a family out of rage and revenge, and the chief stepping down from his position as chief. It couldn't have come at a bad time.

The news of the chief's retirement is trending number two on social media and all local newspapers, while 'The Giggling Giant is at number one.

My father wants me home, he says he saw me

on the news crying for a murderer. His words not mine. I didn't have the strength to explain to him, he will never understand.

With Mathonga's permission, I moved back to the palace working the same job. The aim is to be here where Ntaba's people are. Today is visitation day, again Mathonga has allowed me to go first. I've waited a whole two weeks to see him.

There are rumours, some workers want to quit because of what Ntaba did. They are afraid for their lives, imbeciles.

Ntaba was wrong, but he did it out of anger. I'm not saying the innocent people deserved to die, I'm only saying that I will stand by my man through it all. I have deal breakers, I guess murder is not it.

I saw that witch Thethelela at Zamangwane's

funeral, she had a smug look across her face. Now that I think about it, she looked like she had won the lottery. I wanted so bad to push her into the grave, I want nothing that associates me with her. There is something uncanny about her.

My palms are sweaty, my heart is pumping so hard in my chest. I'm a nervous wreck, Ntaba is not here yet. I thought prisoners are brought into the room before visitors or I have been watching the wrong channels.

"Dead man walking," A thick voice booms outside the door. A loud mocking laughter is next, the person is coming this way. The sound is getting louder, I wish he would stop. He is giving me heart palpitations.

"Haade ntwana, I'm practising for when I walk a man to the death row."

He's with someone, it could be Ntaba. What is stressing me is the mention of a death row. Will Ntaba be sentenced to death?

I'm on my wobbly feet, eyes engrossed on the door. It opens wide and I see him...my Ntaba. A flurry of emotions overwhelm me, has he lost weight? I can't tell with how strong he looks.

"Make it snappy skhokho," the warden says and slams something on Ntaba's chest. It's a condom, I'm uncomfortable.

"Voetsek," Ntaba sizzles frowning down at the prison guard and throws the pack at him.

It's a gasping moment for me, he will get into trouble for swearing at the guard. Maybe not, the warden is dead with laughter.

"That idiot," Ntaba mumbles as the prison guard dances his way out.

I'm not here for that man but this one who holds the key to my heart. He's looking down at me,

penetrating gaze and unsaid words. I have so much to say to him too.

Like why he did what he did, did I not cross his mind? How do I live without him?

“Where is Mathonga?” Really? No hug, kiss or a pat on the shoulder?

“How are you Ntaba?” I will not be answering about Mathonga. He shrugs and slides into a chair, it’s too small for his build. His knees are pointing skyward, he looks so uncomfortable. I would offer my lap, become a chair for him but I’m not sure if we are in a good space.

“You shouldn’t be here, I’m going to have a word with Thonga.” Ntaba.

This man can’t be serious right now, a lump forms in my throat. I blink and drop my gaze to avoid crying. He’s looking at me, I can’t see him but I can feel his gaze on me.

“Why have you not been granted bail yet? I hate that you’re in here.” I take a different route, hoping he will see a need to give me answers.

“Bhengu is a useless lawyer,” that’s all he has to say to me. I lift my eyes and find him staring, he does not blink away.

“Mathonga told me that Bhengu is working hard to get you a lighter sentence.” I inform him.

He throws his head back and dwells in a world of laughter.

“I killed people and showed it to the world, a lighter sentence will be a miracle.” He is right.

“But the world is on your side, you’ve become famous. There are strikes and rallies, people are protesting for you Ntaba. They want you out.”

It’s crazy how the world thinks he is a hero after what he did, unless they are into sadism like him. He receives fan mail from his fans, the world is changing indeed.

“It’s not their choice to make,” I hate that he is always right.

I’m trying to give him hope, and he’s not letting me.

“Whatever sentencing you get, I will wait for you. It’s either you or no one.” I’m pathetic and a fool for him.

I put my hands on the table, stretching them out for him to take. He does not acknowledge them, stinging my heart with his rejection.

“Let’s get married.” He says from nowhere.

Heat envelops my body, I’m surprised by his sudden request.

“What?” I whisper.

“You heard me, let’s get married.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean why? You’re my girlfriend, I want you as my wife now.”

“That’s a bit hasty, don’t you think?”

The giggling rapidly takes me back to the day he killed those people, I shake my head to wipe away the images.

“Hasty is good, couples get married eventually.”
Is he trying to tie me down?

“I’m not going to cheat on you Ntaba, you don’t have to tie me down.”

“I thought I tied you down the first time we had sex.” He laughs, there is nothing funny in what he said. This is a serious matter, being someone’s wife. His wife. I don’t want to be toyed with, Ntaba is not the marriage type.

“You have never told me that you love me, why do you suddenly want to get married?”

“What’s love got to do with it?” He shrugs and folds his arms.

After the chasing and pursuing, he still does not

believe in love. Will I ever hear those words roll out of his tongue?

“Love is the building foundation of a marriage, without it we will never be happy. If you’re not in it for love, then it will never work.”

He’s quiet, waiting for me to continue. He needs more convincing.

“I love you Ntaba, I have loved you for as long as I can remember.” I tell him.

I’m not ashamed of saying it, he knows how much I love him.

“Thank you.” He breathes, before tapping his fingers on the table. Am I supposed to be reading something from that? A devastating wave of disappointment swings past me, too hush and vicious for me to handle. My eyes water that I fail to block the sob pushing its way through my throat.

“So much for wanting to marry me.” I’m leaving,

I will be back soon but I refrain from letting him know.

Arms wrap around my waist from the back, he's pressing me into him. He smells the same as he always does, a drug I love to be addicted to.

"You're my salvation Khethiwe," he groans against my ear, making me shiver. "I adore you, I want you with me all the damn time. I want to build something with you, you make me feel alive and wanted."

My heart is hammering too hard, it's making me dizzy. He tightens his arms around my stomach, spreading kisses on my neck.

"Marry me, KaMandonsela. We'll start a new life together when I get out of here."

When is hopeful, but what if he never gets out? The law will never overlook what he did.

“Okay, we’ll get married.” He’s the only man I want, life is Ntaba.

He spins me around, I lean into him and savour the moment. His eyes are penetrating me, staring too deep and probingly. All of me is trembling, I blame it on the way he’s looking into my eyes and running his big hands up and down my back.

“Are you going to kiss me or keep me waiting?” I’ve waited way too long. His lips are on mine, a barely there touch, more shivers attack me. I’ve been craving for this moment.

“Thank you Peaches,” is that what is said after a proposal? “I know I don’t get hard for you, but we will fix it.”

“What?” I pull away, caught by surprise by his words. “You’re not attracted to me?”

“You’re twisting my words,” he says pushing his hands in his pockets. The idiot probably doesn’t

know what to do with them.

“That’s what you said Ntaba, since when?” I’m hurt, when did I fail to arouse the only man I want to have sex with?

“It’s not important, we’ll fix it.” He’s chilled as if the world did not just come to an end.

Amafufu was right, we are cursed. This is witchcraft, and whoever did this to us is probably dead or they would have felt sorry for us and reversed the curse.

“How are we going to make this work if I can’t...”

No, don’t cry Khethiwe. Marriage is not everything, I can become a nun and be devoted to Jesus. But Ntaba is everything, I don’t see my life without him.

“That is no reason for you to cry, I did say we will get it fixed. I’m the one with the problem not you.” He takes my hand. “Sit down, I’m still enjoying your company.”

My foolish ass sits back down, I need to find a solution to this. My father must know something about this curse.

MATHONGA-

Things are not looking good for Ntaba, everything we touch trying to get him released turns to dust. There is no hope for him, the ancestors have not come forth.

Their silence feels more alive than I am, it sucks being ignored especially by the people who are supposed to be there for you through it all. I feel a blockage, an invisible wall separating Ntaba from us. I wish they would talk to me and show me a way forward, I'd think they are enraged by the blood that was spilled by a Khanyile.

Nandi's family came to claim Zamangwane's body, baba had no choice but to let them take her. They were seething with anger but thankfully allowed us to attend the funeral.

Nandi's Lobola was mentioned after the funeral, the uncles wanted it cancelled.

"We have lost a granddaughter, we won't lose our daughter too." Clearly they put all the blame on baba, Nandi didn't show any emotion.

Marrying my father must be the last thing on her mind.

Khanyile Holdings is under construction, Vukuzakhe and Ndleleni are currently working at Durban offices. Ndleleni prefers to drive back home after work, I don't know what's happening between him and Banami. He hasn't brought up the Ntaba topic.

Vukuzakhe prefers to live there. He took Funokuhle with him, unbeknownst to Bongwiwe.

She gets to see him twice a week, I can tell she's not happy anymore.

The chief finally performed a ceremony for Vimbela and Sakhile this past weekend, I thought the little rascals would come to me in a dream to tell me they were free and crossing over.

I'm sure Nomkhubulwane told them not to speak to me, that old woman is the love child of thunder and lightning, straight from Limpopo.

Me being the good son or messenger I'm trying to be, I went into endumbeni and told them I was leaving for Johannesburg. I wouldn't want to set fire on burning coals, ancestors can be dramatic.

I arrived in Johannesburg minutes ago, Nala took a taxi to meet me at OR Tambo

international airport, so unnecessary but hey she's with me. I had a rental car delivered, we're on our way to the Sishis.

"I've been attending therapy with Zitha, it's actually bearable. I'm able to talk about my affliction without feeling like I'm exposing my shame. She went through something similar, our past has brought us closer." It's all she has been talking about.

She mentioned another sister who is in the hospital, my girlfriend is the sister of all nations and she is the happiest she has ever been.

There's an undeniable glow bursting from within her, her eyes light up when they briefly meet mine.

"How is Thobani?" I ask.

She hasn't mentioned him at all.

"Thobani will be starting school soon, he's going to repeat grade four since he missed so

much in the past year.”

“Have you thought of any schools? There are good schools back home, we can look at a few on the internet.” I frown at her long silence.

“Is something wrong?” I ask.

She hands me a flyer with the words King’s College and Preparatory School in bold letters.

“Bryanston?” I’m shocked really, I thought Thobani will be living with us. Then again, Thobani goes where Nala is. Does this mean?

“Zitha says it’s a great school, she enrolled Buhle there.” Zitha this, Zitha that. It’s all I’ve been hearing.

“She’s going to cover his school fees, and she offered me a bursary to finish my studies, I’ll write my matric first.”

Wow! From what I have gathered, Nala has planned so much with this Zitha.

“Okay, so while you and your sister were discussing your future. Did I perhaps cross your mind, or you completely forgot about me?” I need to know if I’m wasting my time with her, not once has she mentioned me in her plans. I park on the side of the road and give her all my attention.

“You did, of course you did.”

“I’m listening,” I tell her and unbuckle my seatbelt. I don’t know why she’s sighing, I’m not being tough on her, I hate that she has made a decision that affects both our lives.

She grabs my face in her hands, “I love you Mathonga, you know that.”

“That’s not what I want to hear, Nala.”

“Look, studying will be good for me...” She says like I’m stupid to think she should not pursue her dreams.

“You can do it in KZN, there are good schools

there. Most people study through Unisa, it's a good institution. You will do while working part time. Plus, I can afford to pay for your school fees, Thobani's too. Your sister does not have to do anything." That was the plan anyway, to take care of her and her sibling.

"But Zitha is my sister, I will feel less guilty if the money is coming from her."

That does not make sense, she just met that woman and already her world revolves around Zitha, I don't like what I'm hearing.

"What is that supposed to mean? What's my role in this relationship? Are we even in a relationship or you don't see me like that?"

She gasps and eyes me disbelievingly, there is nothing wrong with what I have said. I can't say I have invested so much in this relationship, but I have plans for us. I chose her over Amandla thinking she wanted the same thing.

“That is not fair Mathonga, you don’t get to question my love for you.” Love? Yeah right.

“Actions speak louder than words, if you have planned this great life without me, then there’s nothing I can do about it.” I start the car and drive on.

Her head is twisted my way, I keep my eyes on the road. For a while, we are trapped in thick silence and heavy tension. I should have stayed home, had I known I was going to come to this, I would not have bothered. What a way to spoil my day...

A long distance relationship is not on my bucket list, travelling back and forth till the soles of my feet wear out. I shall pass.

“Can we talk about this without arguing please?” Nala’s voice breaches through the silence.

“What is there to talk about? You have made up your mind, nothing I say or do will change that.”

Like I said...

This is not an open conversation that needs a response, I don't want to talk about this anymore. I see from my peripheral view how she folds her arms across her chest and looks out the window.

“Drive to Helen Joseph Hospital, please.” Her voice has changed, I hurt her with my words.

Is it a crime to love the fragile Nala over the fierce Nala? I want her to need me, not her sister. I'm not against their relationship but I came before Zitha, I should be number two after Thobani.

“What's there?” I ask.

It always feels good when she asks me for favours, I love doing things for her.

“My sister, I told you I wanted you to meet her.”

The excitement in her voice is back.

Will I compete with her sisters all my life? I want to ask how her sister is, without sounding bitter. I'll find out when we get to the hospital.

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We walk in a ward filled with sick people. Six beds are lined up on each side of the wall, it smells like medicine in here.

"She's this side," her hand holds mine, pulling me to the right. I frown upon her enthusiasm, I myself have never been so excited to see my brothers.

I understand where Nala is coming from, she had to take the responsibility of a mother at a young age.

I'm not looking at her with red eyes wanting to

take her happiness away. I only want her to make space for me too.

“We need to keep it down, she’s sleeping.” Nala introduces, in time to release me from my thoughts.

I don’t see her sister, but my ex-girlfriend. Shock has got to be a living thing.

“Amandla?” I don’t have a high pitched voice, as to why it escalated like that.

“You know my sister?”

At her question, Amandla flicks her eyes open. At first she is confused, shock steps in but doesn’t eliminate the confusion. I know Amandla when she is about to cry, her nose crumples, followed by flaring nostrils.

“Ma... Mathonga?”

And there it is, a dam of waterworks. People are staring, patients have forgotten their pain and

are staring with wonder. That is how loud she is. Something pushes me to hold her in my arms, she tightly holds on to me, curling her hands on my t-shirt. My ancestors have turned their backs on me.

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A/N: I'm sorry for the late update, it's been a hectic week.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-three

VUKUZAKHE-

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The house he purchased in Umhlanga is everything a family home should be, it speaks

highly of who he is and what lies in his bank account. The grey walls are plastered with pictures of his family, Vimbela and Sakhile included.

It's not that Funokuhle or Bongiwe were in his mind when he went house haunting. Perhaps fate paid a huge role in it, men do not control their own destiny.

Days have passed and Funokuhle's heart has not healed.

An argument broke out when Zakhe flew Black to Durban to keep an eye on him, after the stunt Funokuhle pulled, he cannot trust him with his life. The young man didn't go down without a fight, he argued that he is not a child to be babysat but Zakhe had to because he can't stay away from work and there has to be someone keeping a close eye on his treasure.

Funokuhle needs to get it through his head that

he's more important than anything, that there are people who love him.

Connections and all, the younger man wanted to start from scratch. He works at the call centre department as a temp. Three days a week, that was the only available spot.

"It's too big, I won't be able to drive it."

Funokuhle's attitude is that of a person who gives zero fucks, the brand new Toyota Rav4 parked before him does not fancy him.

Why the hell did this gorilla buy it anyway when the only thing he can drive is a donkey chariot?

After leaving work early to make sure the gift was what he ordered, he was convinced that Funokuhle would at least be ecstatic.

He's standing beside him, looking like a man who has been hard at work. Shirt sleeves rolled up, tie unloosened and three buttons

unbuttoned.

“You don’t like it?” He’s willing to change it if he wants a different model.

“You can’t make it go away by buying me gifts.” Funokuhle turns his back on his man. Maybe he would have jumped for joy for a Bajaj Qute.

“That’s not what I’m doing.” Vukuzakhe mumbles.

Warmth envelops the younger man when Zakhe’s arms enwrap around him from the back, he leans down to kiss the minion’s nape.

“I want you to be happy.”

Is that too much to ask?

“Expensive gifts won’t make me happy, you should know me better than that.” The minion pulls away, rejecting the embrace. He hitches when he meets the hurt in Zakhe’s eyes, his mouth opens to utter a whole lot of things but

nothing seems to come to him.

The Khanyile brothers have obvious similarities, it's easy to tell they are related with how they look so much alike thanks to Vumile's strong genes, and this one reminds him of Ntabezikude.

Funo turns his eyes away.

"Tell me what to do, I'll do it, just don't push me away. Don't shut me out." This is the only person Zakhe can be sensitive with, Funokuhle made it easy for him to wear his heart on his sleeves.

"I have to prepare dinner, it's late." The last of the Sangweni offspring says, ready to walk away. At least he cooks for him, there's hope.

"You're cooking?" He gets a nod for his question. "That's great, I love your cooking. Can I help?"

Shame he's trying.

"I'm not preparing a feast, I can manage." Funo goes back into the house and leaves Zakhe outside. What is the point of trying when he refuses to give in.

He has completely shut him out, but no matter how much Funo has built walls around him, not a single night does he go to bed before Zakhe gets home.

Every night he would wait for him. His heart would jump at the sound of the door opening and his eyes would itch with the desire to see him.

Zakhe finds him pouring water in a kettle, he takes a sit on a high stool and watches in awe. It's a beautiful sight, he'd love to never forget.

"Are you good?" Funo nods at his question without giving him much attention.

"We need to talk, let's go to the lounge." This

statement could very well be followed by an unbearable rejection, Khanyile takes a breath and brushes the thought of them breaking up out of his head.

First Funokuhle pours him a cup of black coffee, strong as the man who is about to consume it. He takes it with zero sugar, a dash of lemon and teaspoon of honey. It helps keep his tummy tight, not that it needs to be tightened.

Done with his daily task since they moved here, Funokuhle turns off the cooktop and toddles his way to the lounge, leaving Zakhe to decide if he will follow or not.

“What’s wrong?” He notices the sadness in Funo’s eyes.

“Please sit.” The younger man points to the empty sit beside him.

He hates having to bring up the subject. He

can't break his heart like that but also marrying him while he is such a mess wouldn't be fair to any of them.

Zakhe makes himself comfortable right next to his minion and puts the cup of coffee on the wooden coffee table, tingles attack him when his knee brushes against Funo's. There's a throat clearing from both parties, Khanyile goes for an eye contact and finds that he's alone in this.

"It's about us." Funo exhales.

The consistent rubbing of his knees tells how nervous he is.

Vukuzakhe can only think the worst, he side eyes Funokuhle and pulls out the tie around his neck.

"What about us" Zakhe.

He composes himself and breathes, it can't be what he thinks it is.

“We can’t get married,” funny how they talk about marriage like Zakhe ever proposed.

“Why?”

“What do you mean why?” Funo throws a question at him, he glances into his eyes for a few seconds wanting to see what’s in them.

“Do you still love me, Funokuhle?”

“Yes,” he replies softly with no hesitation.

Given hope and a new leap of faith, Zakhe entangles his fingers with his. Argh! Love...

“Tell me what to do, tell me how to make it go away.”

Not knowing what is going through the young man’s head is pure torture. “I will give you all the time you need but don’t keep me waiting too long kid, I miss you.”

Khanyile’s heart sinks when Funo gets up and

makes his way back to the kitchen without a word.

“What is this Funo? Why are you punishing me for my brother’s wrongs?”

He’s standing in the middle of the kitchen, a frown splashed on his dark features.

“At least you acknowledge that he did something wrong.”

To avoid being emotional, Funo keeps himself busy with the pots, it seems to be his only hiding place.

He’s never really spoken about how he feels, all he does is portray a stinking attitude and push Zakhe away. It’s never on purpose, he’s having a hard time getting through what he saw.

“Why are you talking to me like this?” Zakhe’s question is valid, there has to be a way to address the problem than this juvenile route.

“Will you look at me please?” Zakhe.

Funokuhle stops bustling and turns to face him, arms over his chest and a scowl on his features. Zakhe sighs and pulls him to his chest.

“Let me kiss away the pain, give me a chance to show you how much I care.”

The cuddle does not last long, Funokuhle becomes selfish with his hugs. He pulls away, takes a few steps back.

For someone whose nerves are internally raging, Vukuzakhe remains calm.

“It doesn’t matter anymore, just... forget about it,” this one is not thinking straight.

“Yes it does.” Zakhe sputters, and rubs his face in frustration.

“It matters to me,” he continues. “When did you decide you don’t want to be with me anymore?” This is what he has read from this conversation,

Funokuhle probably wants out and has no clue how to go about it.

“It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it?” He chases Funo’s gaze till they are eyeball-to-eyeball. “You hardly look at me, you never notice me when I’m around. You’re pushing me away, I can’t hold you without you flinching. What game are you playing kid?”

“You think this is a game?” Narrowed eyes condemn Vukuzakhe, the kid is offended by his statement.

“I don’t know, I don’t know what to think. You refuse to speak to me.”

“I don’t want to talk about this right now.” Funo spits, and turns to give his attention to the pots. It’s exasperating for Vukuzakhe, the one sided relationship is driving him insane.

“You don’t want to talk about it? You don’t want

to talk about it Funokuhle? How will we solve anything if you won't speak to me?" He's yelling, trying to get him to speak.

Funokuhle is too reticent, he's not used to yelling. He keeps his mouth shut and does what he's been doing which is to cook for this man he refuses to acknowledge.

Vukuzakhe knows he is not getting anywhere with him, walking away is the only option at this point.

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MATHONGA-

Bambindlovu came to the hospital after I told him about Amandla and what she's been through, he had a lot to say thereafter. I look at

him and wonder if this will be me one day, helping people—predicting futures and seeing the supernatural.

It's crazy how my spirit agrees with his, I don't have friends outside my brothers. But I have found a friend in him.

Amandla's story is that she was attacked by a truck driver who wanted sex as payment for giving her a ride, she can't remember what happened next because she blacked out.

Cults are common, people are desperate for money out there and would do anything to attain it. I'm not a saint to judge them, but to sell your daughter off for riches is the purest of all evil.

We're on our way to Sabusiswa's house, it was Bambindlovu's idea.

"I'm led by those who own me," he said when I

asked why.

Bambindlovu is a talker, he reminds me of Ntaba in a way. I have not been able to say more than two words to him, my mind stayed back at the hospital with Nala and Amandla. The disaster that awaits me when I get back- there was no time to explain to Nala how I know her newly found sister. Perks of being a man, you need to always have an explanation of some sort packed in a shelf just in case push comes to shove and you need a way out.

“Why am I talking to myself? Are you even listening or you’re thinking of a way to lie to those girls.”

His ancestors better not have told him what’s on my mind, I judge him with my eyes and wait to hear what he has to say about what he just

said.

“Relax,” he laughs, taking a left right after the traffic lights. “Anyone can guess what you’re thinking about.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yes and relax, they will understand, both of them.” The seriousness of the tone of his voice leaves me questioning his remark. Something tells me we’re talking about two different things.

“Amandla needs to be taken to the river for cleansing, she has blood in her hands. The man she killed will never leave her alone. His spirit will come for her and torment her life.”

Bambindlovu chooses to be random.

He goes on to tell me that Amandla’s soul is tied to the cultist because of some blood covenant.

“You have to help her ntwana, she has no one now.” Bambindlovu.

That's not true, her mother is alive. She also has her grandmother's family somewhere in KZN, they are not close but family will always be family.

"Can you arrange the cleansing?" I don't know how these things are done, getting rid of a bad spirit.

"I know a place, if she is willing. I'm free this coming weekend."

I don't see why Amandla would say no to a cleansing.

"I hope you understand your purpose in this, why you crossed paths with those two sisters." I don't say anything because really I don't understand.

He chuckles like he heard something funny, "They never would have met if it were not for you. Their journey with you was destined to happen."

Destiny is a joke, what the hell is Bambindlovu trying to say anyway?

“Are you saying meeting Nala was orchestrated by someone?” I’m dumbfounded.

“If you want to put it that way, your ancestors want you to help people. You might not understand some tasks they give you, but we learn from them. Nala would’ve stayed in bondage forever if your paths did not cross. Amandla would have never met her sister, everything boils down to you.”

I feel used, no matter how much he tries to sugar coat it.

“Sounds too farfetched to me.” I groan, suddenly upset.

I have a bad feeling about this.

“After what you have been through in life, farfetched should be the last word to leave your mouth.”

What, is he trying out for motivational speaking?

“I’m trying to grasp everything you are telling me, but you’re not making sense ndoda.” He can tell I’m mad, that’s why he steals a glance and smirks.

“It will make sense eventually, don’t stress yourself.” He’s laughing.

I guess the ancestors have something up their sleeves, it can’t be good.

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We’re in Waterfall City, outside Sabusiswa’s house. She must be home because the gate is not locked. We are impatiently waiting for her to open the door, she should have been here three knocks ago. I’m about to twist the doorknob when Bambindlovu pulls me back.

“Don’t go in there,” he warns urgently.

“Why?”

“Ugogo refuses to enter, she says it’s not clean.” He delivers and oh boy I believe him. The old lady is sitting on my shoulders, they felt heavy the moment we walked through the gate.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out that it’s an ancestor. Try needing something and asking them for favours, they don’t show up but when I’m about to enter people’s houses, she flies like lightning to dictate me.

Nomkhubulwane thinks this is her body, she has made herself too much at home. I can almost see her, laid back and watching everything unfold before her eyes, through my eyes of course.

“I’ll go instead,” nice! His ancestors are not control freaks.

I have no choice but to wait for him here.

Rich people don't lock their doors and gates, the area must be a crime free zone. This can never be me, I don't trust any place located in Johannesburg.

A foul smell swooshes out the door as he swings it open, it's nauseating. My stomach churns violently, I quickly cover my nose. Bambindlovu squeezes his face.

"Smells like something died in there." I tell him the obvious.

He nods and enters, I respect his courage. Meanwhile, I won't be eating anything for two weeks, the smell is stuck on my tongue.

He's back in less than three minutes, a gloomy look on his face. I give him a questioning look, expecting him to read my mind.

“She’s dead, we have to call the police.” He says.

We’re not in April, so it can’t be April’s fools.

“Her body is decomposing, looks like she’s been dead for weeks. Evil takes when you can’t pay back what you owe, Amandla’s escape meant her mother’s death.” He says and pulls me with him away from the door. “Ugogo is complaining, there’s too much evil in this place it’s weighing her down. We have to leave.”

“How am I going to tell Amandla that she is an orphan now?”

“She will be fine, just take care of that girl Mathonga, she’s been through more than enough.” Bambindlovu advises as we step into the car.

Take care of who?

Like I have time, not that I don’t care about her.

She will always have a special place in my heart and I'll always love her but I don't have the time.

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DALISILE-

Crossing the border with a sick woman was not a walk in the park, they had to hide her rotting leg from the authorities. That Nyoni woman works wonders, the day she bid her sister goodbye felt like the last goodbye. But here they are in Kampala Uganda, living in a one room shack that works as a bedroom, kitchen and living space.

It can be crowded in here, especially during the night when humidity pays them a visit.

It's better than jail, she would say. That packet Nyoni gave her that day had a root inside, all she had to do was swallow it and go to sleep. In the morning Dalisile had found favour in the eyes of the devil... no, in the eyes of the law.

"You're free to go." The warden had said. "There is no case, go home."

She was not shocked whatsoever, knowing how black magic works. Dalisile didn't look back when she left the country, neither did she report her release from prison.

Life gets harder with every passing second, two weeks in Uganda and nothing special has happened.

She works at a market selling fruits and vegetables along with Nyoni, they don't make much but enough to buy something to fill their stomachs.

If Vumile did not freeze her accounts, she

would be living lavidia loca.

Sometimes she looks back, and thinks of her children. If she didn't let greed get the best of her, life would be soft like before.

She's outside, Mgobhozi is sleeping in the house.

Her hand is trembling so much so that she almost drops the phone in her hand, she's dialled his number but the courage to press call has not visited her yet.

It's do or die, slightly she presses the phone to her ear. Her heart jumps to her throat as the phone starts ringing.

"Hello." The voice of her first born sashays through the line, fear has her mute. "Hello."

"Vu... Vukuzakhe." Finally. "It's me, please don't drop the call."

“What do you want mother? I’m busy.” The coldness in his voice is torturous.

“How are you? I miss you.”

Silence.

Vukuzakhe has always been coldish towards her. Floating in Mandela notes, it was easy to bear it. Now it hurts like a bitch.

“I told you I’m busy mother, why are you calling me? I’m not coming to visit you in jail, I don’t want to see you.”

He’s not cutting onions, he’s dicing meat into lean strips causing her heart to bleed.

A deep breath, she leans against the corrugated iron. Her knees have alerted her of their weakness.

“I’m not in jail, I was released.” She can’t tell him that there is no case now, can she? Vukuzakhe is silent again.

“I need money, your father froze my accounts.”
Damn you Vumile.

“Maybe that’s your punishment since prison has failed.” Ouch!

“Vukuzakhe please, I only need R500 000 and I will be able to start from scratch.” Please is more like Chinese to her.

“I can’t help you, not after what you did to my brothers. Don’t call this number again.”

For the first time in a long time tears stream down her face, being the queen she is, she disposes of them. They are disconnected, she sucks in a breath and throws her phone on the ground. Her heart springs up and drops, making her dizzy.

“No,” she cries and jumps to check if it’s not broken. She’s not rich anymore, smashing phones against hard surfaces is a luxury she will never experience again. Throwing it on the

bed should do, that way it will softly bounce up and down and live another day.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-four

BONGIWE-

She is done running after a man who does not appreciate her, her mind is made up. She's had enough, she thought he would fight for her and show her that he's willing to keep her in his life.

She knows she has fought a good fight, went through great lengths to stay in this marriage and chose her husband over, and over again.

This time she chooses to put herself first.

In her hand is a letter explaining everything, she wrote it last night while waiting for her husband. Thursday is one of the days he remembers her

and comes home, but he didn't. It hurts that he's slowly forgetting her existence in his life.

Vukuzakhe wants two life partners yet can't handle one. What a joke...

The letter is placed under his pillow, one last look at the room she slept in since she became Mrs. Khanyile. Memories flock in her head, she knows she's giving up a lot. If she had a choice, she would take it. She drags her suitcase outside, and bumps into Khethiwe.

"Are you going somewhere?" She looks at the suitcases, Bongive chooses to be rude and walks on. She owes no one an explanation.

She decides not to report her departure, and gets into her car. Her heart is heavy, she is tired. There has to be something better for her out there.

Tears start to pour down her cheeks as she drives out of the premises.

NDLELENI-

“A call came through from prison, Pule was rapped and hung by a fellow prisoner.” Ndleleni is listening to his brother over the phone while speeding to Banami’s place.

Vukuzakhe has grown a tendency of telling Ndleleni everything, they have grown closer since the secret of how Vimbela and Sakhile died came to light.

“Do you think Ntaba had anything to do with it?” What a question from Ndleleni. Then again, Ntaba is capable and they both know it.

“I don’t want to say anything that might be used against our brother, anyone might be listening to this phone call.” Zakhe sends a clear warning. “The jailer said a group of boys did it, some kind of jail mob justice. No one is willing to come

forth with sturdy information. I don't care about Pule, my baby finally got his own pound of flesh."

By baby he means Funokuhle, Ndleleni winces at the sound. He's having a hard time wrapping his hand around the fact that his brother sleeps with a man every night.

He's been to their house once, invited by Vukuzakhe and the man couldn't stay for dinner.

"You really love him don't you?" He didn't mean to sound judgemental, he's talking to his big brother after all.

He knows Zakhe loves Funokuhle, he's seen how he looks at the young man. It seems Ndleleni will not be getting an answer for his rhetorical question.

"I'm not against your happiness bhuti, this comes from a concerned brother. You're

married to sis'Bongiwe, now there's this boy..."

"Bongiwe left me," Vukuzakhe cuts in. "She texted me saying she's leaving and not to look for her, divorce papers were delivered to the office today."

That's quite a giant step taken by the wife. Ndleleni would send words of comfort if he were that person.

"Maybe she's better off, she wasn't happy anymore." Ndleleni.

Almost everyone in the Khanyile household noticed it, but everyone was too occupied to actually ask how she was doing.

"I guess," comes a reply.

"Are you two okay now? The kid I mean."

"No, he's still very much upset. He refuses to speak to me, I have tried everything but he won't budge."

“Maybe if he went to the funeral he would be less resentful.” This must be a reminder because Zakhe has gone quiet on the other side. “What is it?”

Sensing that something must be wrong, Nldeleni pauses a question.

“I was so focused on Ntaba and the family that I forgot about the funeral... and... he didn’t go.” Zakhe stutters. “Dammit, he never said anything about it.”

There’s a chuckle, it’s Ndleleni. These brothers are not experienced in this thing called love.

He arrives at the house, and pulls up at the gate. He’s not going to blow the horn, it’d be disrespectful of him.

“He probably didn’t want to upset you, knowing his brothers killed your sister.” Ndleleni says.

He could be right, Funokuhle is a man of few words. He doesn't express himself much.

"But not to go to his family's funeral and not say anything about it..." Zakhe stops midway, in his voice lies a twinge of irritation. "I'll talk to him, maybe accompany him to their graves."

"I don't know about you, but I think it's best we don't set foot there. Our own blood took their lives, who knows what the uncles did to the graves."

That's a strange thing for Ndleleni to say, he's never really sat down and thought about black magic.

"He's not a child ndoda, let him make his own decisions. Don't think for him, there is a reason he didn't go to the funeral or mention it to you." Ndleleni.

Zakhe has taken another vow of silence.

“Have you spoken to Thonga? He’s not taking my calls.” Ndleleni changes the subject.

“He won’t be taking calls for seven days, he’s at a mountain. It was a request from the ancestors, maybe they have something to tell or show him.” Zakhe explains.

“Hopefully it’s about Ntaba, we need a miracle. The trial starts next week, our brother will need all the luck in the world.” His eyes are on the door that just opened, Banami looks confused a second before a smile takes over her face. She goes back into the house and not a minute later the gate slowly slides open.

“Yeah, can you do me a favour? Mathonga asked me to look for Amandla’s family from her grandmother’s side, apparently ugogo was buried outside some weird church. The family needs to come and collect her bones and call her home.” Zakhe.

“You want me to look for the Celes?” He asks as he parks the car and turns the engine off.

“I’d do it if my hands were not full,” Zakhe’s hands are forever full.

“I’m on it,” they end the conversation on that note.

Eager to see Banami, Ndleleni rushes inside the house. She’s seated with her feet on the couch, in her nightwear and a remote in her hand, as if she did not see him.

“Banami!” He calls, leaning against the door post. He wants to come in but an invitation would be nice.

“What are you doing here dude?” He will never get used to this word, it irks him to the ends of the earth. He doesn’t want to be her dude, they are sleeping together for Christ’s sake.

“You’ve been ignoring my calls,” he tells her.

Banami has not met his eyes, seems like she would rather watch TV than the snack standing at her door.

“You ignored mine first,” what a self-indulgent response. It still makes Ndleleni smile though.

“I thought you don’t play games, MaFakude.” He steps forward.

“I don’t, that’s why I’d rather we stay away from each other.” Is this a breakup session? They have barely started dating.

“What if I don’t want to stay away?” Not what if... he doesn’t want to stay away. “Huh?” He adds, furthering his question with a cocked brow.

Banami pops a short sigh and graces him with her eyes.

“If you want me to take your brother’s case,

then we have to stay away from each other.”
She says but the smile lingering on her face
speaks a different language.

“Do you want to stay away from me?”

A sudden burn of warmth bursts in her stomach
as Ndleleni takes her hand and brings her to her
feet, the eye lock will be the death of her.

“Your first time shouldn’t have been like that, on
top of the boot of a car, below a raging heart. It
should’ve been special, just tell me I didn’t mess
up, MaFakude.” He presses her body against his.
She rolls her eyes, scoffing arrogantly.

“Please, Mr Khanyile.” Her voice is unwillingly
careless. “I’m a big girl, sweet words don’t
pamper me, and I can handle anything.”

Her words are enough to pull a smirk across his
face, arrogance takes over his eyes. There’s
that temptation to roll her eyes at him again, the
cocky bastard.

“Are you sure, MaFakude?” It’s times like these she’s convinced he’s a player. “Even a big cock?”

Her breath catches, she freezes, staring into his half-lidded eyes. He just had to do that, didn’t he?

“That’s quite an ego you got there sir, careful, your big head might not be able to carry your body.” That’s not what she wanted to tell him, she wants to tell him that his cock is not big, but then she would be lying to him and possibly bruise the stupid ego that has him on a high horse.

Ndleleni’s hand glides to the small of her back, the other holds her chin.

“No one has to know what we do behind closed doors, no one has to know that I enjoy fucking you and you love screaming my name.”

Actually they... argh, no one has to know.

“No one has to know,” she grins, voice sounding pouty as she further presses herself against him like she wants to get under his skin. She curls her hands on his shirt, waiting for that long awaited kiss.

“You smell like gas,” that’s so random of her.

“I was driving, and I need to use the toilet.”

Would you look at that, Mr. and Mrs. Random... he cages her lips with his, the kiss is too deep and wolfish.

Ndleleni pulls out, he knows his way to the bathroom. He’s been here a million times before.

The bathroom floor is empty of any mats, just cold tiles. She must have washed them. He could care less, he needs to release before a disaster happens.

He barely gets far, belt unbuckled and zip undone before arms grab him from the back leaning his backside against a soft chest.

“What are you doing Banami?” What is she doing in here? Should be his question.

“This fell out of your pocket,” in her hand is a flyer from the man’s clinic.

Some random guy carrying a million of those dropped it inside his car while waiting for the traffic to give him a pass. It happened weeks ago when he was questioning his manhood, why he couldn’t cum. Manna from heaven comes in different forms. He’d forgotten about it until he saw it in his car this morning, as to why he shoved it into the pocket of his pants; only he knows.

“It’s not what you think.” Someone is defensive.

“Do you have a problem?”

He can't tell her that she broke his virginity and he was so nervous when they had sex, reaching an orgasm became hard for him.

"No, no. Why would I? I'm just making sure all is well down there... taking care of my health you know." That sounds believable.

She's sniffing his back, her face buried in it and arms tight around him.

"Let me go now, I need to pee."

"Hold it, don't let a single drop fall." She runs her hands down to his front and grabs it. Ndleleni hisses, the pressure is too much.

"God dammit, Banami. What do you mean hold it?"

The toilet bowl is just a step away, if only he could free himself from her. His tip is hot and throbbing.

"What's wrong Ndleleni? You can hold it in for a

while, can't you?"

No he can't. Where is she even getting that from? The fact that her tone is stern and sturdy is darn attractive, he can only trust his bladder won't betray him before Banami makes up her mind.

"Hold it for me, love." She comes forward and kneels in front of him, his eyes widen.

"What are you doing?" Ndeleni purrs.

"Don't let a drop out Ndleleni." She giggles as she pulls his pants down, she keeps her eyes on him, seducing him with a look only she's capable of mastering.

Mini Ndleleni springs out, if it could speak it would plead for a release too. She touches it and slowly licks the tip of his mushroom head. Ndeleni's head falls back, he's hissing like a snake.

“Banami let me pee first, you can’t do this.” He moans, feeling the faucet begin to leak and his bladder uncoil. “I’m so clo...”

Ndleleni gasps highly when she swallows him whole, he’s trembling and fighting his bladder. If he releases in her mouth, it will be the end of him.

He can feel her warm tongue swirling around his cock, he also feels a drop pass through his throbbing tip. Banami increases the torture by cupping his balls and squeezes them like stress balls.

He forgets how to breathe for a while and grabs a hand full of her hair.

“I’m going to pee... on myself.” He muffles and bites his lower lip, the heavy pressure is killing him.

“Our father who art...” signs of bunking church, he’s forgotten the prayer. He clenches his teeth

and tightens the grip on Banami's ponytail, he'll be paying for her new braids after this.

She's sucking and teasing him, she muffles a scream when he pulls her hair too tight.

"Lead us not into temptation," the prayer is coming together. His dick does not have ears, it can't hear his desperation to hold on. His body is burning, he's sweating balls of fire.

All of him is visibly trembling, who knew holding pee was the hardest thing in the world? Pens down!!!

He wants to tell her to stop, to pull back but what he is feeling is insanely crazy. He's never felt anything like this in his life, he's never been sucked while desperate to pee. It's sweet and sour.

"Banamiiii..." his voice takes a high note as he screams like a woman.

The sexual sounds he's making would get him

arrested, his knees have gone weak.

There is a possibility that he has died and gone to heaven or hell, nothing can feel as good and painful as this.

He's reaching his high, an orgasm he easily accumulates and wants to reject because he will pee in her mouth. It's bad enough that he has let a few drops out, Banami would fit so well in Dubai.

"Baby let go, let go. I'm going to cum." And pee...

The neighbours definitely heard that hoarse scream.

"Jesus, Jesus, Jesus." He repeats the name when Banami grabs his butt and starts sucking him faster. Jesus should be looking away, considering how Ndleleni slept in church.

“Lord... take my... my soul when I die...” He hisses, his eyes are closed, he’s praying for salvation. He thinks he won’t survive this. The explosion is close, there is no way he is going to release his sperm and pee inside her.

He jumps back with a loud shout and runs to the toilet bowl, it hurts like hell as he releases both liquids. It’s a good hurt, one he’d want to experience again.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He groans and hisses with his head thrown back, his body has not stopped trembling.

Banami can see his butt vibrating, she bites her bottom lip, drooling over the man.

It takes a lifetime for Ndleleni to finish, his lungs are pumping air like people will be breathing oil from tomorrow. He is a heaving mess.

Banami is behind him, he can feel her gaze on

him. He turns his heavy eyes filled with lust to the lady, and finds her grinning like a Cheshire cat and arms folded over her chest.

“I want you to bend me over the sink and fuck me.” She hums seductively.

“Can we pray first?” Ndleleni sighs, rubbing his throbbing penis. He looks worn-out, maybe he should write his will after the prayer. That's if he knows how to pray.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-five

AMANDLA-

Sabusiswa and my grandmother were buried next to each other, it was the Celes' request. They didn't care that Sabusiswa had my grandmother killed and gave her body in

exchange for riches.

“We’re going to perform the necessary rituals, and lay them to rest next to each other.” I was seething.

I will never forgive my mother for what she put me through, wherever she is, I know she is a bad ancestor.

I wish she told me why she did what she did, sure Mathonga’s friend explained everything but I wanted to hear it from the horse’s mouth.

Her house in Waterfall City is vacant till today, I want nothing to do with it or her money. She had no will, which I’m grateful for. I wouldn’t have taken the devil’s money.

The cleansing ceremony went well I presume, I sleep like a baby at night. Bambindlovu gave me things to drink to clean me on the inside, it took me a month to complete the process. If I ever have to drink anything bitter in my life again, I

will dig a hole and bury myself.

My wounds are healing, slowly but surely. For two weeks I had to depend on a wheelchair and Nala to help me with things I couldn't do myself.

My mind hasn't gotten used to the fact that we're sisters, Zitha too. Who would've thought? It's too bizarre for me. Sometimes I wake up thinking it's a dream.

They have been very supportive, we're staying in one of Zitha's rentals in North Riding. A nice two bedroom apartment, Nala shares one of the bedrooms with her brother. It's been good I must say but there are days when it's awkward between us, especially when I bring Mathonga up.

Fate is a deity, playing with people's lives like that.

“Amandla, can I come in?” That’s Nala.

I look at my reflection in the mirror for the last time and shout for her to enter.

“Hey! Are you ready?” She’s smiling.

Nala and Zitha look so much alike, they must look like our father and I had to have Sabusiswa’s features. I wouldn’t want to look like either of my parents, I resent them both. I’m not interested in knowing about my father, the three of us decided we are better off without him. I don’t want my life complicated again.

“How do I look?”

I’m only wearing a dress, nothing fancy. A girl needs to look like she just walked out of Instagram once in a while, I’m still trying to find my way through that.

“Let your braids loose and you’ll look amazing,” the sister has spoken. I’m not saying I trust her fashion sense.

“We should get going before it’s crowded.” She says.

We’re having a picnic in Emmarentia dam with Zitha, she has too much time on her hands. She’s always planning something.

“Just a second.” I need this second to gloss my lips. By the time I’m done, she’s wearing a weary expression. That’s a quick transition for someone who was jolly early this morning.

“What?” I shrug.

“I saw Thabani in my dream, he was on the other side of the river. I wanted to cross over and get to him but I couldn’t, he kept waving at me. There was a smile on his face, I couldn’t understand why he was happy when I was in tears. My mother suddenly appeared, she took his hand and walked away with him.”

The story about her dead brother is sad, and I thought I was going through the most.

“I’m not knowledgeable on African spirituality but I think your brother has crossed over, he’s gone to be with his ancestors now.”

I hope she doesn’t break into tears, telling people to stop crying can be exhausting. It should come with a six-figure salary.

She’s nodding, her eyes have cleared up. I’m saved.

“I’m ready,” I sing sending a smile her way.

“Before we go,” she sits on my bed. I guess it’s going to be a long talk then. “Have you thought about what to do regarding going back to KZN?”

“I’m not sure what to do yet, I don’t know if I want to be in Gauteng.” I’m not sure what I want actually.

Nala wants me here with her, she told me she’s going to be studying part time and working as well. I was inspired, I want to apply for education when registrations reopen. I would

do well as a teacher.

“Whatever you decide, I’m always here for you.” I appreciate her. I return the smile she’s giving me and join her on the bed, something is weighing heavy in my heart... it’s important I let it out.

“Have you made a decision regarding Mathonga?” She looks taken aback by my question.

When Nala told me who Mathonga is to her, it took me a while to get over it. I was taken back to the day he left me, how he ended things. For a while, I blamed her for destroying my life. Mathonga was not here to explain himself, no one knows when he’ll be back.

When he came back from the mountain, he had to leave again. It’s been almost three months since his departure.

“I want to be able to stand on my own, Amandla. But he wants me to hold his hand.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” there are independent women who are in relationships.

“I know, but Mathonga wants me back at the village. I’m not sure I’m ready to go back there.” She’s biting her nails, she must be nervous.

“Did he ask to get you pregnant or marry him?”

I can’t believe I’m talking about my ex with his current who happens to be my sister. Life...

“No,” she timidly shakes her head.

I find myself in an awkward situation looking at Nala smiling at me. Should I drop it? She loves Mathonga, his name is visible in her eyes. I know she will do anything for him but put him before herself which is good, but if she is not going to commit then I wouldn’t mind taking him for myself. I will never stop loving him.

“I want to study, get my degree then I’ll give Mathonga all the attention he needs.” I’m guessing Nala is inexperienced in the love-life department. Men don’t wait for anything, neither do they change their plans out of nowhere. Unless she is that special to him.

“Okay,” I stand and move to the mirror to check if I haven’t wrinkled my dress. I can see her from the reflection, there are questions in her eyes that are hovering over my body.

“Do you still love him?” She asks.

I saw this day coming, we never really got into it. Mathonga had to leave immediately, there was no time to discuss this matter. At first I feared that in Mathonga’s absence, Nala would seek answers from me.

Now here we are, I have to tell my sister that I’m still very much in love with her boyfriend. She is aware that we dated, he was my first love and

he left me for her.

“He was my life, I will never love anyone like I loved him. I don’t think I will ever love again.” In all honesty.

Her eyes are suddenly teary, I understand her pain.

“So if an opportunity opens, will you take him back?” Nala is asking questions that will only hurt her.

“Given an opportunity,” I spin to face her as a sigh emanates from my chest. “I would take him back with no hesitation.”

She looks at me like I’m here to destroy her dreams, like that’s my mission in life.

“I don’t want to lie to you Nala, you are my family. I know we have only just met but I care about you and that means I have to be honest even if it will break your heart.” I take her hand and pull her up to my height.

“I’m sorry that I can’t let him go, he’s become a very important part of my life.” She sniffs as she wraps her arms around my shoulders.

I’m hurt by hers saying, it will be hard for me to watch my sister marry the man of my dreams.

I have to pretend that I’m okay with this, it’s not like Mathonga wants me anyway.

“I think we’ve had enough of sad talks, let’s get out of here.” That’s me.

The lump on my throat wages war with my voice, I grab my bag and rush out before I shed unwanted tears.

NTABEZIKUDE-

One of the most high profile trials of the century began over two months ago, friends and family gathered, desperate for justice.

The defence team made a surprising move—blamed the victims.

The Sangweni brothers preyed on an innocent little girl, got her addicted to drugs without her knowledge. She was gang raped and later murdered. Any normal person would be enraged and unravel.

The defence team painted the Sangwenis as a family with animalistic behaviour.

With the evidence of the murder, it would appear the case is an easy win.

However, the videos of the bloodbath trending on social media are a thing of the past, the evidence kept in police custody disappeared as if it was never there to start with.

As a hacker, Styles would take credit, but he

swears it wasn't him, the only thing the authorities have is word of mouth which does not help much in the court.

Ntaba is kept behind bars, new evidence has to be gathered. The world has not forgotten, but how do you convict a man with no evidence?

The last time he spoke to Mathonga, he told him he was going to plead for him, ask their ancestors to intervene and pardon his iniquity.

"I'm going to the mountain, the ancestors have spoken." Mathonga laughed, finding a joke on how his life is not his anymore.

"I will make sure to pray for you bhuti, they will have to hear me this time."

Ntaba found no hope in his promise... his life is falling apart, and it is his own doing. If the Sangwenis have the lives of a cat, he'd haunt them down and slaughter them the way he did

the first time—without remorse, and without regret.

Taking a life is so easy for him, that's why it was easy to arrange Pule's attack and death when he found out they were in the same prison.

The world is too small for him and his enemies, one of them has to live and it's got to be him by all means.

Alfred Madi has visited him with promises of a prison break. But that's not the life he's looking to live, a life of a fugitive.

The world belongs to him, he wants to be free and accepted in the community. Yes there are some who call him an animal and wish death upon him and his entire family but he still has a place in the world.

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This is Khothama's first visit, like all his brothers, he has been waiting for this day. Ntaba has talked about everything but what happened that night and why he went as far as taking out every single Sangweni.

They have five minutes left before he is sent back to the cells, that's what the prison guard tells them.

This one does not leave them alone, he's different from the clown Ntaba gets favours from.

"Who would've thought that you would ever wear an orange uniform?" Khothama down plays his statement with a chuckle, he finds no smile from Ntaba.

"Yeah," the giant sighs. "If you ask me to narrate what went on that day in detail, I will be as lost as you."

He's not making sense, Khothama is confused.

"Are you saying you were not aware of what was happening?"

"I was fully aware, I saw everything. The fear in their eyes, the blood spilling from their bodies. I heard their screams and smelled their blood, I was aware of what I was doing. There was a point where I wanted to let the children go, but I couldn't stop killing. I wanted all of them to be wiped off the face of the earth, it was as if something was pushing me to do it. I'm not sure if it was the rush or anger but the force was stronger than me."

He scratches his head and lets out a brief chuckle.

"You're laughing?" Khothama doesn't catch the joke but he laughs too.

"Yeah because I enjoyed it," this confession can get him convicted. Khothama shakes his head,

he knows they are the same. Men who would kill without thinking twice.

“Must be a Khanyile thing then,” Khothama gloats.

Ntaba doesn't want it to be a Khanyile thing, he doesn't want his brother to go down the same route.

“What about Zakhe's woman?”

“Bongiwe?” he frowns.

“No, that pretty boy.” Khothama is talking about Funokuhle, Ntaba sneers at his cousin.

“Koti is not a woman, respect him.” That finger pointed at Khothama might as well be a gun, Khothama surrenders by throwing his hands up.

“You're protective over him, why does he get to live?”

“He's my brother's heart, I will never rip his heart out. I'd rather die myself.” He is not apologetic

about killing Funo's family, if the young man is heartbroken, then Vukuzakhe will have to work hard in pacifying him.

"How come you don't love me like that? Am I not your brother too?"

Jealousy is not a disease, it's a bloody emotion and every man has the right to feel it. You just need to know how to put a leash around it and control it.

"How about you be my best man the day I get married?" Ntaba asks, laughing at the look of sadness on Khothama's face.

"You're getting married?"

Yeah, it's puzzling.

"Khethiwe agreed to marry me, we're tying the knot when I get out of here." The giant lacks emotion, maybe that's how he is as a person. Impassive.

“Who would’ve thought that you’d ever get married? That’s Zakhe’s things.” Khothama.

“I want her close to me, she makes living worth it.” Just say it already, you love her.

“Let’s have a double wedding, I’ll tell Zilile to contact Our Perfect Wedding. You and I will wear matching suits and...”

“Usuyasangana ndoda,” Ntaba cuts his rumbling short. No way is he doing all of that.

He clears his throat and adjusts himself on the chair, it’s about time they get him a customized chair if he is going to be in here for a while.

“How is everything? Are you taking care of your stoko?” (Woman.)

The only reason he calls Zilile that is because he can’t remember her name.

“Zilile is fine, she gave birth two days ago. I’m a

father now.”

That’s funny to Ntaba, “You mean you’re a father again? Don’t forget that you have children all over the world.”

As if he’s been outside KZN.

“Trust me, they are fine without me. I will stick with Zilile and Khethintaba.”

Ntaba’s eyes widen, he’s not sure he heard right.

“Who?” He asks, running a finger over his left eyebrow.

“I was going to name him Ntabezikude if it was a boy, but Zilile gave me a beautiful little girl. Khethintaba seemed fitting, Khethiwe changed you ndoda. You opened up and became less of a dick, I believe she is the one for you. She’s the one who will love and protect you, you’ve been through shit and deserve a woman who lives for you and only you. Khethiwe is the one.”

Khothama has said too much, Ntaba didn't think he could ever be so deep. He's feeling uneasy and thinks his cousin is weird. He clears his throat, he doesn't cry this one.

"I feel bad for not remembering your girl's name but you know Khethiwe's and even named your baby after her."

Point of correction; after us—after us.

"Like I said, you are a dick." Khothama teases. "I want you at my wedding, we'll get married when bum-bum turns one."

Who's Bum-bum now?

"She poops a lot, her bum is always cooking in poop." The only man who can utter such rubbish in this world is Khothama. They fall into outbreaks of laughter, talk about the baby and how weird it is to have a stranger living with them. It's a big step for Khothama, a man who has never taken responsibility for his other

children.

“Speaking of strangers, Thethelela went back to her father’s house.” Khothama is telling the wrong person. “I woke up one day and her bags were packed, she said she needed a break. I don’t know from what.”

Ntaba shrugs, he’s really not there. Silence sweeps into the room, it’s not the uncomfortable kind. Both these men have something in their minds.

“You’re getting out of here ndoda, you’ll see.”

They stand, Ntaba wastes no time in hugging him.

“I love you, thank you for being my brother.”

Ntaba says and hides his face on Khothama’s shoulder.

Khothama is crying and not doing anything to

hide it. His sniffles are loud and his shoulders are convulsing. As they pull out, Ntaba places a kiss his forehead.

“I didn’t know you were a cry baby.” He references his statement with a raised eyebrow, Khothama’s head is dropped—he needs to wipe away his tears first.

“It’s your fault, you’re making it sounds like this is goodbye.” Khothama uses the collar of his t-shirt to wipe away his tears. “I will see you in court and we’ll go home together after that.” Khothama.

Nah, it doesn’t work like that. The jailer tells Ntaba it’s time to go, he gives Khothama one final look.

“Wipe your tears ndoda, that’s Khethintaba’s job.” He giggles and lets the warden lead him out of the visiting room.

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Don't forget to like, comment and share.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-six

NDLELENI-

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Living at the royal house became too much for him, and so he did what he has always wanted to do. Follow his heart.

He lives in Umhlanga in a three bedroom, estate house, cosy for him and the partner he found for himself.

Primarily, Cape Town was what he had in mind. Once upon a time he wanted to be independent

and build a legacy outside his family. Going solo would mean denouncing the Khanyile name, his children would be denied a chance to partake in building the Khanyile legacy.

It's not who he is. He doesn't walk away from what built him and made him the man he is today.

Moving in with a girl three months after knowing each other is a big step, a step his father is not proud of. Had Vumile tried to build his relationship with him, he would still have all his sons under the same roof.

The fact of the matter is that he and Vumile will never have their father-son relationship, no matter how much any of them try. The bridge collapsed years ago, it's too late to take broken bricks and build something solid.

Banami had no problem with moving out of her

home to start afresh with him. He knows she is for him and would follow him wherever he leads her.

He walks in the house tired and irritated, he's hungry and has a lot in his mind. It's lunch hour, he makes sure he's home around 1pm to have lunch with Banami. It's a promise they made to each other.

The smell of chicken tickles his nose and adds to his frustration, he can hear the clanging of spoons and dishes in the dining room and knows that Banami has dished up.

“Banami!” He's letting her know that he's home.

His first stop is the bathroom, he rolls his shirt sleeves up, releases a pee he's been holding for ten minutes while driving home, and washes his hands. He's in the dining room before they are cold again, Banami smiles at the sight of him.

She greets him with a soft peck on the lips, they sit down and Banami digs in.

“Are we having chicken again?” He’s looking at his plate, displeasure detectable on his face.

“Dude, you love chicken.” It’s his favourite meal.

“I never said I love it every day, can’t I also have beef or wors? Don’t I buy meat in this house?”

No, he buys chicken apparently.

“That is not fair Ndleleni, I’m trying here.”

“Well, you’re not trying hard enough, that’s why there’s yet another damn grilled chicken on my plate.”

Banami clicks her tongue, grabs his plate and leaves for the kitchen. Ndleleni sighs, he didn’t mean to start a war.

He can hear her banging pots and dishes, he finds her taking out a packet of beef from the freezer.

“I didn’t say cook something else.” Guilt can be an irritating itch even a scratch can’t get rid of.

“You hate my chicken, so I’m making beef.” Her words dribble against each other, she doesn’t usually cry. She bites her lip to push back the tears, after all the effort she put into preparing a meal for his ungrateful ass, he does this to her.

“I don’t hate your chicken, I only said I don’t have to have it every day.” Ndleleni says.

“It’s okay Ndleleni, I know I’m not a good girlfriend.”

Sigh! She’s putting words into his mouth.

Ndleleni frowns as confusion takes over his face.

“What are you talking about?” He asks, raising his brows at her.

Anger has taken over Banami’s hands, she tosses the meat packet into the microwave to

defrost it. Everything she's touching falls victim to her anger, she bangs a pan on the cooktop and pours more than the required measurements of oil.

"That's too much cooking oil, don't you think?" He wants to further tell her that it's expensive; R100 per 2 litre, but the look in her eyes stops him, and probably saves his life. Do not upset a woman standing in front of a hot pan with expensive oil in it.

The microwave calls for her attention, time to make this man a steak.

"Sthandwa sami..." he's about to plead, he knows how to melt her heart. And who said short girls have a short fuse?

"You hate me for not wanting to help your brother." Maybe they do.

She's not looking at him.

Ndleleni releases a sigh and puts his hands in

the pockets of his pants, a Khanyile habit.

“I don’t hate you Banami,” another sigh volunteers to leave his now gasping mouth. At his dispute, Banami swivels around and aims her narrowed eyes at him.

“Oh please, I’m not a child Ndleleni.”

“I know, sthandwa sami. I know. I have never asked you for anything. Just this once, I’m asking that you take my brother’s case.” He’s desperate and she is the only person he can turn to.

For three months and at every chance he got, he brought it up; asked for the impossible.

“Not when I’m sleeping with you, I will lose my job if anyone finds out. No offence but that is a risk I’m not willing to take. I love my job Ndleleni and you know that.”

“Of course I know you love your job,” a short circuit of irritation seeps through his veins. It’s

unintentional, he treats this woman like an egg. Any mistake and she will crack; that's what he thinks.

"You love it more than anything in this world. Sometimes I wonder if I have any place in your heart. Am I just a walking dick to you Banami?"

Banami's heart flat-lines for a jiffy, her wide-eyed gaze fixed on him. She's blinking faster than usual. She grabs the nearest thing and throws it at him, the dish cloth lands on his chest before it tumbles to the floor.

"I hate you!" She turns the stove off and storms out of the kitchen in a fit of rage.

Anger was not supposed to bud in, he doesn't know how he let it.

He finds her in the bathroom pouring a handful of Handy-Andy inside the bathtub, she's taking her anger out on household goods.

“Are you taking a bath?” He’s standing in the doorway, arms across his speeding heart.

He sighs when she ignores him, their rule is that they don’t go to bed angry with each other. It’s in the afternoon, he needs to make things right before sunset.

“Smurfette.” He lovingly calls her causing her to stop cleaning the bathtub and look at him with soft eyes. The endearment usually has her playing in the palm of his big, warm hand. “Talk to me please.”

Banami shakes it off, she huffs and puffs and almost blows profanity at him.

Ndleleni is asking for too much. No man in this world is worth giving her life up for... a few lessons from Khethiwe would be highly appreciated by Ndleleni.

She drops everything and faces him, “You left the toilet sit up again and there’s a drop of urine

on the sit. We spoke about this, Ndleleni.”

“I’m sorry,”- Ndleleni

He winces and scurries to clean up his mess and pull the sit down.

“Where are you going?” He asks.

She’s leaving her work undone.

“Kitchen, I’m hungry.”

“But we’re still talking.” He tries to sound apologetic, as if he has a choice.

“Talk to yourself.” She shouts back as she takes the long walk to peace, her appetite is back and she is going to finish her boring-grilled chicken like she intended to.

Not a second later, Ndleleni goes after her. He finds her seated on the barstool, their eyes clash, he clears his throat and goes to get his plate on the counter. Quietly, he settles down a

chair away from her, he's trying to make eye contact but she's gawking at her plate.

"Did you use a different recipe this time?" He's talking with his mouth full, the chicken he was grumbling about is dancing on his tongue and seducing his saliva glands.

"You're a great cook sthandwa sami, this is so good." He continues.

The power of an angry woman.

He's singing her praises now, Banami gives him a onceover, their eyes do that thing again where they clash before he looks away and stands to take her plate to the sink.

Ndleleni is looking at her, a sad look on his face. The man is trying.

He rushes the meal, cleaning his plate. To show he is grateful and appreciates her food, he goes to the extent of chewing the chicken bones till they look abused and in ICU.

He dashes to the sink to wash his plate, crowding her on purpose. Banami won't move because he found her here.

A song randomly comes to mind, he's humming and slightly moving his shoulders.

"Are you humming?" She asks and stops to look at him.

She has never seen this side of him before, he can be sweet, he can be sour but never playful. Ndleleni looks at her and smiles.

"When I get this feeling, I want sexual healing." He sings and takes her hand, laughter erupts from her when he spins her around. She falls back on his chest, against his body... in his arms.

"Get up! Get up! Get up! Get up." He continues to sing swaying with her in his arms. "Wake, wake up! Wake up! Wake up!"

Banami crackles with horse laughter, it's the weirdest thing Ndleleni has ever heard. She

literally laughs like a horse and he's okay with it.

"That's not what the song says, and you're off tune." Banami.

Like it's the funniest thing she has ever heard, she continues to laugh.

Ndleleni shrugs, Marvin Gaye doesn't pay him to perfect his songs and harmonize like him.

Everything seems to be okay again, it's how he desires them to be. In this perfect place, loving and enjoying each other.

"Ngiyak'thanda MaFakude." His eyes repeat what he said, his hands let her feel it as he caresses her.

"I love you Ngwane." She sighs with content and accepts his kisses.

"Do you think there's hope for Ntaba?" He asks, taking her hand and leading her to the living

room.

“There might be, seeing that the evidence went missing. But everyone knows what happened, everyone remembers how he mercilessly killed that family.” Banami.

Ndleleni sighs, this is not what he wants to hear. Banami sits on the couch and places her legs on his lap, he knows which type of massages she likes.

“Does your brother have a violent history?”

“No, Ntaba kept to himself most of the time. He didn’t have friends outside us, he never expressed himself at all. He was a quiet kid, who enjoyed spending time alone, I guess.”

Ndleleni says.

He can’t really vouch for his words, they were all going through something growing up.

“Some killers evolve into criminality, but others are programmed that way from birth. They are

born evil.” Banami says.

Ndleleni frowns, he can't associate the word evil with his brother's name.

“He's not evil.”

“Babe come on, that's not what I meant.” She defends herself.

“Your brother might be suffering from antisocial personality disorder, it's characterized by the disregard of the feelings of others. He might have showed symptoms in childhood. Hostility, aggression, violence. The jury will see your brother as a ruthless monster, like he did the Sangwenis, they will not have mercy on him.”

Ndleleni is baffled, “You've diagnosed him already?”

“No, just a theory I came up with.” She wiggles her feet when he touches a ticklish spot. He touches her feet like he touches her body, she's squirming, moaning and biting her lower lip.

If he continues like this, she will be riding him before he goes back to work.

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VUKUZAKHE-

Signing the divorce papers would break all ties he had with Bongive, she will be nothing but his ex-wife.

They have nothing that ties them together, a child or anything solid that tattoos her to him for life. He's not sure he's ready to let her go, she left in a fit of rage. He knows because of the letter she left him which he got a week after her departure.

In it, she specified her level of hatred for him and confessed her undying love. She told him

how she wished he was a better man, how desperately she wanted to have a family with him.

He shattered her dreams, killed her soul and took away the most important thing in her life—Him!

He'd do anything to speak to her, for the sake of closure. If only he knew her hiding place, she's suddenly become a needle in a haystack.

He arrives home a little earlier than usual, it's a Friday today. He plans on going home to Izingolweni for the weekend, he needs to see Ntaba and his father regarding marrying Funokuhle.

It's not a tomorrow thing, but it's part of his five-year goal. If Bonguwe didn't pull the stunt she pulled, he would marry Funokuhle tomorrow.

The garden is very clear from the driveway, he

frowns upon seeing Funokuhle laughing with the gardener. The last time he saw his smile was... it was... dammit, he can't recall the day.

He's supposed to park in the garage but he leaves it in the driveway. He sucks in a breath to calm himself, before exiting the vehicle.

Funokuhle has not turned to look at him, he's trimming lollipop trees like he gets paid to do it. The gardener is standing too close to his Minnie minion, or Funokuhle is standing too close to the gardener. Either way, it angers Vukuzakhe.

"Funokuhle." Zakhe's voice rings out, startling the young man.

"Inside, now!" He commands and heads to the house.

He's gulping down a glass of water when Funokuhle walks in and stands in the doorway,

arms over his chest.

“You are such a prude, did you have to embarrass me like that?” Funo says, he has a new found attitude Zakhe has never seen.

“So you were enjoying the gardener’s company?” It’s more of a statement than a question.

“Mlungisi is a friend, and he listens to me.”

It’s shocking to Vukuzakhe really because this Mlungisi person was hired last week. Does this friendship have a beginning? He knows it definitely has an end, and that’s today.

“He listens to you?” He raises his brows in question and gets a nod in return. “He’s fired.”

Mic drop!

“You can’t do that, Mlungisi is...”

“Mlungisi is irrelevant.” Zakhe interrupts harshly.

“I’m not going to discuss the staff with you kid,

and I sure as hell will not argue with you over them. Your focus should be on becoming my husband and not flirting with the employees.”

He’s never been so blunt and harsh with him, it’s the anger talking. Funokuhle’s jaw drops at the indifference in Zakhe’s eyes that are staring daggers at him.

“I don’t want to get married.”

What’s new? It should be a yawning moment for a fed up somebody—say... Vukuzakhe?

Khanyile’s shoulders tense, his eyes turn cold. Not a single flicker of emotion, he knows rage boils within Funo and this must be the results.

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that to me.”
Zakhe.

If provoked further he might let out his rage.

“That’s how I feel and you should respect it.”

Funo fires with an attitude.

“Fine, pack your shit and get the hell out.”

The minion’s eyes widen, “Wh... what?”

“You don’t want to get married, so I don’t see the need to keep you around.” Zakhe is unsympathetic.

“Your brother killed my family.” He’s crying.

“Are you going to remind me of this every fucking day? Wear a banner already.”

“Why are you saying these things to me?”

Funokuhle asks, slamming his fists on Vukuzakhe’s chest.

Zakhe grabs his wrists, “Because I’m tired Funokuhle, you’re not the only one going through shit. We all are, but you don’t see us walking around pointing accusatory fingers.”

“But you only lost a sister, I lost my entire family.” The young man spits, tearing himself

free and creates a huge space between them.

“What the hell are you saying to me? Huh? Was my sister’s life worthless?” Zakhe cannot grasp what he just heard.

Funokuhle sighs and covers his face with his hands, “You’re twisting my words.”

He shakes his head as his hands fall away from his face.

“That family didn’t care about you, they hated you and treated you like garbage. Your brothers, gang raped and killed my sister, my little sister. Have... I ev...ever called you out on it?”

Silence.

He charges at him, Funo staggers back. He’s never been afraid of him till today.

“Have I ever ca...called you o... out on it Fu... Funokuhle?” His speech impediment worsens, and his voice becomes more feminine. But his

anger is tangible, Funokuhle fearfully looks at the finger pointing at him.

“N... no.” Funo answers, his mouth working wordlessly to try and come up with more.

“I’m tired of this shit, I have too much on my hands to be entertaining a spoiled brat who won’t grow the fuck up.”

Zakhe walks out and slams the door behind him. So much for coming home to a happy, peaceful place.

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Please like, comment and share...

MATHONGA

Eighty-seven

VUMILE-

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Ntabezikude has always been the unruly child, but not once did he think he would live to see the day his son turn into a monster. This is what he calls him in secret, where no one can hear him, not even his beloved Nandi.

On the outside Vumile looks like a retired pensioner, but on the inside he's falling apart. His family is not complete, his sons are his life. He has tried over the months to fix what he broke. He's seen the damage his ignorance has done, a grown man should be able to differentiate between right and wrong and Vumile has done just that.

Life with Nandi is slowly picking up, the house feels empty without his sons though.

Vukuzakhe has found a home in Durban, Hlabela is somewhere around the world. Ntabezikude is in prison, Ndleleni moved out too and Mathonga is god-knows where.

“You’re deep in thought Ngwane,” Nandi’s warm voice saves him from his thoughts. He blinks and averts his gaze to her, it’s a hot afternoon yet the oldies are enjoying each other’s company over cups of hot steaming tea.

“What’s on your mind?” Nandi continues as she shifts closer to him as if he will need a shoulder to cry on.

“Do you think they will ever come back home?” Nandi is aware he is talking about his sons, it’s all he ever talks about. Sometimes she is convinced that he has an obsession over them.

“This is their home, it’s where they were born. There is no place like home.” Will they ever

come home was the question.

“It’s been too long,” he speaks like a man who will die if they don’t return.

Nandi sighs heavily, she’s tired of convincing him as if he is a child that needs constant reassurance.

“We spoke about this Ngwane, they are grown men.”

Maybe his head is too thick, that’s why he’s not getting it. Vumile takes a sip from his mug and heaves a sigh, Nandi’s words of comfort are not helping.

She decides to let him be and focus on her own tea before it gets cold, she takes the plate filled Marie biscuits and offers it to Vumile.

“I’m fine MaShamase,” he goes for an appreciative smile.

“Baba,” his heart stops at the sound of Hlabela’s voice. At first he thinks he’s imagining things, imagining Hlabela standing in the middle of his living room. His mouth pops a smidgeon, he drops the mug on the table with a loud clang, spilling the tea Nandi made with love.

“Hlabela?” His long legs bring him up. “Ndodana, you’re home?”

The great Vumile sheds tears, he wants to go for a hug but Hlabela drops down on his knees. Beside him is an Indian woman, there’s something affectionate in how he’s holding her hand.

“I’m sorry for taking your sons from you baba,” takes a real man to admit he was wrong. “I was young and...”

Vumile raises his hand, gesturing that he stops. Hlabela must be reading it wrong because he drops his head in shame, the woman beside

him squeezes his hand.

“I know what happened son and I do not hold it against you.” Vumile.

Relieved, Hlabela lifts his head to look at his father who is contently smiling at him. Vumile tells him to get up and hugs him, it feels absolutely amazing to have one of his sons home.

“Who is the beautiful woman with you?”

Humans are naturally curious.

To answer Nandi’s Question, Hlabela regards the young woman with a soft smile.

“I found a flower baba, the only woman who is capable of making my heart beat. Her name is Kushi, we’re married. She is kind and takes care of me.” Hlabela chokes on a chuckle. “All my life I have been craving for the love of a woman, to be taken care of. Well, look at God. I can’t fulfil the church duties, it was all for you, so

you'd be proud of me. I can't live under your shadow anymore, and I'm not sorry about it."

Vumile does not seem to mind, Hlabela being a pastor is the last thing on his mind.

"I understand ndodana, I'm happy you found love." Vumile.

"She is beautiful," says Nandi with a smile dancing on her face. Khushi's face gleams, she drops her gaze like a newlywed and thanks the woman. Vumile silently approves.

Nandi asks them to sit before she's running to the kitchen to get something that will excite their intestines.

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"Ntunjwa KaLanga, Mthiyane, Ndwandwe!!!"

Everyone is abruptly astonished by the voice

loudly reciting the Khanyile clan names outside. Those who have heard it before are aware of who it is, they drop everything and run outside to find Mathonga dancing around the yard.

He's barefooted, dressed in ibheshu, a leopard gear around his shoulders. Around his neck is a blue and white beaded necklace.

Behind him, at the gate are three grey haired men and a young man they already know as Bambindlovu Buthelezi.

Mathonga breaks in loud whistles, stomping his feet on the ground while swirling around in celebration.

"What's going on?" Khushi has clung on to her husband, as she should. Hlabela is too astounded to give her an answer.

"It's a celebration, the ancestors are celebrating Ngwane's homecoming." Vumile lets that out, he's not going to cry because grown men don't

cry, right? The wetness on his face must be his sweat. Bambindlovu approaches the family, he greets the head of the family with a handshake.

They turn their eyes back to Mathonga's body being used by his great ancestor, it's an ethereal sight.

It's crazy how he moves with perfect rhythm, this specific ancestral dance is to inform and guide.

"What's going on?" Hlabela is the one to ask.

He wouldn't know considering he grew up in the seventh day Adventist church.

"Mathonga's journey is complete, the ancestors are happy. That's Nomkhubulwane celebrating through him, she has something to say to the family." Bambindlovu puts them at ease.

"Bakhanyisile oKhanyile, Mhlambululi has

arrived, uNgwane KaNgwadi. UNtunjwa KaLanga. I am proud of my son, he has shut the mouths of my enemies.” The spirit yells at the top of her lu... Mathonga’s lungs.

To cleanse the family is what Nomkhubulwane has always wanted Mathonga to do hence the name Mhlambululi. He is their cleanser.

“Mhlambululi is his ancestral name,” Bambindlovu tells the crowd watching.

Eventually, Nomkhubulwane gives Mathonga’s body a break.

“I’m here to bring peace in the family, I have removed our enemies from our land. My offspring will live in peace on their forefather’s land, the Khanyile name and legacy will live on.” Her voice seeps through Mathonga’s Adam’s apple.

“I don’t understand gogo, what do you mean you have removed our enemies?” Vumile asks.

It is what he thinks it is.

She turns a stern gaze towards Vumile, “you never understand anything, that’s why your family was falling apart.”

That’s not what Vumile asked though.

“I, Nomkhubulwane Khanyile...” she’s proudly banging Mathonga’s chest with a firm fist.

“...Stepped in to calm the wrath of Khahlamba, your grandfather. At first I wanted you dead. You were standing in my way, preventing me from getting to my son Mathonga. My rage diminished when he accepted me, but Khahlamba remained seething. He wanted to take everyone from you, all your children. I couldn’t allow that, I took his wrath upon myself and let it fall on the enemies who occupied my land.”

“Are you saying you killed the Sangwenis?”

Vumile is flabbergasted. Nandi wants to slap his hand to reprimand him lest they strike him dead with lightning.

The great ancestor throws Mathonga's head back and falls into giggles that bring shivers down everyone's spine. Hand on his belly, mouth wide and head bobbing arrogantly. For a minute there, they see a version of Ntabezikude.

"It was that or the Khanyile children, Khahlamba is calm now. He wants umhlabelo so he knows he has not been forgotten by you Vumile."

Nomkhubulwane spits, she's pointing at Vumile.

"But what about Ntaba? My son is behind bars because of you." Eh!

The nerve Vumile has to point a finger back at his elder. She tilts Mathonga's head, shoots a cold stare at Vumile and points a warning finger at him.

“My son... Ntabezikude is my son. You have no children Vumile Khanyile, all these big heads walking around these premises are mine. Do you hear me?” She roars.

Vumile gulps, eyes wide.

“What do you take me for Vumile? How dare you assume I will let my son rot in jail? My son, a Khanyile blood?” She spits on the ground.

“I know how to take care of my own, why do you think these children are still alive today? Your wife’s sister would’ve consumed them all if it were not for me.” She’s doing that thing again, banging her fists against her chest. Mathonga will be nursing a swollen chest the entire week.

Nomkhubulwane lifts his head and a broad smile spreads across his face, she sucks in a long breath with hands lifted high.

“The skies are open, the village will forever be

blessed with rain.” She declares loudly.

Suddenly, the clouds gather, thunder resounds and lightning strikes. There’s a drop of rain, then two before showers pour down from the skies.

Mathonga is brought to dance in the rain, loud whistles leaving his mouth. He alternates, singing praises to his ancestors and God.

Kushi screams and runs back into the house, it cost a fortune to get her hair done.

The others relish the rain, it’s been so long since it rained.

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KHETHIWE-

Mathonga said Ntaba will be out soon, or was it his ancestor? These things confuse me, I know nothing about African spirituality.

I can only hope Ntaba won't expect me to chase chickens and slit their throats once we're married, I grew up in the village yes but with two brothers who did everything.

It's been raining cats and dogs for the past seven days, since Mathonga's arrival. He came like a miracle, you can actually taste and smell the difference in this place. There's more, light than there was before.

Today is day eight, we woke up to clear blue skies. We kind of knew yesterday was the last day, a rainbow appeared in the sky before the sun set.

The house is full, and I mean both his girlfriends are here full. Nala made it clear that she is

visiting, and will go back to Johannesburg as soon as she can.

Mathonga's welcome home ceremony is what brought her here, I can't say the same about Amandla. She is like a belt, goes where he goes. She doesn't miss a chance to land a helping hand whenever he is concerned.

They are not dating but Amandla wants him, I see it in everything she does for him.

Vukuzakhe left with Funokuhle yesterday, I didn't get time to get to know him. He seemed nice, too quiet and reserved.

Hats off for him for sticking around after Vukuzakhe's brother killed his family, he is me... I am him. He is my spirit animal, we'd get along pretty well.

Ndleleni showed up alone, but rumour has it he's seeing someone. Good luck to her, Ndleleni

is too standoffish it's scary.

The kitchen is loud today, Nala and Amandla are helping me prepare breakfast. It's nice to have six hands, we get things done. It will be sad when they leave.

"Khethiwe, how is breakfast going?" That's Khushi, Hlabela's wife. My mind went to search for answers as to how and why he married her, it hasn't come back yet.

No offense but she is not his type, Hlabela is the type that marries those pastor's wife material. The girls who sing the loudest in church, walk around showing all adult teeth and pray like Jesus will prize them for the best prayer.

Kushi is the housewife type of girl, I haven't seen her lift a spoon since they arrived seven

days ago.

The only thing she lifts are her heavy eyelashes. It doesn't look like she bathes herself, I can just hear her say "Siri wash my back."

"Oh, it smells nice." Kushi.

She is opening the pots of a black woman, how do I tell her that this is against all laws? Nala and Amandla gasp, they are expecting me to react. I'm trying to be a good person, Ntaba will be proud of me.

"What are you doing?" I ask politely.

I don't know if they do this in Bangladesh but she will finish the cooking if she continues to test me.

"Hlabela is hungry, he won't stop nagging me." She says and takes my wooden spoon from my hand. I have to watch as she dips it inside the

pot of baked beans and takes a subtle lick.

“Hlabela must wait,” I grab the spoon from her.

I will burn this when she is not watching, I’m cooking for royalty here. Not Rajesh and Ashok selling Go’Slows at the tuck shop.

“My man is locked up in a prison cell. I don’t know if he has eaten or not, at least Hlabela can smell curry as we speak. The aroma should be enough to fill him up.”

I’m not usually this this rude, Kushi has not offered a helping hand around here. All she does is walk around looking pretty and ready to board flights. Haibo! We’re going to be sister-wives, no one should be getting special treatment.

“I think we should dish up for Hlabela, Kushi will take his food to him.” That’s Amandla, she’s in charge of the eggs and sausages. Nala is making toast.

“Isn’t Khethiwe the maid? I just did my nails yesterday, I can’t afford to break them.” She called me a maid.

Can she afford to take care of a village man though? Those ones don’t care about money, they want a woman who is willing to bend over and blow the burning coals on the firewood till the fire starts dancing under the pot.

“Khethiwe, can I have a word with you?”

Mathonga emerges from nowhere, he looks too serious.

I wonder what could’ve happened. I leave the spoon in Kushi’s hands and hope she doesn’t put it back in the pot.

“Wait, here’s your tea.” Amandla pushes past me to get to him, instinctively, I send my eyes to check Nala’s reaction. She’s not bothered by this. She needs to hotspot me her liver, I’d be

pulling braids and splashing tea on a girl.

It's the two of us in the living room, he heaves a sigh and glances directly into my eyes. My heart is beating very hard, I'm thinking the worst.

"Did something happen to Ntaba?" My voice trembles, I pray I'm jumping into conclusions. Mathonga shakes his head and tells me he's fine.

"Is everything okay at home?" Huh? I thought he called me here to talk about Ntaba.

"I think so.-" I'm really not so sure about my answer. First I need to know where this is going.

"You have an underwear that went missing." He says.

I knew something was up.

"Yeah, I found it days later but I never wore it." I wanted to burn it but with how my mother kept

me on my toes, I completely forgot.

“You did wear it,” he says and I disagree with him.

“I didn’t, I remember placing it separately from my clothes because I have two more that are similar. They came in a pack, they were on special at PEP and... I was planning on burning it.” Mathonga shakes his head and then laughs.

“Khethiwe you wore that underwear, when you were at the hospital your cousin brought clothes for you. It was in there, you have to burn it.”

No, I couldn’t have worn. The one Sono brought looked new, I thought maybe she washed and ironed it.

The one that went missing is wrinkly and dirty.

“That means I would have to burn the other two,

I won't be able to tell them apart. And underwear is expensive, have you seen the prices at Mr. Price?"

He doesn't care, his eyes are penetrating through my soul. They move down to my belly.

"I feel something heavy here," he says as he presses a hand on his abdomen. "There's a frog sitting in your womb."

He continues and my head spins.

"I don't understand, are you saying I'm pregnant with a frog?" I'm baffled honestly, more like confused.

Mathonga chuckles lightly and scratches his head.

"If you want to put it like that," what does he mean if I want to put it like that?

"That's a weird thing to say Mathonga, it's not funny." People don't randomly have frogs in

their wombs, it's farfetched, unreal. Mathonga brings the cup of tea to his mouth, he's drinking after telling me I'm going to be a mother to a frog.

No, no. I must be dreaming, Nandi will wake me up any minute now and tell me to go sweep the yard before the roaster rings the alarm.

"This is not a joke Khethiwe, I don't know why I'm being shown this. But someone close to you is working tirelessly for your downfall, they put a frog in your womb. It's spiritual and I don't expect you to understand."

I stand, I have no idea what I'm looking for. My mind has not come back yet, it has to. I need understanding, to make sense of all this.

"Khethiwe," Mathonga calls.

I don't realise I'm tearing up until he's telling me to keep it down, too late, my sister-wives are here. They will think I'm a freak that slept with a

frog.

“Nala, I...” Something twitches in my stomach or it’s my imagination but I flinch and press my hand on my belly.

“Mathonga it’s kicking,” I scream.

“What’s going on?” Nala asks, I don’t have answers for her.

“Please bring Khethiwe a glass of water or warm milk to calm her nerves.” He’s instructing one of the ladies.

“Warm milk?” My eyes are wide as I ask him, he nods. “W... why are we feeding it?”

My voice is trembling, I can’t control it nor the tears streaming down my face.

“It’s to calm your nerves Khethiwe, you need to relax or your blood pressure will rise.”

Mathonga.

A rising blood pressure? That happens to

pregnant women right?

“Then let it rise, I want to die.” I’m wailing.

“Khethiwe what’s going on?” Nala again, she looks worried.

If only she knew how I feel, I knew something was wrong with me. When I sit with my legs open, I always felt something trying to push its way out of my vagina. Now I know I’ve been nurturing a frog... Oh God, that’s why I gained weight. I’ve been feeding it McDonalds and hot wings and pies.

“Where is that water?” I hear Mathonga shout, snapping me out of my thinking zone. I don’t know when I got on the floor, I’m heaving and tearing up. Mathonga is on his knees, right between my legs.

Why are my thighs open? My eyes widen out of their sockets, I quickly shut my thighs and cry for my father.

“Call my father, please call my father. I don’t want to give birth to a frog.” God, why have you forsaken me?

“Khethiwe you’re not going to give birth to a frog.” He’s irritated. I don’t care, he’s not the one whose womb is a home to a frog.

“Khethiwe is pregnant with a frog?” Amandla sounds surprised before she’s laughing.

I’m going to make her the God-mother before I die and see who gets the last laugh.

“Tell her to push so she can get it out,” her request is directed at Mathonga. It offends me still, my heart is racing and I’m about to pass out from shock.

“It’s not funny Amandla, after your predicament you should be the last person to laugh. Now please, try and be helpful by getting me a towel and a glass of water.” Mathonga scolds her.

He's not helping though, the things he's requesting from these women...

"Are you going to take it out?" I grab his hand and open my legs, I don't care about my granny panties being exposed. I need this thing out of me.

He's sweating, he has no business being nervous. He's not the father, I'm the mother-to-be.

"I'll make some butter milk, it does wonders to shock." Khushi decides to be handy, I'm grateful but no.

"I'm not going to eat anything until this thing is out of me," I cry and tighten my hand on his.

"Nala help me get her outside, she needs some air." He requests.

"No, please let's take it out first. I can feel it inside me, please take it out."

“That’s your mind telling you that it’s moving, I told you it’s a spiritual thing. It’s not something that will come out when you push, it’s meant to make you barren. It was given instructions, that any man who wants to sleep with you will not be aroused.” Mathonga.

“Then we can take it out right? I can’t imagine not having sex with Nta...” I stop when his face becomes awkward.

“You’re going to be okay Khethiwe.” Nala’s comforting words are useless right now.

I realise I’m still lying with my legs open like a woman who is about to give birth.

I feel the twitch again, Mathonga says it’s my imagination. It can’t be when he just told me I’m carrying a frog, spiritual or not. Something is in my womb.

“Khethiwe please calm down, you’re burning up. You will go into shock if you don’t.” Dr

Mathonga instructs, he knows better because he's had a frog growing inside him before.

"I can't breathe, I'm scared." I cry.

Mathonga and Nala help me up, they are dragging me across the room, literally. My legs feel numb, I can't move them.

"Please tell my father not to bury me with this thing in my womb." It's my last will and testament, I can hear Amandla laughing behind me.

There's also a smell of warm milk and cinnamon, the milk from India is here.

"You're not going to die Khethiwe, Bab'Manyanga will help you. He specialises in these things." Mathonga utters.

I don't know who that is, but I know death is near. Nala and Mathonga better catch me when I fall, I don't want to hit the ground like a sack of potatoes.

He pulls the door open and standing on the doorstep with his hand up like he's about to knock is Ntaba. His brows furrow, he's looking at me.

"Ntaba?" My tears triple, I must be dreaming. He's in jail as far as I know.

"Ntaba there's a frog in my womb... I'm pregnant with a frog." I tell him, he needs to know as the stepfather.

His face blurs, I can't make out his features anymore. The last thing I see is a confused look on his face before I feel myself falling and black out on the way to the ground.

MATHONGA-

Eighty-eight

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KHETHIWE-

“I leave for a second and you become a drama queen,” he hands me a glass of water. I place it on the bedside table and fold my arms across my chest.

“You have to drink to keep hydrated, unless you want to pass out again.” Ntaba doesn’t understand anything, I don’t want anything going into my stomach.

He sighs and sits on the bed next to me when I don’t reply.

“Khethiwe, I know you’re terrified. But you need to drink something, I don’t want to worry about you.”

What does he mean he doesn’t want to worry about me?

“I thought you’re always worried about me, what

are you saying now?"

He throws his head back laughing, the last I remember we don't have comedians in my family.

"Does fear turn you into this dramatic person?"

Him.

Dramatic? I'm offended, there is nothing wrong with me wanting him to worry about me. I want him to have sleepless nights thinking of me, heck I want him obsessed with me.

He takes the glass from the table and tries to make me drink, he didn't hear what I said...

"Ntaba don't give it water, let's wait for Bab'Manyanga to get here first." There's a lump in my throat I'm trying to push down, my hands are shaking.

Mathonga called Bab'Manyanga, it's been too long. I'm starting to worry if he will come or not, I can't go another day with this thing inside me.

“Turning me against my kid already? Shame on you Khethi.” He’s frowning and I get the feeling he’s judging my parenting skills... shit, what am I saying?

“Ntaba don’t do that, don’t plant thoughts in my head. This thing inside me is evil.” I’m an over thinker, sometimes I entertain things that will send me to hell.

The last thing I want is to think of this thing as my child, unwanted thoughts can be like a bad song on replay in your head.

“It’s a joke,” why is he not laughing then? People laugh after saying it’s a joke. “I’m trying to lighten up the mood, you’re too sour Peaches.”

Does this guy know how sacred a woman’s womb is? How will my children feel when they find out they shared a womb with a frog?

He should be telling me how he was released from prison instead.

“How did they let you go?” I ask.

I'd do anything to get my focus elsewhere, his face scrunches into a deep frown. I know that look, he doesn't want to talk about it.

“I was let go,” he sighs and takes his gaze to the open window. “They let me go, just like that.”

“Your ancestors came through for you Ntaba, you're out because of them.”

“I know, Mathonga told me.” His eyes are looking at me again.

I don't need to know anything more, he's here and that's all that matters. I'm not sure about that look on his face but I think he's feeling lonely, so I take his hand into mine.

“I'm happy we're together again, thank you for coming back to me.” He needs to know I love having him around.

This is the part where he tells me he missed me

and almost died without me, I'm expecting kisses and a long hug and tears to make it look real.

Why is he not saying anything?

"Ntaba?" I have to snap my fingers to get his attention again, the frown is back.

"I've been thinking," he says and my heart stops.

Men are not manufactured to think, they are not good at it. When a man thinks it means a woman will be nursing a broken heart.

"It's about the wedding." Ntaba.

"Yes!" I'm trying to stay calm, Ntaba is unpredictable. He might call the wedding off and I can't have that.

"I'm not perfect Khethi, I make mistakes and..."

"What did you do Ntaba?" He couldn't have cheated while in prison, right?

I've watched Lock Down, those guards can be

thirsty.

He takes a long moment of silence, I'm not okay with. He could be thinking how to get away with murder.

"I want to send my uncles to your family, I want to make this legit." He says.

Don't cry Khethiwe, you deserve to be loved too.

I want to throw myself in his arms but the knock at the door stops me, it's Amandla.

"The Sangoma is here." She says.

Great.

Ntaba helps me up, I'm not too weak to make it outside.

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If anyone had told me that on this day my fiancé

would be driving me to my father's house to confront my parents, I would've called them bluff.

Bab'Manyanga is with us, he said he can't help me without talking to my parents first.

They know where this thing started and if he has to send it back to where it came from, he will need to talk to them first and get them to cooperate.

I can only decide on it if they disagree, I don't see my parents agreeing. Even though they are descendent of Judas.

"Call me when you're done, I will come and get you." Ntaba says.

Are we not doing this together? Couples do things together and frankly I don't have the strength to face my parents alone.

“Aren’t you coming in? I can’t do this by myself, they won’t believe anything I say.” I sound needy and I don’t care, I’m allowed to be fragile.

“Khethi, if I want to clear my name with your parents I have to respect them. I can’t come into your house, it’s wrong.”

Today it’s wrong?

I see, he’s throwing me under the bus because he wants to score points.

“Fine, but don’t go far.” I tell him.

I missed that grin he’s giving me, I missed everything about him. I need to remember to buy a Christmas present for the guard that unlocked his cell.

My father’s house is forever crowded, everyone is here but Aunt Rebecca. Her twins are squashed on the same couch, I bet Amafu

bullied them into holding the remote.

“What are you doing here wena?”

The last time I checked this was my father’s house, my mother should go to her own father’s house if she has a problem with me being here.

“Go back where you came from, where do you think this is?” She stands with a threatening look on her face. I’m not going to argue with her, there’s no time for that.

In this family, we don’t believe in ancestors, and traditional healers. But it’s time I drop a bomb on them.

I take a peek outside and ask Bab’Manyanga to come in. Blood drains from my father’s face, his wife looks like she has seen a ghost.

“What the hell is this man doing here?” The woman who wears the pants in the house yells.

“Khethiwe, I don’t know what you are digging but you need to stop. Get that man out of here.”
My father is pissed.

They can shoot me if they care to,
Bab’Manyanga is not going anywhere.

“My life is a mess baba, all three of your children are suffering. I had to bring Bab’Manyanga here. He’s going to help us.”

“Am I not your father Khethiwe? Why make a decision without letting us know? Without letting me know?” He’s yelling and pointing fingers.

“I had no choice baba, there’s a frog in my womb. It won’t let me have children or a man.”
The sound of my voice matches his, this is how he wants to communicate. Like two baboons fighting over a banana.

“Did you know about this?” He’s asking my mother.

Didn't he hear what I said? My mother shakes her head.

"No one knew, I brought him here. Baba we are going to listen to him and we will do as he says, or I will call my brothers. I'm sure they'd love to know why their lives are a mess."

My father is forcing me to threaten him. He can look at me anyhow, the truth will come out today.

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These people look petrified of Bab'Manyanga, I asked him to sit on the one seater couch right across my father. We have two of those so why not let the man sit like a king?

"Baba can we start?" I have to ask, it's his house even though I had to force the sangoma in.

He moves his eyes to Bab'Manyanga and gives

him a subtle nod.

“You can begin baba,” I tell the sangoma.

I’m waiting for him to throw bones and starts groaning but he does the opposite, he’s on his feet praying.

“Please kneel down here,” the instruction is for my parents.

My mother looks away with a frown on her face.

Relax Khethiwe, you just need to remember that this woman is for your downfall. She birthed me to kill me.

“Baba please tell your wife to cooperate, this is your house KaMandonsela and she only listens to you.” I’m too nice and polite for someone who is pissed.

My mother murders me with her eyes, I’m not playing this time. We will get to the bottom of this, come hell or high waters.

“Khethiwe please,” baba throws his hand up.
“What are you trying to do?”

“Fix my life,” what does he think? “This curse ends today baba, your life is perfect, right? You’re married, you have a home, a job and children. At least you have something to shame the devil. I’m not going to go through life fighting demons I know nothing about.”

He looks over at his wife then back at me.

“There are no demons Khethiwe. Please stop this nonsense.”

Jeer, this father.

“Bab’Manyanga asked that you kneel, please respect him and do as he says. He has other people to attend to.” I’m showing respect because of the elder in the room. I have an A4 page full of shitty words for these two.

“It’s okay my child, don’t resent your parents for what they did. This can be fixed.”

Bab'Manyanga.

So he's seen what they did? I thought he'd see right through them the moment he walked through the door.

"What did they do mkhulu?" I ask, before staining them with a dirty look.

"Khethiwe calm down." my father.

What the fuck? I'm not going to calm down. Bab'Manyanga looks at my father with raised eyebrows.

"Tell your children what you did, and you need to apologise to them." Bab'Manyanga continues to bring the pots.

"Baba talk," I snap at him. The man who fathered me drops his head, he's carrying the posture of a defeated man.

"I didn't mean to do it, we we're struggling."

KaMandonsela is talking. "You know when you give a child money and tell them to buy bread but it goes and does something different?"

"Baba don't this," my mother is not serious about life. We're not starring in a movie, our lives are at stake.

"Mkami don't stop me please," Good men still exist. Look at my father making me proud, I still hate him though.

"You and Lethiwe were not born yet, life was hard. We were not making enough money to buy a month's groceries, I was a street vendor. Your mother was unemployed, we had nothing. I was failing as a man, it was embarrassing. When I confided in Ndimande, he suggested seeing a witchdoctor."

Ndimande! Why, am I not shocked?

"The witch doctor gave me a root, he said to plant it in the middle of the gate, it will bring me

riches. All I had to do was tell it what to do and it will follow my instructions. For the first three months nothing happened until one night I heard a noise in my room. When I woke up there was a monkey on my bed, when I called Ndimande he told me to give it instructions. But it did the opposite, I thought it needed time or training. So I kept it, things got out of hand.”

His voice is shaking, I want to believe that he’s regretful.

He sighs and buries his face in his hands, it’s taking forever and I’m getting impatient.

“What happened next baba?” I ask.

He looks up, there are tears in his eyes. Is he kidding me?

“It became unruly and started giving itself to my wife, we tried to get rid of it but we failed. It destroyed everything it touched. Phathiwe was always sick. He started failing at school, the

same things happened to you and Lethiwe. When you reached the age of five, it started sleeping with you Khethiwe. It's the reason men never took you seriously, it chased them away. I don't know how the prince has stayed in your life for so long, he's not supposed to be around."

Jehovah!

What is my father saying to me? Did this monkey of his get me pregnant? My whole body freezes, I'm slowly forgetting how to breathe.

I glance at my mother, her head is dropped. She's usually the talkative one around here.

"It drinks the blood of Phathiwe's children, that's why he's childless. Things were not meant to go this far, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you, I tried to get rid of it but the witch doctor said the only way was for me to find it another owner. Where was I going to look?"

That is not an attitude of an apologetic man, he is shrugging like he's suffering from muscle spasm.

“What about the frog? Where does the frog come from?”

I want to know everything. Sono suddenly jolts up, her eyes are popping out. What's wrong with her?

“Sit down sisi, don't run away from your mess.” Bab'Manyanga points at my favourite cousin. I'm a little lost or slow maybe.

“What's going on baba?” I'm asking the sangoma.

“Your sister went to seek the help of inyanga to destroy your life, there are eggs kept in this house with your name on it. Those eggs are meant to bring bad luck in your life.” Is he talking about Sono?

I look at her, puzzled and in shock.

Sono is visibly trembling, her twin stands next to her. She's asking if she is okay, but Sono bursts into a loud cry.

"I'm sorry Khethiwe, I got jealous when I saw Ntaba. The man I went to see told me to bring your underwear, he said he will put something in your womb that will make Ntaba break up with you." She confesses through a flood of tears.

Witchcraft on top of witchcraft? What did I do to deserve this?

"Sono, I thought we loved each other?" Words can't describe how I feel right now. "I thought Amafu was the one who hated me,"

"Please, you're not special. Why would I waste my time hating on you?" Amafu.

"But you were the one who told me the story about the Madonsela children being barren." I say.

“Because that’s the conversation I heard between aunt and mom, why would I make it up. I don’t want your life, I just happen to think you’re an annoying entitled brat who deserves nothing.” Amafu.

Argh! I will deal with her later. Right now I want to know where those eggs are.

“Where are they?” I question Sono who looks at me with regret in her eyes.

“What?”

“The eggs, where are the eggs?”

“In your room, under the bed.” She stutters.

I knew not cleaning under my bed would come back to bite me one day.

“Go get them now!” I demand.

Why is she looking at me with big eyes? I grab her hand and pull her to my bedroom. My family follows.

“I don’t think touching it with her bare hands is a good idea,” Bab’Manyanga says.

I really don’t care, she touched them when she placed them under my bed.

She’s trembling and crying me a Nile river, I’m not touched. It was fun when she wanted to take me down, she must continue having fun while taking those bloody eggs out.

“Do it Sono or I will gather the entire neighbourhood and expose you for the witch you are. You know how black people deal with witches, right?”

She chokes a sob, snort spews from her nostrils. She bends over and half of her body disappears under the bed. I move my eyes around. Everyone is looking at me like I have lost my mind, they can’t judge me for this.

They are lucky I didn’t call Moja Love, I’m sure

there's a show called Umndeni that would love to cover this story.

Sono is back, with a calabash in her hands. The opening is covered with a black cloth and around it is a red thread. I'd be damned.

"Open it," I give her an order.

Her hands are trembling as she unties the wool and flips the cloth open.

So this is witchcraft? I never thought I would see the day.

There are three eggs bound together with a black and red wool, there are writings on the eggs written with a black pen.

I tell her to untie them and show us what's written.

Khethiwe- Job

Khethiwe- love life

Khethiwe- Brain

She wanted my brain too? She can have the man, not my brain.

“What’s this one supposed to do?” I’m asking about my brain, somehow it worries me the most.

Sono is having a hard time looking at me.

“After the prince breaks your heart and leaves you because you can’t make him hard, you’re going to lose your mind.” Sono.

Why is she speaking as if she is calling it into existence?

It’s too late to pick my mouth up, it’s on the floor. My cousin wants me to go insane?

“Sono how could you? How could you be so evil?” I’m screaming.

I know I'm not the prettiest girl in the world but I don't deserve to be counted amongst the crazy people. It wouldn't suit me.

Acting out of anger, I drag Sono to the kitchen. The family follows, no one has dared to stop me.

"Since you like eggs so much, you will make these and eat them."

"Khethiwe, I can't eat the eggs. If they crack, Amafu will die." Sono.

"What do you mean I will die?"

"If the eggs crack, a life will be taken. I told the nyanga to take your life Amafu, instead of mine." Sono says.

"Sono, I'm your twin sister, how could you?" Amafu yells.

"They were never going to crack, I wasn't going to let it happen. You are my sister, I would never

let anything happen to you.”

I can't believe she just said that. Khethiwe's life matters too.

“Oh, so I'm one of the cockroaches in this house? My life means nothing? Do you hate me that much Sono?” I shout out of anger.

“I don't hate you, I hate that your life is perfect. You have a job and a man who would do anything for you, it's not fair that you get everything. I wanted your life, the prince, the favour and the job.”

She forgot the frog and the monkey, plus parents who are witches.

“You know what, I'm done with you. All of you.” I yell, judging everyone with a single look. “Cook those eggs Sono now.”

I don't sound as scary as I think I do, she's not moving.

“I can’t eat them,” she cries.

“Sono you will eat those eggs today.” We can argue the whole day, I don’t mind.

I’m glad Bab’Manyanga is not saying anything, I’m out for revenge. My parents are next.

“Malume, please talk to her.” Sono pleads with my father.

Malume for what? He has his own sins to atone.

“Khethiwe stop this nonsense, she’s your cousin.” What nonsense is this father talking about? Amafu is also telling me to stop, my mother doesn’t seem to care.

Take a deep breath Khethiwe, you have been through worse.

“Everybody shut up, Sono will eat these eggs. I’m done playing nice, you people don’t see me in this house. How dare you make me your puppet? I thought I was surrounded by family

but you're all a bunch of snakes."

I take the pan, place it on the stove and pour a small amount of cooking oil. There's water in the kettle, it's warm. It won't take long to boil.

"Choose sisi, egg salad, hard-boiled or scrambled." She should thank me I'm giving her options.

No one messes with my life and gets the fuck away with it.

MATHONGA

Eighty-nine

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NALA-

*Are you there yet? Please take lots of

pictures.*

Amandla has sent four of these and I have deleted them all. She wants to know where Mathonga is taking me and what time we're coming home. How am I supposed to know when I was not told? He's different lately, acts and speaks differently.

I was rearranging my clothes when he came into my room and told me to follow him, I didn't dispute.

Disputes come with lies and you don't lie to a gifted person. I still want to see many days on earth.

"Your phone is busy today." That's him beside me, on the driver's seat.

"Amandla wants to know where we are," I keep my eyes on him to see if she affects him. He gives me nothing but an eyebrow raise.

“What did you say?” Him.

Insecurity will not win this time. I need to remember that this man loves me. He’s said it and I believed him each time.

“I’m not going to reply, where we’re going has nothing to do with her.”

But where are we going?

He doesn’t say anything, self-doubt is telling me that he’s hiding something. I need to self-inspect, this can’t be good for my health.

I feel his eyes on me, he must see the displeasure on my face.

“You okay?” Why is he asking me this?

“Never been better,” I lie.

I hate competition, I’m not good at it. My whole life I’ve never had to compete with anyone.

Amandla is beautiful, she’s curvy and knows Mathonga inside out. I have nothing to show for

our relationship.

What if he realises that he made a mistake by choosing me?

It's been troubling me how she is all over him, she's my sister, I can't confront her. It will ruin our relationship.

He's taking a narrow road that looks kind of familiar, questions in my head bring a frown to my face.

"Where are we going?" I know this road leads to the river, we can't be going fishing.

"The river," he replies.

I'm waiting for a more reasonable answer, he gives me nothing.

"Okay, what's at the river?" He will never tell me if I don't ask.

"Water," smart ass.

Maybe he's planning a surprise picnic, it would be strange. Not only do we not fish at the river, we don't do picnics.

Let me not complain, quality time without my sister would be nice. I don't care if it's at a river where people wash off their bad lucks.

We're there, he steps out of the car without saying anything to me. Today I want to feel special, so I wait for him to open the door.

I watch as he opens the boot and takes out an empty 10litre bucket and a blue plastic bag from Pick 'n Pay.

Before I can register anything, he's knocking on my window.

"Let's go," he says frowning at me.

His gentleman days are falling away, nothing I can't fix.

"Where are we going?" I'm trying to keep up

with his long legs, he's not making it easy for me with how fast he's walking. Does he have to be ridiculously tall? We're all ants compared to these Khanyile brothers.

"Mathonga wait up," I jog to get to him but he's still faster. I give up and walk on my own pace, I can't get over that bucket and the plastic.

He will probably use the bucket to sit. But what's in the plastic bag? It can't be food, it's too empty. Unless he's the type that eats peanuts on picnics.

The water is moving violently it's making my head spin, there's no one around but us. I'd be afraid if he wasn't with me.

He places the bucket on the ground, and fiddles inside the plastic bag. If I'm not mistaken, it smells like muti in there. Our eyes meet, he smiles and I return it. I can feel the chemistry...

sigh! I love this man.

“Take off your clothes.” Huh?

Just when I was singing his praises. I look around again, letting my eyes search every corner. The coast is clear, if he’s thinking what I’m thinking then we have to be quick.

“I don’t usually do this Mathonga, I mean I hear that white people love it. But we are black, our ancestors are watching our every move, so if we’re going to do it here. We have to have a blanket at least, I don’t want them to see us naked.” It would be so embarrassing.

Rivers are sacred places, the water spirits will strike us dead if we dare.

“We can’t use a blanket Nala, tie this around you.” How will a sarong cover us both?

“It’s too small, didn’t you bring a blanket?” I’m worried, didn’t he think this through?

“Why would we need a blanket?” He’s frowning a confused frown.

“To cover ourselves,” must I tell him everything?

“Why do we need to cover ourselves?”

Mathonga is confusing me with his confusion. I probably forgot to put on my brain this morning.

“If we’re going to have sex under the sun, emlanjeni we need to cover our nakedness. We’re not white, they...”

He’s laughing, my dress and head scarf have left my body. I don’t think I will need the panties either.

“You think we’re here to have sex?” He asks.

I’m missing something, my blood runs cold when he rolls into more laughter. Today I hate the way he laughs, I never want to hear this sound ever again. I cover myself with the sarong, and wrap my arms around my middle.

“You were excited before we left the house, you even said I was glowing today. The kiss you gave me in the car made me wet because your hands were all over my thighs. I thought you planned a getaway for us, since the house is full. And we haven’t had sex, so I...”

Why am I explaining myself? He won’t stop laughing, and it’s pissing me off.

“Mathonga stop,” I don’t like being confused.

“I’m sorry Nala, you’re just too adorable.”

There’s a grin I do not appreciate on his face.

“We’re not here to have sex sthandwa sami, we’re here for a cleansing.”

“Cleansing for what?” I snap.

He finds my annoyance funny.

“For you, Petros is dead. I want to remove every print he left on your body, physically I can’t. But spiritually I can help, if you would allow me. I don’t want his spirit tormenting you.”

If I would allow him? He's asking for permission after bring me here without my knowledge? I will never understand men.

"Oh!" I want to jump into the river and let the current take me wherever it's flowing. I can't believe I thought we were here to have sex.

"If you would allow me," he's touching my face. It's comforting. I give in, I trust him.

"Did I really make you wet?"

I'm kneeling in the water waiting for him to do what he has to do, and he has the nerve to ask me this?

"Mathonga, it's cold. Can you hurry up?"

He graces me with his ugly laugh again, it will take time for me to love it again. I don't know what he mixes in the bucket, the smell is strong.

"Use your hands to scrub yourself when I start

pouring the water.” He says.

The water is ice cold, I scream under my shivering lips.

Three buckets later, he helps me up and out of the water. The sun feels good on my skin.

“Are you okay?” He’s hunching over, caressing my frozen cheeks. I’m too cold to utter a word, a nod does it.

“You can change when you’re ready.” He instructs.

Nope, I will stay here and bond with the sun.

“We can have that sex date tonight.” The man is not even looking at me, he’s packing his things and there’s a smile on his face.

“I’m not wet anymore,” why are we talking about sex after my cleansing? Is it even allowed?

“That’s fine, we can fix that.” He turns and winks at me, I’m not in the mood for his

boyishness. I click my tongue and turn to look away from him.

“Hurry babe, the sun will set soon.” He hands me my clothes, I’m being forced to break up with the sun.

He takes my hand once I’m done, his hands are warm, I love it here.

“Walk straight and don’t look back,” his instructions make my heart jump a little. What’s behind us?

“You’re leaving all the bad luck behind.”
Mathonga.

Oh! That explains it.

I cling on to his hand and lean into him, he feels so warm and homey. I’m an idiot for wanting to be away from this man.

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KHETHIWE-

This is not how I thought I would leave my father's house, I dreamt of leaving in a white dress with my aunts and elders ululating behind me. Not like this.

Bab'Manyanga stopped my plans of forcing Sono to eat her evil eggs, Amafu was going to die and it was going to be on my conscious.

My father asked them to pack and follow their mother, they will come back after everything has cooled down.

Amafu wasn't talking to her twin when they left, and knowing how strict and very black my aunt is, she will deal with Sono accordingly. I don't wish to be her.

I'm leaving the house, I gathered everything that has my name on it, including my favourite spoon and plate I use when I'm here. No one

ever uses them so why not?

“Khethiwe don’t leave like this please,” my father grabs a hold of my hand stopping me from walking out the door.

I hate seeing him like this, but I also hate him for what he’s done and what he refuses to do.

“I’m leaving baba, and I’m never coming back.”

He grabs the china bag filled with my belongings and tosses it in the living room, something breaks. I know it’s my favourite cup.

“You’re not leaving, I’m your father and I’m telling you that you are not going anywhere.” Is he kidding me?

“Then let Bab’Manyanga cleanse the house, let him fix your mess baba.” I’m begging.

Bab’Manyanga said if he helps us, there might be death in the family. That’s when my father

said his help is not required, he told the elder to leave.

“You know I can’t do that Khethiwe, one of us might die.”

“So, am I supposed to accept this fate? Is that what you’re saying to me baba? Is that it?” I can’t stop myself from shouting, he’s pissing me off.

“Lower your voice young lady, that’s your father you’re talking to.” My mother better not test me, I am not in the mood for her playing Hitler.

“You should’ve spoken to us first before bringing a sangoma to my house...” My father takes over.

“And then what baba? What were you going to do?”

He never would’ve told me the truth, he would’ve let my brothers and I continue living this miserable life.

“Listen to me both of you, you will never see me again. Your curse will not work on me and my brothers, I will make sure of it. Even if I have to send it back to you, so help me God I will.”

If they refuse to take action, then I will.

Bab'Manyanga said if they don't want his help, then he'll help me and my brothers.

I'm going to call them today.

“We are your parents Khethiwe, you can't do this to us.”

Yesis!

My father seems to forget that I am his daughter, if he thinks he's stubborn then he hasn't met me.

“Watch me baba, it's over. You will stay here with your monkey.”

“You ungrateful fool,” it's too late for me to duck. My mother's palm leaves a burning sensation

on my cheek. "I should've aborted you when I had the chance."

"Then why didn't you? You would've saved me the embarrassment of having parents like you," I'm too seething not to shout.

How dare she lay a hand on me? Who the fuck does she think she is?

"I am still your mother Khethiwe, I brought you into this..."

"Please mama, don't even humour me. You have failed as a parent, you can't possibly be telling me you brought me into this world. You have no right to gloat about being a mother."

"Yeyi wena!" She's going for another slap but my father grabs her hand.

"That's enough mkami, you have done enough." He says.

At least we agree on something for a change.

“I hope you find it in your heart to forgive us, Khethiwe. We are truly sorry, parents are human too. We make mistakes,” my father.

“That was not a mistake baba, you knew what you were doing when you went to fetch that thing.”

A mistake is spilling tea while trying to get to the couch in time for your favourite show. A mistake is adding too much salt in rice. What he’s saying is utter bullshit.

He nods, his eyes are not able to look at me.

“You have grown up my child,” I wish he would stop calling me that.

I wish I was nothing to him.

“One day you will wake up and realise that what we did was for you, so you can have a good life.” This man is sick.

He can't possibly think what he did was for my good.

"Baba!" I'm wasting my tears on these people, they don't deserve to see me like this. "Where is this thing? Does it live in the house with you? Does it know where I live?" I ask.

He exhales deeply and graces me with a sad look.

"You'll never be able to see it with your naked eyes, it roams around the house in the dark. I don't know if you've ever heard any sounds at night, maybe on the roof, outside. It mostly stays in the kitchen," he says.

That's where we keep food, does that mean it eats with us? I'm not even going to ask.

"What about the palace? I lived there for years, did it ever come there?"

"No," his confidence has dropped. "Somehow it couldn't get to you anymore, there's boundaries

at the palace. But the bad luck stayed with you, it claimed you as its wife Khethiwe, that's why you are not lucky in love. Whether it takes a month or years, no man will ever stay with you forever. In your absence, your mother became the target because you were not accessible, it started sleeping with my wife." Is he crying?

My father is a joke, he didn't cry for me when his monkey was harassing me.

My mother is shooting fiery darts at me, what does this woman want from me?

"She grew bitter towards you, you were gone for too long and..."

"Are you saying that's why she hates me?

Because the demon that you and your wife brought to the Mandonsela premises turned on you?" I can't be hearing right.

I must have forgotten to clean my ears this morning.

“We were going to fix everything Khethiwe, Ndimande said he had a plan. That’s why he wanted to marry you to his son?” My father says and I’m starting to think I was given crazy people as parents. Seriously, God took these two from Hospice.

“I thought you said Ndimande saved your life and you promised to marry your daughter to his son?” I move away from the door, I don’t see anyone leaving this house alive. I am murdering someone today.

“That was a lie,” my father. “We were trying to fix what we did wrong, Ndimande...”

“Ndimande is a fraud baba,” I scream. “Look at your life, look at your family. He’s destroyed it but you can’t even see that.”

“Ndimande is a good friend, we grew up together. He would never hurt me...”

Yeah hey! My father is a gone man...

Bamthathile!

“God, you’re so ignorant KaMandonsela.”

“Khethiwe...”

“No baba, I am leaving. And I will make sure Pathiwe and Lethiwe find out about this, we will fix our lives. You don’t want to get rid of the monkey right? Then stay, if you dare come near me again, I swear to God I will not be responsible for what I do.”

I grab my china bag from the floor and hang it over my shoulder.

“You will be back, this is your home.” My mother says.

She is funny this woman.

“If that will comfort your evil heart, then don’t let me stop you from thinking like that.” I’m done arguing with crazy people.

“You’re going to regret this, both of you.”

These are my last words to them, my mother clicks her tongue and disappears into their bedroom.

I bet she's going to comfort her monkey.

It's my father and I, staring at each other for the last time. It's hard for me to grasp that he will not be the one to walk me down the aisle, I will never feel his comforting arms again. The first man to ever love me and take me as I am.

I feel tears behind my pupils, the only way to get rid of them is to blink a couple of times.

"There's still time baba, let Bab'Manyanga fix this."

"Your mother or I will die, I can't let that happen. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me sisi, I love you Kethiwe." He drops his head and takes the direction his wife took. This is it, this is how I say goodbye to my father?

Ntaba is parked outside, he knows everything. I texted him after the incident with Sono, that bitch is going to hear it from me one day. If it were not for Bab'Manyanga and me wanting to keep Amafu alive she would be history along with her twin.

"Are you okay?" Ntaba asks as soon as I enter the car, I'm struggling to control my tears.

"I just lost my father," I say trying to fight the tears falling down my face. "My father is as good as dead to me Ntaba, I'm an orphan."

I stop because talking makes me cry more, that's not what I want.

His arms pull me to his chest, it's supposed to calm me down but it makes me cry even more.

"I've got you, we'll take it one day at a time KaMandonsela."

I want to believe him so bad, but it doesn't seem like it at this point. I hide my face on his

chest and shake my head no because I will never be okay.

“Look at me,” Ntaba says.

He pulls me back and cups my face with his hands, his thumbs are wiping away the stubborn tears and his eyes are penetrating through my soul.

“I love you,” he says softly.

Heat overtakes my whole body, I swear my heart is doing a break-dance.

“What did you say?” I ask, needing confirmation.

Ntaba chuckles, “Don’t act like you didn’t hear.”

He says and hugs me again. God help me, your daughter is in love.

MATHONGA

Eighty-nine

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NALA-

Are you there yet? Please take lots of pictures.

Amandla has sent four of these and I have deleted them all. She wants to know where Mathonga is taking me and what time we're coming home. How am I supposed to know when I was not told? He's different lately, acts and speaks differently.

I was rearranging my clothes when he came into my room and told me to follow him, I didn't dispute.

Disputes come with lies and you don't lie to a gifted person. I still want to see many days on

earth.

“Your phone is busy today.” That’s him beside me, on the driver’s seat.

“Amandla wants to know where we are,” I keep my eyes on him to see if she affects him. He gives me nothing but an eyebrow raise.

“What did you say?” Him.

Insecurity will not win this time. I need to remember that this man loves me. He’s said it and I believed him each time.

“I’m not going to reply, where we’re going has nothing to do with her.”

But where are we going?

He doesn’t say anything, self-doubt is telling me that he’s hiding something. I need to self-inspect, this can’t be good for my health.

I feel his eyes on me, he must see the displeasure on my face.

“You okay?” Why is he asking me this?

“Never been better,” I lie.

I hate competition, I’m not good at it. My whole life I’ve never had to compete with anyone.

Amandla is beautiful, she’s curvy and knows Mathonga inside out. I have nothing to show for our relationship.

What if he realises that he made a mistake by choosing me?

It’s been troubling me how she is all over him, she’s my sister, I can’t confront her. It will ruin our relationship.

He’s taking a narrow road that looks kind of familiar, questions in my head bring a frown to my face.

“Where are we going?” I know this road leads to the river, we can’t be going fishing.

“The river,” he replies.

I’m waiting for a more reasonable answer, he gives me nothing.

“Okay, what’s at the river?” He will never tell me if I don’t ask.

“Water,” smart ass.

Maybe he’s planning a surprise picnic, it would be strange. Not only do we not fish at the river, we don’t do picnics.

Let me not complain, quality time without my sister would be nice. I don’t care if it’s at a river where people wash off their bad lucks.

We’re there, he steps out of the car without saying anything to me. Today I want to feel special, so I wait for him to open the door.

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"Mathonga wait up," I jog to get to him but he's still faster. I give up and walk on my own pace, I can't get over that bucket and the plastic.

He will probably use the bucket to sit. But what's in the plastic bag? It can't be food, it's too empty. Unless he's the type that eats peanuts on picnics.

The water is moving violently it's making my head spin, there's no one around but us. I'd be afraid if he wasn't with me.

He places the bucket on the ground, and fiddles inside the plastic bag. If I'm not mistaken, it smells like muti in there. Our eyes meet, he smiles and I return it. I can feel the chemistry... sigh! I love this man.

"Take off your clothes." Huh?

Just when I was singing his praises. I look around again, letting my eyes search every corner. The coast is clear, if he's thinking what I'm thinking then we have to be quick.

"I don't usually do this Mathonga, I mean I hear that white people love it. But we are black, our ancestors are watching our every move, so if we're going to do it here. We have to have a blanket at least, I don't want them to see us naked." It would be so embarrassing.

Rivers are sacred places, the water spirits will strike us dead if we dare.

“We can’t use a blanket Nala, tie this around you.” How will a sarong cover us both?

“It’s too small, didn’t you bring a blanket?” I’m worried, didn’t he think this through?

“Why would we need a blanket?” He’s frowning a confused frown.

“To cover ourselves,” must I tell him everything?

“Why do we need to cover ourselves?”

Mathonga is confusing me with his confusion. I probably forgot to put on my brain this morning.

“If we’re going to have sex under the sun, emlanjeni we need to cover our nakedness. We’re not white, they...”

He’s laughing, my dress and head scarf have left my body. I don’t think I will need the panties either.

“You think we’re here to have sex?” He asks.

I’m missing something, my blood runs cold when he rolls into more laughter. Today I hate the way he laughs, I never want to hear this sound ever again. I cover myself with the sarong, and wrap my arms around my middle.

“You were excited before we left the house, you even said I was glowing today. The kiss you gave me in the car made me wet because your hands were all over my thighs. I thought you planned a getaway for us, since the house is full. And we haven’t had sex, so I...”

Why am I explaining myself? He won’t stop laughing, and it’s pissing me off.

“Mathonga stop,” I don’t like being confused.

“I’m sorry Nala, you’re just too adorable.”

There’s a grin I do not appreciate on his face.

“We’re not here to have sex sthandwa sami, we’re here for a cleansing.”

“Cleansing for what?” I snap.

He finds my annoyance funny.

“For you, Petros is dead. I want to remove every print he left on your body, physically I can’t. But spiritually I can help, if you would allow me. I don’t want his spirit tormenting you.”

If I would allow him? He’s asking for permission after bring me here without my knowledge? I will never understand men.

“Oh!” I want to jump into the river and let the current take me wherever it’s flowing. I can’t believe I thought we were here to have sex.

“If you would allow me,” he’s touching my face. It’s comforting. I give in, I trust him.

“Did I really make you wet?”

I’m kneeling in the water waiting for him to do what he has to do, and he has the nerve to ask

me this?

“Mathonga, it’s cold. Can you hurry up?”

He graces me with his ugly laugh again, it will take time for me to love it again. I don’t know what he mixes in the bucket, the smell is strong.

“Use your hands to scrub yourself when I start pouring the water.” He says.

The water is ice cold, I scream under my shivering lips.

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“Are you okay?” He’s hunching over, caressing my frozen cheeks. I’m too cold to utter a word, a nod does it.

“You can change when you’re ready.” He instructs.

Nope, I will stay here and bond with the sun.

“We can have that sex date tonight.” The man is

not even looking at me, he's packing his things and there's a smile on his face.

"I'm not wet anymore," why are we talking about sex after my cleansing? Is it even allowed?

"That's fine, we can fix that." He turns and winks at me, I'm not in the mood for his boyishness. I click my tongue and turn to look away from him.

"Hurry babe, the sun will set soon." He hands me my clothes, I'm being forced to break up with the sun.

He takes my hand once I'm done, his hands are warm, I love it here.

"Walk straight and don't look back," his instructions make my heart jump a little. What's behind us?

"You're leaving all the bad luck behind."
Mathonga.

Oh! That explains it.

I cling on to his hand and lean into him, he feels so warm and homey. I'm an idiot for wanting to be away from this man.

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KHETHIWE-

This is not how I thought I would leave my father's house, I dreamt of leaving in a white dress with my aunts and elders ululating behind me. Not like this.

Bab'Manyanga stopped my plans of forcing Sono to eat her evil eggs, Amafu was going to die and it was going to be on my conscious.

My father asked them to pack and follow their mother, they will come back after everything has cooled down.

Amafu wasn't talking to her twin when they left, and knowing how strict and very black my aunt is, she will deal with Sono accordingly. I don't wish to be her.

I'm leaving the house, I gathered everything that has my name on it, including my favourite spoon and plate I use when I'm here. No one ever uses them so why not?

"Khethiwe don't leave like this please," my father grabs a hold of my hand stopping me from walking out the door.

I hate seeing him like this, but I also hate him for what he's done and what he refuses to do.

"I'm leaving baba, and I'm never coming back."

He grabs the china bag filled with my belongings and tosses it in the living room, something breaks. I know it's my favourite cup.

“You’re not leaving, I’m your father and I’m telling you that you are not going anywhere.” Is he kidding me?

“Then let Bab’Manyanga cleanse the house, let him fix your mess baba.” I’m begging.

Bab’Manyanga said if he helps us, there might be death in the family. That’s when my father said his help is not required, he told the elder to leave.

“You know I can’t do that Khethiwe, one of us might die.”

“So, am I supposed to accept this fate? Is that what you’re saying to me baba? Is that it?” I can’t stop myself from shouting, he’s pissing me off.

“Lower your voice young lady, that’s your father you’re talking to.” My mother better not test me, I am not in the mood for her playing Hitler.

“You should’ve spoken to us first before

bringing a sangoma to my house..." My father takes over.

"And then what baba? What were you going to do?"

He never would've told me the truth, he would've let my brothers and I continue living this miserable life.

"Listen to me both of you, you will never see me again. Your curse will not work on me and my brothers, I will make sure of it. Even if I have to send it back to you, so help me God I will."

If they refuse to take action, then I will.

Bab'Manyanga said if they don't want his help, then he'll help me and my brothers.

I'm going to call them today.

"We are your parents Khethiwe, you can't do this to us."

Yesis!

My father seems to forget that I am his daughter, if he thinks he's stubborn then he hasn't met me.

"Watch me baba, it's over. You will stay here with your monkey."

"You ungrateful fool," it's too late for me to duck. My mother's palm leaves a burning sensation on my cheek. "I should've aborted you when I had the chance."

"Then why didn't you? You would've saved me the embarrassment of having parents like you," I'm too seething not to shout.

How dare she lay a hand on me? Who the fuck does she think she is?

"I am still your mother Khethiwe, I brought you into this..."

"Please mama, don't even humour me. You have failed as a parent, you can't possibly be telling me you brought me into this world. You

have no right to gloat about being a mother.”

“Yeyi wena!” She’s going for another slap but my father grabs her hand.

“That’s enough mkami, you have done enough.”
He says.

At least we agree on something for a change.

“I hope you find it in your heart to forgive us, Khethiwe. We are truly sorry, parents are human too. We make mistakes,” my father.

“That was not a mistake baba, you knew what you were doing when you went to fetch that thing.”

A mistake is spilling tea while trying to get to the couch in time for your favourite show. A mistake is adding too much salt in rice. What he’s saying is utter bullshit.

He nods, his eyes are not able to look at me.

“You have grown up my child,” I wish he would

stop calling me that.

I wish I was nothing to him.

“One day you will wake up and realise that what we did was for you, so you can have a good life.” This man is sick.

He can't possibly think what he did was for my good.

“Baba!” I'm wasting my tears on these people, they don't deserve to see me like this. “Where is this thing? Does it live in the house with you? Does it know where I live?” I ask.

He exhales deeply and graces me with a sad look.

“You'll never be able to see it with your naked eyes, it roams around the house in the dark. I don't know if you've ever heard any sounds at night, maybe on the roof, outside. It mostly

stays in the kitchen,” he says.

That’s where we keep food, does that mean it eats with us? I’m not even going to ask.

“What about the palace? I lived there for years, did it ever come there?”

“No,” his confidence has dropped. “Somehow it couldn’t get to you anymore, there’s boundaries at the palace. But the bad luck stayed with you, it claimed you as its wife Khethiwe, that’s why you are not lucky in love. Whether it takes a month or years, no man will ever stay with you forever. In your absence, your mother became the target because you were not accessible, it started sleeping with my wife.” Is he crying?

My father is a joke, he didn’t cry for me when his monkey was harassing me.

My mother is shooting fiery darts at me, what does this woman want from me?

“She grew bitter towards you, you were gone for

too long and..."

"Are you saying that's why she hates me? Because the demon that you and your wife brought to the Mandonsela premises turned on you?" I can't be hearing right.

I must have forgotten to clean my ears this morning.

"We were going to fix everything Khethiwe, Ndimande said he had a plan. That's why he wanted to marry you to his son?" My father says and I'm starting to think I was given crazy people as parents. Seriously, God took these two from Hospice.

"I thought you said Ndimande saved your life and you promised to marry your daughter to his son?" I move away from the door, I don't see anyone leaving this house alive. I am murdering someone today.

"That was a lie," my father. "We were trying to

fix what we did wrong, Ndimande...”

“Ndimande is a fraud baba,” I scream. “Look at your life, look at your family. He’s destroyed it but you can’t even see that.”

“Ndimande is a good friend, we grew up together. He would never hurt me...”

Yeah hey! My father is a gone man...
Bamthathile!

“God, you’re so ignorant KaMandonsela.”

“Khethiwe...”

“No baba, I am leaving. And I will make sure Pathiwe and Lethiwe find out about this, we will fix our lives. You don’t want to get rid of the monkey right? Then stay, if you dare come near me again, I swear to God I will not be responsible for what I do.”

I grab my china bag from the floor and hang it over my shoulder.

“You will be back, this is your home.” My mother says.

She is funny this woman.

“If that will comfort your evil heart, then don’t let me stop you from thinking like that.” I’m done arguing with crazy people.

“You’re going to regret this, both of you.”

These are my last words to them, my mother clicks her tongue and disappears into their bedroom.

I bet she’s going to comfort her monkey.

It’s my father and I, staring at each other for the last time. It’s hard for me to grasp that he will not be the one to walk me down the aisle, I will never feel his comforting arms again. The first man to ever love me and take me as I am.

I feel tears behind my pupils, the only way to get rid of them is to blink a couple of times.

“There’s still time baba, let Bab’Manyanga fix this.”

“Your mother or I will die, I can’t let that happen. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me sisi, I love you Kethiwe.” He drops his head and takes the direction his wife took. This is it, this is how I say goodbye to my father?

Ntaba is parked outside, he knows everything. I texted him after the incident with Sono, that bitch is going to hear it from me one day. If it were not for Bab’Manyanga and me wanting to keep Amafu alive she would be history along with her twin.

“Are you okay?” Ntaba asks as soon as I enter the car, I’m struggling to control my tears.

“I just lost my father,” I say trying to fight the tears falling down my face. “My father is as good as dead to me Ntaba, I’m an orphan.”

I stop because talking makes me cry more,
that's not what I want.

His arms pull me to his chest, it's supposed to
calm me down but it makes me cry even more.

"I've got you, we'll take it one day at a time
KaMandonsela."

I want to believe him so bad, but it doesn't
seem like it at this point. I hide my face on his
chest and shake my head no because I will
never be okay.

"Look at me," Ntaba says.

He pulls me back and cups my face with his
hands, his thumbs are wiping away the
stubborn tears and his eyes are penetrating
through my soul.

"I love you," he says softly.

Heat overtakes my whole body, I swear my
heart is doing a break-dance.

“What did you say?” I ask, needing confirmation.
Ntaba chuckles, “Don’t act like you didn’t hear.”
He says and hugs me again. God help me, your
daughter is in love.

MATHONGA-

Ninety-

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng.

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MATHONGA-

The homestead is crowded today, family has
gathered to celebrate baba and Nandi’s union.
The oldies signed at the magistrates this
morning. Who would’ve thought they would

follow the trend? And with the money my father has, he should've at least given Nandi a big wedding.

These two became official two weeks back after their traditional wedding and had a ceremony to introduce her to the ancestors, she's finally a Khanyile. It worries me that Dalisile has not signed the divorce papers, she's hiding in Uganda and I know desperation will bring her back here one day.

Nandi does not need stress, she's been through enough. Baba better make sure she doesn't shed a tear.

It's night time, and I haven't seen Nala today. The preparations have kept her busy, I don't understand why they didn't hire catering. I'm on my way to look for her in the kitchen when Thobani comes running over to me.

“Mathonga, look what uncle Funo got for me, cool right?”

He holds up a yellow toy car, he’s obsessed with these. I’ve resorted to leaving him at home whenever I go to the grocery store.

He wants to sponsor PnP with my money, I’m sure the owner is rich enough. Nala moved back with Thobani last month, she will be studying through Unisa and working part time.

Moving back was her decision alone, she called me one day and said she was coming home. Amandla is around as well, she never left. She stays in her grandmother’s house but never misses a day here.

She left early today, something happened that made her leave early.

“That’s a nice car,” I whisk him up.

Here comes Funokuhle, he’s never been the same since he watched his family’s massacre

on national television. Sometimes I get the feeling that he doesn't want to be here, maybe I'm exaggerating.

"Thank you, but you don't have to spoil him. He gets enough as it is." I tell him.

"I never enjoyed my childhood because my father thought I didn't need toys," touchy subject.

His eyes water, how do I get away from this? I don't know how to comfort a crying man. "He's a child, he deserves everything in the world." Funokuhle argues.

Okay... I see.

"Come Thobani, your favourite show is about to start." Funo.

I have to place the child down when he takes his hand, now I'm certain he hates all of us. He smiles at me and walks off with the Thobani, maybe I am exaggerating.

“It will take time for him to heal,” Nala says behind me. Her eyes are trained on Funokuhle who is dragging Thobani toward the main house.

“Sometimes I think he’s secretly planning our murder.” She laughs, it’s what she does, laugh at most things I say.

“That’s ridiculous, Funo is hurt. He watched your brother slaughter his family.”

Another touchy subject I’m not going to engage in.

“Where have you been?” I wrap my arms around her. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“Mathonga, people will talk.” She’s suddenly shy.

“Were are a couple, everyone here knows that.” I put that out.

There is no reason for her to be shy about it, my lips are all over her face. I love how her breath

quickens, it takes less effort to have her melting in my arms.

“Thonga,” she breathes into my ear. “We’re not married, we can’t be touching each other in public like this.”

“Okay, let’s go to my room then.” I pull her hand, denying her a chance to stop me. You need to be clever when it comes to dealing with this gender.

The door slams behind us, and immediately, I have her pinned to the door. I lean in and kiss her from her ear down to her neck, a whimper leaves her throat and I feel heat pooling in my stomach.

“They’ll be looking for us, can’t we do this later?” Nala whispers huskily, her hands are telling me a different story. She is grabbing on to me, and breathing my name.

“I’m sorry, I don’t speak foreign.” I slide a hand down her oversized top and cup her breast. My lips are teasing the sensitive skin on her neck.

“Okay let’s be fast,” she says.

“Ohh, I love it when you speak French.” She giggles at my response and captures my lips.

“Two minutes okay?” Mood killer, what the hell is two minutes?

I move back and glare down at her, “I don’t know how to cook noodles Nala.”

Fuck, I hate noodles. How am I supposed to cum in two minutes?

She’s laughing at me.

“Do you want it or not?” Her question hurts me. What am I? A sex hobo?

“Fine,” I have no choice but to accept her offer. When I lean in for a kiss, hungry to taste her, she slips out of my hands.

“Let me use the bathroom first, you warm the bed. I’ll be back.” There she goes running to the bathroom.

I’m not a very patient man, but I will wait. To make things faster, I strip naked and wait for her in bed.

“Mathonga, are you in there?” What is Khothama doing here? I don’t respond because I’m not here.

The door handle is twisting, he’s trying to break in. It hits me that I didn’t lock the door, I think of running to lock it but it cracks open, and my first thought is to cover up with a blanket.

He walks in with Ntaba, Khethiwe and Funokuhle just as Nala saunters out of the bathroom. She gawks at me then back at them.

Yeah, I’m also stunned my dear Nala.

There’s more, Hlabela and his wife along with Vukuzakhe, Ndleleni and the ever silent Banami.

I don't remember calling a meeting to my room.

"What the hell? This is my room, get out." They are not listening, everyone finds a comfortable place to sit. Ntaba of all people sits on my bed, I have never been so uncomfortable in my life. These people should be out there fake-fainting to 'idibala' on the dance floor with everyone.

"We're here to bond with you ndoda, it's a good thing Nala is here." What is Khothama talking about?

"I don't need a bonding session, get out people." I'm shouting but no one is paying attention to me. They are having conversations like I'm not here and they are invading my space.

"Who do you think your father will appoint as chief?" Hlabela asks.

I shrug when I see him looking at me because, how the hell am I supposed to know?

“I don’t know ndoda,” I say.

Any answer I give will be nonsense, my brain is the form of a dick right now.

“I think Ntaba should take the throne,” of course Khothama would vote for Ntaba. He’s his favourite cousin.

“Forget it, I’m too busy.” Ntaba argues.

He lies flat on my bed and uses his arms as a pillow. I’m overthrown with shock, my eyes find Nala. She hasn’t moved from her spot, baby girl wants these baboons gone too.

“Only father knows who he will ordain, whatever decision he takes, we need to respect it.” Says the man who lives in Durban and has no plans of moving back. Honestly, Nidleleni is a prodigal son. Zakhe too, they are cut off from the same tree.

“I agree with Nidleleni, but I will never accept the throne. I love Durban, I don’t want to come back

here.” Zakhe says.

I’m getting bored and tired. Condemning eyes fall on me. What? Am I not allowed to yawn loud in my room?

“When are your kids visiting, Kushi?” That’s Khethiwe asking.

I’m glad she has changed the topic, then again, my father’s land is huge. There are many rooms where Khethiwe and crew can discuss Kushi’s kids.

“I will have to ask permission from my mother, she’s too protective of them.” Kushi replies.

Kushi, Khethiwe and Banami are squeezed up at the foot of my bed, I never should have installed a carpet in here. Look at the fruits of my labour coming to bite my flat behind.

“Aren’t they your kids? Why do you need

permission?” Funo questions, leaning into Vukuzakhe.

These two chose to sit on my couch, I’m giving it away tomorrow. I mean that’s why they are comfortable in being in here because there’s more space to sit. I will have to trade my king sized bed for a single one, a boat in fact. Ntaba looks too comfortable.

They are still talking about Kushi’s kids, the conversation is exhausting.

I search for Nala, she has settled in with the ladies. She can’t be serious.

I give her a questioning glare and she has the audacity to shrug her shoulders, so much for injure one injure all.

“I thought we were in this together?” I mouth the complaint, she smiles.

“Mathonga did you know that Kushi is a mother of two?” Khethiwe...

Sigh!

Bloody hell! Why are we counting Kushi’s kids? Taxi maths showed me my mother back in high school, so numbers and I are not friends.

My reply is a frown, she smiles and turns back to Kushi.

“Why do you look frustrated?”

Because I am sexually frustrated, Ntabezikude. I wish to tell him this but they will laugh at me.

“I don’t know,” I mumble, pulling the blanket up to my chest. Ntaba is sitting on it, he won’t move.

“Asphelelanga madoda, Vimbela, Sakhile and Zamangwane should be here.” I don’t like the route Khothama is taking.

Actually, these people should leave my room.

“Can we not go there please, today is a happy day. Let’s not ruin it by dipping our hearts in sadness.” Vukuzakhe takes the flashlight.

He turns his gaze to Funokuhle, their fingers intertwine. Great, this gives me a chance to get rid of these two.

“Funo looks tired, don’t you think you should go tuck him in bhut’Zakhe?” I ask, and use my eyes to plead my case. His face crinkles up in a frown, he thinks I’m weird. I feel weird.

Is that music playing? In my room? On loud speaker?

“Who brought a speaker to my room?” I snap, frowning at all these motherfuckers. A finger points at Khethiwe, I should’ve known. And why would she play Brenda Fassie? I can’t deal with this.

“Cima sisi, it’s giving me a headache.” I snap. How far are they willing to go to destroy me? My enemies have sent them here.

“It’s a wedding Thonga, we can’t have a wedding without playing Vulindlela.” Khethiwe.

I never signed up for this trauma.

“It’s not my wedding, go play it for the couple that just got married, and take everyone with you.”

I see Ntaba frowning at me, his eyes are searching me. Oh no, he’s looking at the blanket. I hate how he’s so smart.

“What’s wrong with you?” He shouts through the music.

Nala turns to face me and shakes her head, she’s warning me about something.

“They will see that you’re naked under there, calm down.” She mouths the words, producing

no sound. It's easier said when you're fully dressed.

"Tell them to leave," I mouth back.

"Let's dance Nala." Khethiwe pulls her up.

I want to tell Ntaba to take his woman out of here, if they leave, the rest will follow.

"Turn it down please," I shout. She turns it down a little. "I'm going to sleep, please turn off the light on your way out."

I inform them and hope Nala will stay behind.

"We're not going anywhere." Khothama laughs.

"Madoda if you want to hang out, please go to Vumile's room and hang out with him and Nandi." I'm yelling now.

"Vumile is getting laid, we won't disturb him."

Ntaba.

But they will disturb me? That's an offensive statement, I was about to get laid too.

"It's too hot to be under the covers, don't you think?"

"It's too late to be in my room, don't you think?"
I return Hlabela's question with a question.

"Mathonga get out of there and join us." I sneer at Zakhe for his stupid request.

Like hell I'm letting them see I'm naked under here, they will know Nala and I were about to bake some space muffins.

I should be high on ecstasy but nope, I'm tolerating my siblings.

"Can I borrow your blanket Mathonga? I'm feeling cold."

And I'm feeling horny! No I don't have a bloody blanket for Kushi.

“Take the one he’s using Kushi, he won’t mind.”
Hlabela will sell me for free in India, I don’t trust him anymore.

“No, I...” He’s pulling the blanket from me. Who does that?

I’m beside myself with insanity and shock.

“Hlabela stop.”

“My wife is cold, borrow her a blanket.” He’s starting to piss me off, I’m booking him and his wife first class tickets out of this country.

“It’s my blanket, leave it.” I’m holding on to it as if my life depends on it and it does. Nala shoots up, her eyes are wide and looking at me.

I know she wants to help me pull the blanket, she hurries to my side and just stands there.

Why am I alone in this world?

I’m glancing up at her when someone snatches the blanket, exposing my nakedness.

My eyes can't go wider than they already are, Nala gasps in shock as her eyes move to my private parts. The room has gone quite, even Brenda has given up on me. I can feel heavy eyes judging me for breathing.

I'm too embarrassed to look at my brothers. But I curse the Goliath who snatched my blanket.

I've always known that I'm too slow, that's why I don't think of grabbing something and covering myself like Nala does.

She throws a pillow over my privates and I press it down like it's my saving grace.

"Thonga lami, you're naked?" Ntaba is judging me like he never gets naked.

Of course I'm naked, that's an obvious observation. I've been caught red handed, I might as well face them and get it over with.

They are staring at me, mouths wide open and... wait a second. Why is Vukuzakhe covering

Funokuhle's eyes and why am I offended by that the most?

My body is not ugly, Nala would attest to that and put a stamp on it.

MATHONGA-

Bonus-

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng...

Explicit content: Reader's discretion is advised, this chapter contains sexual content 18+

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FUNOKUHLE-

Staring at the man sleeping on the bed, a smile spreads across my face. The past few months

have been hell for me, I fell into a dark pit and didn't know how to come up.

Instead of asking Vukuzakhe for help, I wanted to drag him down with me.

My selfish efforts made me feel like the biggest scum of the earth.

I'm willing to come out of the dark pit and hold his hand again, I miss him so much yet he's always here with me.

I haven't let him touch me sexually for seven months, but not from his lack of trying. I've seen and ignored every advance he made, I knew he wanted more by the way he would hold me every night.

It's not that I don't want him, I want him more than I want air.

I lie down beside him and kiss him awake, his

eyes flap open and the first thing I see is confusion.

“Have you forgiven me?” He asks.

I know this is what he’s been waiting for, I was never upset with him to forgive. My anger was directed at the wrong person.

To answer him, I kiss him again and quickly pull away. Vukuzakhe caves with a smile, he loves what I’m doing.

He must see the distant look in my eyes because he asks, “What’s on your mind kid?”

My mouth goes dry, unable to bring up the topic that would inevitably put us in a sour mood. A small smile crosses my face, when Zakhe places a hand on my chest and leans in to softly peck my lips.

“I’ve been in contact with Banami, she told me

that Pule died in prison.”

I tell him, and sit up from the bed.

“Oh!” That’s all he has to say, he pulls himself up till he’s sitting.

“Did you know?”

“I did, and I know I should’ve told you. I’m sorry.” It’s easy for him to apologise, I love this about him.

“When I was with Pule, there were days when I would dream of his death. It made me feel so guilty and evil, I’d find myself mentally apologising to him. I thought when the day eventually arrives I would die too.” my confession brings a frown to his face.

I can tell he’s not comfortable talking about Pule, Banami said avoiding my past would pull me steps back.

I have been attending therapy sessions since

she moved to Durban with Ndleleni, I don't know if a doctor and a patient can be friends. But that's where we are, I want to host her and Ndleleni before we go to Izingolweni for Ntaba and Khethiwe's wedding.

When Ntaba was released, I was afraid for my life.

What if he comes for me? This was one of the thoughts I had.

"Kid," his voice brings me back to life. There is something about the way he calls me kid, only he makes it seem special. Like it's a name I was given from birth.

"I lost you there, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I think I am okay. Perfectly okay, I'm happy and in love with the best man in the world.

"Good, for a second there I thought you were going to cry over that bastard." He says, rubbing

his nose against my cheek.

“Pule’s death does not affect me, I don’t feel anything. If anything I feel safer that he’s not in this world anymore.”

I’m more than certain about this, the world is too small for Pule and I.

I straddle my giant and wrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m sorry I gave you a hard time, I didn’t know how to deal with my heartbreak. I needed someone to blame and you were the closest person I could find. I should have opened up and told you how I felt, instead I kept you in the dark and acted like an idiot.” I say.

Vukuzakhe sighs and cradles my face.

“I’m also sorry kid, I’m sorry your heart is broken. I’m sorry you had to go through all that pain and I’m sorry your family was taken away from you.”

I don't want to talk about my family, not today. It still hurts and it will take time for me to get over their deaths, my nieces and nephews were deserving of a second chance.

To avoid more talks about them, I scamper off the bed and strip naked, leaving nothing on my body. I perch myself on the bed, my legs folded beneath me and place my hands on my lap.

"What's going on?" His brows furrow.

"I need you," I confess, biting my bottom lip.

I've never needed it so bad before, and I have never initiated sex before.

"A- And work?" He stammers, shifting uncomfortably on the bed.

I have to clock in at 8am, and be logged in by 9am. I'm sure I'll make it.

"My boyfriend is the boss, I'm allowed to be

late.” It’s very irresponsible of me but what the heck? I’m dating a millionaire.

“You’re cunning, you know that?” Zakhe says as he leans over and nuzzles into my neck like a puppy.

“Babe stop, it’s ticklish.” So much so that I laugh and push against Zakhe to get him to stop. It must work because he stops, and looks at me.

“You called me babe?” It’s not that big of a deal.

“You’re my babe,” I enwrap my arms around his neck.

“I’m your babe, and you’re my Minnie Minion.” He mumbles with a grin as he runs his fingers on my head. The sensation has me leaning into his touch.

“I promise to hold you when you need me, you’ll never feel alone again kid.” He says.

I have no words but attack him with a greedy kiss, dominating over my giant. A first time for me, it feels like I'm on top of the world until Vukuzakhe takes over the kiss.

We pull away heaving, eyes heavy-lidded and lips swollen from the kiss.

"I want you to make me sweat," I'm sure of this.

A mischievous glint lies in his eyes, before he's running his tongue down my throat. I whimper and cling on to him.

He captures my lips with his, taking me off guard before I respond hungrily.

My fingers are tangling on Zakhe's spine, pulling him impossibly close to me. The kiss is close to animalistic as if two souls who have been craving for each other.

"Zakhe," I moan, nonverbally begging for more.

"I know kid," my blush deepens at his words.

There's a bottle of lube on the bedside table, I grab it and squirt the liquid on my fingers. My eyes are on him as I get into a position on my hands and knees.

"Funno," his voice is strained, he's watching me with dark eyes. A smirk of satisfaction draws on my lips as I move my hand behind me and slip in two fingers.

My breath intakes are sharp, I hiss and moan his name a little extra loud just to get him to squirm.

I've never done this before and Lord knows where I got the courage. I pump my slick fingers in and out of my hole, biting down my bottom lip.

I hear him growl from his chest, before he reaches his hand and uses his thumb to free my lip from my teeth.

I move my lips to his ear, nibbling at his earlobe.

“I’m begging for it Vukuzakhe, please help me.” I purr in his ear.

He grabs the back of my neck and presses our lips together, the kiss quickly grows desperate. He slips his tongue past my lips, it’s roaming in my mouth until it finds my tongue and swirls with it.

I pull away heaving and trembling, the mischievous smile on his face makes me wonder what he’s thinking. My eyes run through his body, his cock is straining against the confines of his pants.

I desperately want to release it. I lie down on the mattress, pulling him down with me. I take this opportunity to lock my legs around his waist grinding my hard erection against his carved stomach.

Vukuzakhe grinds down on me, his erection brushing against my balls and making my eyes roll back. He releases himself, only to remove his clothes and lube his erection, before connecting our bodies again.

His hips rock forward, he's rubbing his tip against my hole. Need engulfs me, making me push myself towards him. He directs his cock, his tip breaches me, making me grasp from how thick he is. It sends my mind into a wild frenzy.

"Are you okay? Tell me if you want me to stop." He's worried, I don't want him to stop.

"No, don't stop." I manage to breathe out. "It's not our first time."

"Yes, but it's been so long." He says.

"Just... go slow and gentle."

He presses his forehead against mine, and captures my lips

“I need you Funo,” I need him too.

He takes a deep breath and slowly inches himself forward until his cock slides in to the hilt. A breath I didn't realise I've been holding sways out of me, my legs are tight around him.

He peppers kisses on my face, whispering soothing words while waiting for me to adjust to his size. A second later I give him a go ahead with a subtle head nod.

Vukuzakhe kisses me, pulls his hips back and thrusts back into me. His erection stretches my walls, I grasp at his back.

“You feel so good, kid.” He groans through clenched teeth. “It's such a shame you can't see what you look like right now, my cock is buried deep inside you, and your drenching it. And it's taking everything in me not to fuck you right into this bed?”

“Do it, fuck me harder.” I plead, digging my fingers into his back. “Plea... please.”

“I don’t want to hurt you...” Zakhe.

“I’m giving you permission to hurt me, fuck me so hard that I can’t walk, make me cry, I want to feel you completely.”

I feel him shiver before he’s grabbing my legs and hooking them over his arms to give him access to thrust deeper. He’s hitting my prostate, that pre-cum spills from my tip and drips down my length.

“Zakhe!” I cry out, my hands grabbing on any part of his body that I can get my hands on.

“Please don’t stop, don’t... stop.”

He groans, snapping his hips harder, I know I’ll be walking with a limp for a week. I don’t think I’ll even pitch for work today, I’ll call in sick. I really don’t care.

Vukuzakhe is all that matters right now, he’s all

I want.

“You’re so warm, Funo. I love how you’re receiving me, it feels so good.” His voice has become smaller than it is, he’s heaving and panting above me.

“Mmmh! Zakhe...” My cries are getting louder and louder, I’m getting closer to my release. My trip to the skies comes to halt when Zakhe pulls out, leaving me feeling empty and frustrated.

He flips me around on all fours before I get a chance to complain, his arm is around my shoulders, pulling me up towards him. My back presses against his chest as he thrusts back into me.

This position allows him to hit my prostate with each thrust, my body is in heat. Tears blur my vision, I’m not familiar with the butterflies in my stomach. My moans are breathy, as pitiful as I reach my hand back and grab onto his neck for

support.

He turns his head to me, locking our lips in a sloppy kiss while he continues to fuck the life out of me.

Pleasure erupts through my limbs, a tingling feeling that has me gasping and begging for more. Flames of desire lick at every corner of my body, the pleasure becomes so intense that I begin to sob, tears pooling down my face.

“I’m almost there,” Zakhe tells me, nuzzling his face on my neck.

I’m close too but I don’t have the strength to tell him.

“I want to see you when you cum for me, Kid.” He alerts me, flips me around, and thrusts back into me.

Our eyes lock, I wrap my lips around his Adam’s apple and he releases a moan that will forever stay with me.

“I’m... com... co... fu... fuck.” His stuttering has worsened, but I know what he’s trying to say.

His hot seed pours inside me, the feeling of his cum inside of me sends me tumbling over the edge. I have to bite my lip to keep myself from screaming as I release. My cum smears my stomach, while Zakhe slows his thrusts to a stop before we both collapse.

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NALA-

I roll over on the soft mattress, instinctively reaching out to his side of the bed. My heart sinks at the emptiness. Another morning, another heavy heart. If it were not for the love I have for Mathonga, I wouldn’t be here. I

wouldn't have chosen to live away from Zitha. Amandla has created a barrier between us. She is distant, I can't grasp why.

It could be about Mathonga, she loves him and will never stop. Unfortunately, I'm not willing to give him up, the man really broke down all of my walls and settled himself comfortably in my heart.

I feel like I can be myself and let loose with him, without fear of being judged or pushed away.

I moved into his bedroom after he left two weeks ago, I miss him every day, no one knows where he is.

It was over two weeks ago when he woke up from what I thought was a bad dream, he wasn't himself the entire day and the day after that. He hardly said a word to anyone, he wasn't the bubbly talkative Mathonga everyone knew.

His brothers tried to cheer him up, pulling

pranks on him, like that one prank they pulled that night in his room where they deliberately invaded our privacy. Nothing seemed to work.

On the third day I woke up and he was gone, Ntaba told me not to worry, that he was okay.

I haven't heard from him since, something is not right. He can't be gone for so long without saying anything.

I walk in on Ntaba and Khethiwe conversing in the kitchen, piles of magazines are scattered on the counter. Their wedding is nearing, I have never seen anyone so happy before, she is literally glowing.

Ntaba already looks annoyed, he knows I'm about to ask him the same thing I ask every morning.

"Have you heard from him?"

He shakes his head, and like each time he does that, my heart sinks.

“He’ll come back Nala, the ancestors probably summoned him. You know how it is with gifted people.” Khethiwe is trying to comfort me. It’s not working but I take it still.

“Where is little man? I can drive him to school.” That’s kind of Ntaba.

Thobani is fond of him.

“He’s in his room, he’ll be out for breakfast.”

I was able to find a good school for my brother, he has made a lot of progress. He talks about Thabani a lot, which is a good thing. I don’t want him forgetting his brother and what he did for him. Thabani was a hero, he saved our lives.

“Come see this, we’re looking at cake catalogues.” Khethiwe gestures with her hand that I come closer. She’s paging through pictures of wedding cakes, looks like this is

going to be the wedding of the century.

Ntaba is excused from us by his ringing phone, I'm glad that he doesn't go far. It could be Mathonga on the phone.

My focus leaves Khethiwe, her voice trails off and becomes background noise.

"Nala are you listening?" Khethiwe asks.

I nod nothing but lies, I'm listening to Ntaba but I can't make out a word he's saying. His face is gracing a frown that puts me into a flurry of anxieties.

He turns his eyes to me and catches me watching, my heart instantly jumps to my throat.

He's putting the phone in the pocket of his pants, his worried gaze trained on me.

"Dammit! Dammit!" Ntaba growls, banging his hand against the fridge it almost falls.

My body suddenly goes cold, completely contradicting with the rushing of my blood pounding in my ears.

I take steps backwards, not sure where my legs are directing me.

“Ntaba what’s wrong?” Khethiwe asks, fear has made a place in her eyes.

I have the same question, but I can’t muster up the courage to speak.

“Ntaba talk to me, did something happen to Mathonga?” She raises her voice, shooting Ntaba with worried daggers.

“Hlabela, Hlabela!” Panic resounds in his voice as he calls his brother.

Hlabela is somewhere around, but why is Ntaba frantically calling him.

“Ntaba you’re driving me crazy, what’s going on?” Khethiwe again.

Why am I not able to utter a single word? Am I that weak? It must be the thought of living without Mathonga that has rendered me weak.

“The elders think they can give and take? Not iThonga lami, he doesn’t only belong to them. He’s ours too Khethi, ours. I’m not going to lose my brother.” And with that he storms out of the house. I don’t know where he’s going, I don’t know what’s going on or what he was talking about.

Tears fill my eyes, a choked sob escapes my mouth and a pang of hurt ripples through my pounding heart.

“W- What happened to Mathonga?” I hear myself ask, my voice cracking with each syllable.

“I think something happened to him,” Khethiwe answers. But I refuse to believe anything could happen to him, he promised me a life together.

MATHONGA-

Ninety- one

Sponsored by Rethabile Mofokeng.

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THE KHANYILES-

Standing at the mountaintop, crazy drunk and suffering from a broken heart is not how he pictured he would die. This is where he finally connected with his ancestors, it might not be the exact mountain but it was at a mountain. And this is where he wants to end it.

He's not a man that easily gives up on life, he's been tested before but this one seems to be the toughest test, one he is so sure he will fail.

“Thong lami.’ The frantic voice calls for his attention and startles him, he tilts his head to see Hlabela and Ntabezikude.

“Why are you here?” Mathonga snuffles, turning back to the vast nothing before him.

“Let’s go home, Thonga.” Ntaba is not telling, he’s ordering. A loud chuckle is released by Mathonga, he sips on the bottle of whiskey and his face crumples in distaste as he swallows the liquid.

“I didn’t ask you to come here, go back to your lives madoda. I don’t have a life, my ancestors have taken it and made it their own.”

Mathonga’s second chuckle is bitter.

He was going for sarcasm but the gods of humour fail him, the brothers don’t find him funny.

“Okay, you didn’t ask us to come but we are here and we’re taking you home.” Hlabela

replies.

“You don’t understand, they want me to...” The thought seems to anger him, he swings his hand and tosses the bottle over the cliff.

“They chose me to be their chief, to lead their people. I don’t mind that, but why does it come with a condition? I can’t do that to Nala, I can’t break her heart like that.”

Tears come as they are, plenty and disrespectful. He’s royalty for goodness’ sake.

“We’ll talk to Nala, we’ll explain everything. Don’t you think your death will hurt her even more?”

Ntaba tries to be the voice of reason, he’s not good at this speech thing but when it comes to his brothers, the poor thing tries.

Mathonga shakes his head, his gaze meets the long trees at the bottom of the mountain. He knows if he jumps from here, he will die before

he hits the ground.

Tears burn his eyes, he offers a subtle headshake.

“I always listen to the ancestors and do as they say but not this time. Let’s see who they will control when I die.”

“Don’t be stupid Mathonga, how will your death be beneficial to Nala? Killing yourself will be killing her.” Hlabela thinks yelling will knock some sense into Mathonga’s head, it has to. Otherwise, how else will they get him to go home with them?

A frowning Ntaba takes a careful step forward, his move brings a frown to Hlabela’s face.

“You want to jump, right Thonga lami?” Ntaba asks. “Then go ahead and jump.”

“Ntaba, what are you doing?” Hlabela’s jaw

tightens. How stupid can Ntaba be to tell their little brother to kill himself?

“Go ahead and kill yourself Thonga,” Ntaba persists.

His request confuses Mathonga, sure he wasn't asking for pity but he wasn't asking for a cheerleader too.

“It's not funny Ntaba,” Mathonga.

“Yeah Ntaba, it's not funny. Stop provoking him,” Hlabela grunts, his scrutiny burning Ntaba's giant form.

“I'm not provoking him Hlabela, if Mathonga wants to jump then he should. Strip Vumile of his sons, it will be like he never had children to begin with.”

No one seems to get where Ntaba is going, Mathonga ogles back at him. Hlabela is spotting a puckered brow.

“What are you talking about?” Hlabela queries.

“If Mathonga jumps, we’ll jump after him.” We?
Did he just say we?

Hlabela is tempted to dispute this, he has a wife and stepchildren to raise.

“I’m sure Vukuzakhe and Ndleleni will do the same once they hear about the triple-suicide.”
Ntaba is going overboard with this, it’s not what Mathonga had in mind. Ntaba is ruining his plans.

“You can’t do that.”

Yes he can and Mathonga knows it every well, the man who dares God and the devil is capable of anything.

“Try me, Thonga lam, jump off that cliff and we are following you. You want to test my love for you, right? Then here’s the opportunity, grab it.”
Ntaba grunts.

Mathonga's mind is muddled up in different colour strings, the challenge is a tough one. If he chooses to live then the ancestors will always expect him to do the impossible, things he does not agree with. But if he dies, then he'll be killing his brothers and Nala.

Mathonga steps backward, his vision is clouded by a well of tears.

He falls flat on his butt the minute he's away from the cliff, he's silently weeping.

Hands fall on each side of his shoulders, his brothers are here and it makes him feel whole.

"I'm sorry," Mathonga's voice trembles. "I'm so confused, I don't know what to do."

"You have no choice but to obey, Nala will have to understand." That's so nice of Hlabela to understand that when ancestors speak, you obey.

"I don't want her to leave me, what if she..." it's

not that he can't live without her. He just loves her too much to wake up without her by his side.

"You will still live if she takes that decision, it won't be the end of the world." Ntaba sounds too insensitive, he's forgetting he's talking to a broken man who almost took his life.

"Now let's get out of here before it gets dark and demons start hovering around."

Demons live in mountains? Hlabela has something to say about what just came out of Ntaba's mouth but he'd rather not, he accepts that his brother is special and perhaps one day he will be put in a straightjacket.

The brothers help Mathonga up, he drops his gaze due to the anger exhibited in Ntaba's eyes.

"I'm sorry bhu..." Mathonga's apology is stopped by Ntaba slapping him across the face. Hlabela gasps, and grips Mathonga's hand to get him away from the angry giant.

Mathonga does not move, he's rubbing his throbbing cheek.

"If you ever try that shit again, I will kill you Thonga lami. Do you hear me?" Ntaba's voice is firm but quiet.

Mathonga hides his face on Ntaba's chest, and wraps his arms around him. He's crying again.

"I will never do it again, I promise." Mathonga says.

Seeing Ntaba's hardened expression, it hits Hlabela that his brother is triggered by the attempted suicide.

Ntaba took Zamangwane's death harder than everyone, not once has he ever mentioned her name nor does he stay around when she is mentioned.

"Let's go home," they listen to Hlabela and find their way out.

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Vumile's lawyer has been in contact with Dalisile, she refuses to sign the divorce papers. She is demanding half of everything he has. If he would have it his way, he wouldn't give her a cent.

Today is the day of the inauguration, it was a spur of the moment decision. Vumile who has been distant and out of touch with reality half of the time woke up and decided to crown the next chief.

He's always known who will take over from him and nothing has changed.

Vukuzakhe and Hlabela arrived last night after getting a call from Vukuzakhe, the throne is waiting to be occupied.

The ceremony started this morning, a band was hired along with dancers. It's a big deal in the village, the people are pregnant with anticipation.

It's 3pm on the dot, Vumile stands in front of the wall mirror and emanates a deep sigh as he feels a hand on his shoulder.

"You're doing okay," Nandi is here to comfort him. Their eyes clash in the mirror reflection. Vumile wants to say something in response but he heaves another sigh instead. He drops his eyes to his trembling hands, Nandi follows his train of sight. Worry fills the windows to her soul.

"Your hands are shaking?" Her heart is pounding in her chest, that's not a normal shudder. Vumile uses his one hand to stop the other, it's an epic fail. The faster he hides this

from her, the better. He rams his hands in his pockets as he swivels on his heel to face the woman he loves.

“Let’s go, the people are waiting.” He’s headed for the door.

“Ngwane,” Nandi lovingly calls his name. He whips his head around, brows lifted and eyes curious. “You’re not wearing shoes.”

Vumile nods but doesn’t move his eyes from her, his eyes remain curious and that births a frown of concern on Nandi’s features.

She picks a pair of brown moccasins from the shoe rack and takes them to him.

He sits and wears the first, the shoelaces seem to give him trouble. He’s struggling to tie them, he stops and sighs deeply.

“Ngwane!”

Vumile ignores her, he's going to tackle this while kneeling. His fingers are fiddling with the laces, he groans and huffs.

"What's going on?" Nandi keeps asking questions, she's worried.

An exhale resounds from Vumile, he is becoming restless. Beads of sweat form on his forehead, he swipes his hand across it and goes for the second round.

Another exhale, he's now fighting with the shoelaces. He jumps when a hand lands on his shoulder.

"You're touching me, MaShamase. Don't touch me." Vumile snaps and stands. Tears have coated his eyes, he takes a long shaky breath and goes back to try and tie the shoelaces.

He's confused and afraid, he's an old man with experience. He can't be forgetting how to tie his

shoelaces.

“Vumile, what’s going on?” Nandi cries.

Vumile gives up, he lowers his now trembling body on the bed and hides his face in his hands. Nandi wants to wrap arms of comfort around him, she would if she were not afraid of his reaction.

“Where are my sons Nandi?” His words are muffled under his big hands

“They... they are in their rooms.” Nandi replies, fiddling with her hands.

Vumile jolts up and grabs her shoulders. It’s tight, he’s hurting and scaring her.

“Where are my sons? I want my sons with me.” It appears Vumile didn’t hear her the first time.

“Ngwane... stop it. Stop doing that, you’re scaring me?” Nandi pleads, she’s looking into dead eyes.

“I want to see them, I want to see their faces and talk to them. They have to know I love them.” His words shatter like glass, all he can utter are stuttering sounds. His tears render his vision out of focus.

“Vumile!” She screams, tearing herself from his grip.

Vumile blinks and detaches his hands from Nandi.

“Whatever happens, don’t let me forget them. Don’t let me forget my babies.” It’s as if he’s afraid to talk, as if he will forget them if he utters more words.

“Why would you forget them?” Nandi scowls in confusion.

“I know I will forget them, their birthdays. The first time I held them in my arms, their voices, and how much I love them. It’s going to happen Mashamase, little by little. I will forget my

babies and there's nothing I can do about it."

"I don't understand, why are you so sure that this will happen?" Nandi.

He's suddenly failing to look Nandi in the eye, he's fumbling for his words.

"The doctor said I... he... he said I have Alzheimer's disease." He can barely breathe.

Nandi has no words, they are not coming to her. She watches as her husband sits on the floor, holds himself and starts rocking back and forth while staring at nothing.

"Ngwane," Nandi kneels before him and cups his cheeks. She knows she needs to be strong. If she crumbles too, nothing will go right. One of them has to hold the fort and it has to be her.

"Look at me, Ngwane."

Vumile squeezes his eyelids shut, his uneven

breathing and watery eyes remain for quite some time.

“I need you to pull yourself together Ngwane, do it for your sons.”

The magic word ‘sons’ has him opening his eyes.

“You will go out there and crown your son, then we will tell them together. They love you Ngwane, those boys would die for you. If it happens that you forget, we will be here to remind you.”

She says ‘if’ because she refuses to believe that her husband has Alzheimer’s disease, it can’t be her Vumile.

Nandi helps him up and helps him with his shoes.

If he ever forgets how to dress himself or brush his teeth, then she will be here to do it for him. She will be here to do anything he can’t.

“Thank you MaShamase,” that’s him professing his love. Tears tease Nandi, she hugs her husband so he doesn’t see her crying.

Strength is the key word.

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No one but Hlabela and Ntaba know what happened at the mountain yesterday, Mathonga made them promise not to tell a soul.

He hasn’t seen or spoken to Nala, plus he’s done a great job avoiding her.

Once again, the Khanyile ranch is packed and that has worked on his behalf.

There’s a single knock at the door before Hlabela walks in, he slept in Zamangwane’s old room to avoid bumping into Nala.

“Are you ready?” Hlabela.

The former pastor looks ready to go, a body-fitting, maroon suit that compliments his dark skin.

“I will never be ready for this, I wish they had prepared me earlier.” Mathonga is talking about his ancestors. Hlabela agrees with a slight nod.

“My life will be destroyed Hlabela, how will I ever look Nala in the face and not feel guilty?” He’s not about to cry again, is he?

Hlabela is not in the mood to dig comforting words, he taps his shoulder.

“You don’t walk alone Mathonga, the elders are with you. You need to trust the process, trust them.”

Argh! They grow up so fast, look at Hlabela.

“Trust them huh?” Mathonga.

It’s not really easy to trust people who do whatever they want with your life. Mathonga

takes his leopard skin attire and dons it over his suit, he turns to Hlabela and finds him smiling.

“You look like royalty.” Hlabela says with pride.

“Yet I feel like death,” Mathonga returns and heaves a long sigh of exhaustion.

“Is she here?” Mathonga adds, his voice full of sadness.

“She’s here, I told her everything. She didn’t put up a fight or chase us away. As a matter of fact, she was over the moon.” Hlabela’s response does not seem like good news to Mathonga.

“What about Nala? Have you seen her yet?”
Mathonga.

Who hasn’t seen Nala? She’s walking around asking people where Mathonga is.

“The last time I saw her she was outside the tent with Khethiwe. You need to tell her what’s going on, she can’t find out in front of people.”

That's great advice Hlabela, but he's not sure he's that brave. Sometimes showing is better than telling, it saves lives.

"The ceremony is about to start, let's go."

Mathonga's voice is not usually fragile, he's on the verge of tears.

He knows he needs to calm down and so he inhales and exhales.

The stretch tent is packed, the loud music gives him a headache. He wants to walk out because his spirit does not agree with this loudness. Nomkhubulwane can wait, Nala is his worry.

On the podium, he spots Nandi and Vumile looking like royalty. He has no time to greet, his eyes search until they eventually find the woman he's looking for. She's on the second row, beside her is Khethiwe, Funokuhle and Banami.

Nala is staring back, she smiles and slightly waves. He's about to wave back when out of the corner of his eye, he sees movement that grabs his attention.

He looks over at the attention grabber, the long purple gown draped on her body is too dramatic, but makes her look majestic. Mathonga had asked Hlabela to get her ready and his brother went all out, Amandla looks like a million bucks.

But so does Nala, she too is dressed up like a queen. Although her dress and makeup are simple to the T.

As he gets to the front, his brothers, seated on the first row stand and bow their heads.

Someone starts whistling, it's Ntaba. The others join in except Vukuzakhe, the guests give him a standing ovation. The word is out, he's the next chief.

“Mathonga,” Vumile calls him to the pulpit. One last look at Nala and he joins his father on the stage.

“Okay, who was it? Who spread the rumour?” Vumile is addressing the guests who break out in loud laughter.

“Come on father, it was obvious that Mathonga is the next chief. He looks the part anyway, a typical village boy.” Ndleleni answers his question and that stirs up more laughter.

Vumile smiles and nods, Mathonga is planning his revenge on Ndleleni.

“Settle down everyone,” Vumile calls for silence. “I know most of you have...”

“Save us the speech baba, and give the boy his crown.” Ntaba interrupts, much to the amusement of the guests. They laugh, entertaining his silliness.

Vumile will not listen to a little boy, but he does

keep his speech short lest his memory gives up on him.

Mathonga is told to kneel, Vumile hands him a sceptre and adorns his head with umqhele.

Mathonga turns to face his people and smiles at their standing ovation.

He finds Nala with his eyes again, sadness visits. He knows the time has come, he has to pick the woman who will accompany him throughout this journey.

“Ngwane, bring your future wife.” Vumile whispers into his ear.

His heart is pounding so hard he’s so sure it will tear out of his chest, he steps down and heads Nala’s way. All eyes follow him, his brothers look tense and suddenly serious.

Nala welcomes him with a soft smile, she’s not used to being under the spotlight.

“Nala, will you have me?” It’s not a marriage

proposal.

Nala does not hesitate, she takes his hand. She was told this would happen and why it's happening, it's not a marriage proposal...

Mathonga walks hand in hand with the woman his heart has chosen, as they get to the pedestal, he looks her dead in the eyes.

"I love you, and I'm sorry." This he whispers and it brings unshed tears to Nala's eyes. She's confused.

Their moment does not last, Mathonga is leaving the stage. Nala's eyes trail him, a frown growing on her face as she sees the direction he's taking.

Mathonga stops in front of Amandla and like he did with Nala, offers his hand but wordlessly. A huge smile spreads on Amandla's face, he doesn't return it.

As he turns back to the stage with Amandla

proudly holding his hand, tears fall out of Nala's eyes. She's frozen in time and can't move a muscle.

A sister wife is not what she wants, she's never even given the idea any attention. Mathonga puffs out an irritated breath, Nomkhubulwane and Khahlamba are abusing their power. He's a little boy and can barely use a toothpick, how will he handle two wives?

MATHONGA-

Ninety-two

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MATHONGA-

The party seems to be going well for everyone, but Mathonga and Nala. They haven't had time

to speak. The villagers are flocking over him wanting to converse with him, he's been trying for a smile but the Khanyile calf is failing dismally.

"Baby," says Amandla behind him. Frustration overtakes him.

After making promises he's not sure he will keep, he bids farewell to the elderly man who has been loading him with complaints about the lack of public services in the village.

Mathonga shuts his eyes, takes a long sigh and abruptly turns to her.

"I'm so glad I finally have you to myself, the villagers have been hovering around you the whole day. I was wondering when they'll leave you alone." She says with a wide spread smile.

"I belong to them now, and that means all my time will be dedicated to them." He forgets to mention the one he loves the most.

“Not just them alone, you’re going to be husband now.” Amandla debates.

That’s right, he’s never told her that marriage is not for him. Marrying one woman he loves, yeah that shouldn’t be a problem. He’ll figure out this marriage thing along the way, but how will he live with a woman he has no intimate feelings for?

“Amandla, I’m not in love with you anymore.” He takes in the look on her face.

Amandla is flushed, but not enough to be deemed stricken. Mathonga notes the smudge of blush on her face, the faintly dazed, and focused gaze, and a carefree grin. She is over the moon and gives no fucks what he says.

“But you chose me, your ancestors told you that I’m the one for you.”

“I love Nala, she was chosen too.” He almost snorts at the look of offence on her face.

“That doesn’t matter, we can share you. I don’t mind.”

Now that sounds wrong in his ears, he needs a stiff drink and this damn animal attire is heavy.

There’s a shadow behind Amandla, a dark aura that has shivers rippling through her. She turns around and gulps at the sight of the stone-cold face staring down at her. Fear flashes past her face, she staggers backward and collides into Mathonga.

“MaCele,” Ntaba greets with a slight tilt of the head. His eyes are too penetrating, sweeping through every corner of her soul.

“Is everything okay, Thonga lami?”

Mathonga looks like death, hence the worried look on Ntaba’s face. He’s waiting with furrowed eyebrows and a tight jaw.

Mathonga gives him a sad smile and a subtle nod, Ntaba finds his way without glancing over at the lady staring at him like he's about to slit her throat.

"I'm not okay with how your brother has been looking at me today, he makes my blood run cold. Is it okay that he's here, around people?" Her statement is frowned upon, that's a statement Mathonga is not going to answer.

"I mean... after killing people, I don't think he should be around people. Is he going to live here, in the palace with us? Will our children be safe? I'm not judging or anything but..."

But he's a menace to society, a threat to humanity and his conscience is as dark as the devil's heart.

Amandla is in her right mind to worry.

Mathonga pinches the bridge of his nose, his eyebrows meet and greet in irritation.

“I don’t think this is ever going to work,” he’s repeating himself, completely ignoring the Ntaba issue.

“So you keep saying,” her shrug is careless and without airs. “You loved me once Mathonga, you will love me again.”

“That’s not how it works,” his head shakes, he scratches it and gusts out a loud breath.

“I’m going to appeal this, there has to be a way to reverse this mistake. You’re not the one for me, I don’t understand how this happened. You’re just... you’re not it.” Mathonga.

“It’s not a mistake, we are destined to be together. You picked me out in front of the entire village, you can’t change what has happened Mathonga. How will I face people after that? You cannot do this to me,-”

“But we’ll never be happy together Amandla, don’t you get that? Any feelings I had regarding you don’t exist anymore, I can assure you that.”

“You love her right?” It’s not a secret, she’s seen the way he looks at her sister. It’s how he used to look at her back in the day, when they were young and careless and restless.

“Nala is off topic,” he says and turns to walk away.

At his turn, his eyes fall on Nala in the crowd. Her dark gaze is on him, Nala shakes her head in disapproval and paves her way out of the tent.

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The only thing he did wrong was promise he wouldn’t lie and won’t break her heart, words matter.

Of course she would’ve understood if he had

told the truth, it would've hurt like a bitch, but she was going to take it like a woman and move. They are exclusive, heck, it's not as if she asked or expected him to be faithful, just honest.

He's outside her rondavel when he senses that she is behind the door, before he could touch the handle. He needs to think about what he will say to her, she feels betrayed and is hurting. One mistake and he will lose it all.

The sensation of a tightness in his chest and a quickened heartbeat is so loud, like the sound of Oscar Pistorius' footsteps in a race.

He needs to face her, he can't run away forever.

When he walks in the room, she stands.

The door slams behind him, he's looking into her eyes. There's so much hurt in them, she is so transparent that he feels every ounce of pain that's suffocating her.

“Are you going to congratulate me?” His voice sounds calm, however there is a hint of pain in it.

Nala holds her breath and tears instantly fill her eyes. Mathonga gulps and rubs the back of his neck, this is not what he wanted.

“Congratulations... for being... chosen.” Every word feels like thorns coming out of her mouth, scratching her throat on the way up.

“I wasn’t serious when I asked you to congra...”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She asks innocently.

“I’m sorry,” Mathonga whispers like it’s a secret, a forbidden prayer.

“That’s not what I asked, I want to know why you would humiliate me like that? What did I ever do to you?” Nala.

Mathonga blinks, a cat has run away with his tongue.

“Ugh!” Nala slams a hand on his chest, she is too overwhelmed to translate her feelings into words.

“Nala!” He doesn’t stop her from pounding him like dough.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I thought we tell each other everything.” She screams.

“I’m so mad Mathonga, I’m so mad at you. Why would you do this to me? What did I ever do to you but love you? I gave up everything for you, I chose you... Mathonga... only you, but you spit in my face.”

Suddenly the feeling to destroy takes a turn, the tension in her limbs reaches a little deeper.

There’s a deep desire and urge to act on it, she feels like throwing something against the wall just to feed this anger that has engulfed her.

Instead, she slams her fists harder on his chest,

he lets her, and stumbles backwards against the door.

“Hit me if it will help you release the anger.”
Mathonga.

“Why her? Why does it have to be her, Mathonga?” Her loud voice echoes in his ears.

Amandla loves him, probably more than Nala ever will and that hurts more than anything she’s ever felt.

“It wasn’t me Nala, I swear on my love for you. The ancestors chose...” He stops as he realises he’s about to say something that will send her over the edge.

“They chose my sister for you, she is your destiny.” Nala finishes his statement... confession or whatever that was.

She twists his shirt in her fists and pulls him.

Mathonga is looking down at her, a little

stunned by her violent side.

He understands her anger though, that her emotional scale is small and a huge slice of it is devoted to rage.

“They chose you too Nala. You are the one my heart loves, I choose you and not her.” His hands try for a touch, but there is a fear of being rejected.

“That’s not enough, I don’t want to share you with my sister. I can’t share you with her, tell her you can’t be with her.” Nala.

He should be able to listen to her and do her bidding. Love is about sacrifices.

“You know that’s not how it works, if I don’t do what the ancestors want, they will punish me or my family. I’m tired of fighting, I’m tired of burying people I love. I need you to understand, please. I’m not interested in Amandla in any way.” Mathonga is saying it all but not what she

wants hear.

“She doesn’t have to stay here, I’ll find her somewhere else to live. I won’t do anything with her, I promise.” Mathonga.

If only that were possible, Nala grew up in the village, she knows how polygamy works.

She steps away from him and exhales loudly.

“You might as well let her go, you can’t bind her in a loveless marriage. She’s human too, she will also need someone to warm her bed at night.” Nala.

What kind of a woman is this? In her rage, she has managed to be selfless.

Mathonga is amazed, but letting Amandla go would be going against his elders and not keeping her around is not humanly optional.

“Amandla will have to agree with me and

choose a different path. She has to reject this alliance. I don't know how it's done, or if it's been done before but the elders will have to hear her." What he's saying does not make sense in his head.

Nala realises this is more complicated than she thought, Amandla will have to be a Khanyile in order to speak to the Khanyiles ancestors.

The thought of her sister carrying the name of the man she loves is shattering, she drops her head on his chest and sobs.

"We'll figure this out together, we can get through it together. Just... don't... please don't leave me," that's a desperate man right there.

"Why do I love you so much? Why is it hard to walk away from you?" Nala is yelling again.

She plants her hands on his chest and shoves him backwards.

The door is the dead-end, Mathonga can't move

further than that. He reaches for her face to wipe away her tears, but she shrugs his hand away.

The stubbornness in him has him nestling her wet cheeks, his face hovering over hers, he intertwines their lips together.

She meets the intensity of his kiss just as he pushes his tongue deep into her mouth. His hands latch onto the softness of her waist with an iron grip.

“Nala,” her name tastes like honey in his mouth.

He thought maybe she would bat him away like a fly, reject him. But on the contrary, Nala’s hands are all over him.

Mathonga pulls her between his legs, against himself like he wants to embrace her.

He breaks the kiss to gasp for air, briefly

overwhelmed by her response. Then he goes in for more, taking her lip in his teeth and bites hard.

His hand slides up her back to grip her braids, he yanks his mouth away, forces her head to tilt and licks the side of her neck.

Nala shivers and sparks dance through her entire nervous system.

“Mathonga!” She slurs, breath uneven and heart pulsating aggressively in her chest.

“You’re the only one for me, Nala. Let me show you how much I love you.”

With a nod from her, Mathonga tugs her back in for another teeth-and-tongue kiss.

He flips both of them around so she is pinned between him and the door, his hand settles around her throat just below her jaw and applies slight pressure.

Nala seizes his wrist and squeezes, digging her nails in between his muscles.

Mathonga grips a little harder, making her gasp for breath, in turn she pounds her fist on his unyielding chest, there's a growing wetness between her legs.

He lets go and crashes his lips against hers.

It's a battle between love and rage.

Nala fumbles for the waistband of his pants, his erection hard against her thigh. Once his pants slide to his knees, she grips him tightly, strokes him a couple of times. His response is an animalistic growl.

Electric tingles of pleasure attack them, their heated bodies are in need and sexual arousal washes over them.

Nala releases his erection, she plants her hands

against his hips and somewhat pushes him away.

She tugs his shirt to rip it open but her hands are not so strong. Mathonga takes the job upon himself and rips his shirt open, buttons shoot across the room. His carved chest is revealed.

“Make me forget...” Nala slurs, fingers wrapping around his biceps for dear life. “Fill me up till I can’t breathe.”

His erection jerks at her words, their lips find their way to each other. He pulls her towards the bed and watches hungrily as she lowers herself on the mattress.

“You look breath-taking,” he breathes.

His eyes are lustful and all over her body. Nala is growing impatient, she sighs and regards him with a frown.

Her breath catches in her throat when Mathonga runs his hands up her thighs, gliding them under her dress and peels her underwear down to her ankles.

His eyes are on her as he pulls the dress off her body, she is left naked.

He kisses her breasts, nibbles and sucks before finding her lips. As he kisses her senseless, he guides his fingers to her clit and circles it slowly.

He moves his lips to bite at her earlobe. The sensation is too much that Nala cries out and glides her feet on the bedsheets.

Mathonga slides his finger along her slit, not deep enough to enter her, just enough to make her clench.

“You’re so wet,” he chuckles in delight and snacks on her breasts.

“Baby,” she finds her voice, desperate and rugged. She almost grunts in frustration when

he stands back to strip off what's left on his body.

"I need you Nala," he spreads her legs and gets between them.

Her breathing is heavy and body tingling with anticipation, she whines at the sensation as he teases her entrance with his tip and grabs her ass with one hand.

He's turned the stove on, her skin feels like it's on fire.

"Mathonga please, just do it already." The words are barely out of her mouth before his cock plunges into her, almost the full length forcing between her folds. She has never begged for it, today he is seeing a different side to her.

Nala lets out a cry of satisfaction and shudders under him.

He's filling her up like she asked him, splitting her in half as he hits every corner of her walls with a punishing rhythm that has her cautiously searching for something to hold onto.

"Nala," he mumbles in her ear thrusting like he'll never taste her again.

"That feels too good baby," Nala hums.

Electricity rumbles in her, she feels it surging through her veins.

Mathonga pulls out and allows his tip into her moist opening, he repeats the process until she is falling apart. When she lets out a pleasurable sob, and tears up; he slowly enters her again and buries his face on her neck. His strokes are slow, deep and passionate.

Nala bucks her hips, trying to meet his deep thrusts. Her nails scrabble on his butt, as he pushes on like a man with a vision. His pace

barely letting up.

Pleasure flows through her, starting off as a tickle of a feather and eventually turning into a tidal wave that threatens to take her offshore and drown her in the deep waters.

“Baby, I can’t brea... I can’t breathe.” She screams when an orgasm hits her like a raging tsunami, making her thrash and tremble beneath him.

She’s loudly speaking in tongues, mumbling words she would never repeat because, what the hell is she saying?

Mathonga presses her hips down when his orgasm knocks, it hits him like lightning bolts. He sinks his teeth in her shoulder, his thrusts are faster than Caster Semenya.

His heartbeat skyrockets, his skin looks like it’s been dipped in oil and his breathing can be

mistaken for the whizzing of the engine.
Unhealthy and exhausted.

The tingling feeling explodes in his veins, he grits his teeth before crashing on top of a shuddering Nala.

His bare skin is warm and his rock-hard weight crushes the air from her lungs.

Nala is done for, finished like a head of cabbage in the middle of January. Her legs are trembling, and numb, she's certain she will never be able to walk again.

At this moment, she realises that Mathonga has brought her to a high peak, so high it scares her a bit because she realises that she is far gone and will never find her way back.

She realises she might die here and part of her wants to because it's just so impeccable and electrifying and so marvellous that it shatters her a little.

There is no turning back from here, even if the way back is presented to her, she will never dare take the path.

“I love you,” Mathonga breathes into her mouth and devours her with a hungry kiss. “Don’t ever leave me Nala, I love you.”

Nala has no strength to repeat the words, she has no strength to do anything. Her energy bundles have depleted for the day.

She moans and her body shudders when Mathonga pulls out. Their eyes are locked for a while, no words shared, just deep penetrating stares.

Tears seep down the corners of her eyes, she cups his face and lets out a long breath.

She flips over, facing the wall and pushes her body to snuggle up against him. Mathonga pulls a blanket over them.

He knows she is okay. She wanted this, she practically begged for it. What he does not know is if she is going to stay with him. More tears escape Nala's eyes as Mathonga wraps his arms around her and cuddles her to comfort.

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NTABEZIKUDE-

His eyes must be deceiving him. He blinks a few times lest he's seeing things, turns out it's not in his head. She's really here, across the room from him.

He turns his gaze around the room in search of his fiancé, and there she is, conversing her life away with a few ladies.

It's an opportunity for him to approach the threat, she sees him approaching and a seductive smile leaps to her face.

"What are you doing here?" Ntaba is too clam for someone whose insides resemble a wild fire.

"Hello to you too handsome." Thethelela's response is coated with arrogance.

Not every waking moment is spent on fixing the path of the past, he would if he could; reverse time and undo what he did.

"Ouch, Ntaba." She screams when he grabs a hold of her arm. No one seems to be paying any attention to the man manhandling a woman, it could be that she does not look bothered by his hands on her.

He unlocks his car, pushes her inside, and shuts the door. Thethelela sits back and folds her arms across her chest.

She's startled by Ntaba slamming his door shut, he starts the car without granting her a look.

"Where are we going?" She asks, nothing in and on her screams panic. "Where are we going Ntaba?"

She repeats when he says nothing.

"Why did you come, Thethelela?" He's speeding out the driveway, hands tightly gripped on the steering wheel and teeth grinding.

"I am still a Khanyile, so it was imperative that I come. Does my presence bother you?" Her hands stealthily land on his lap, he gives it a brief look before clicking his tongue.

"Don't start something you won't be able to finish, Thethelela." A warning is what it sounds like.

However, the seductive smile on her face is back. She's slowly running her hand up his thigh, it's clearly headed to Khethiwe's property.

“I won’t have a hard time finishing this one,” her eyes are heavy-lidded and her throat has dried up. Lust has taken over her whole being.

“Get your hands off me, sisi.” That’s an order accompanied by arched eyebrows.

“We can do it in the car, don’t mind my big belly.” Thethelela.

At the mention of the belly, his blazing eyes glare down at it. Ntaba is confused, he frowns and snaps his glare up at her.

He saw the change in her body back at the homestead, the bulging stomach and chubby cheeks. He just didn’t care to think that she could be pregnant, that’s how irrelevant outsiders are to him.

“You’re pregnant?” He asks the recognisable and an obviously happy Thethelela hums with excitement.

“The baby will arrive anytime, we’re going to be parents.” She shrieks, slightly bouncing on the seat. Ntaba is bothered by that ‘we’ she used.

“What are you talking about?” Ntaba.

“You’re going to be a father Ntaba, I found out I was pregnant four weeks after we slept toge...”

“It’s not mine,” he interferences.

He’s so sure it’s not his baby, it can’t be his baby. This man is getting married next week, he won’t let anyone stop his wedding. Rejection is not a friend of his.

“What reason would I have to lie, Ntaba? I’m having your baby, that’s what I came to tell you.”

Pin-drop silence takes over, Ntaba slows down until the car comes to a stop. They are in the middle of nowhere, a few cars are passing, two to three minutes apart.

“Do you have anything to prove that the baby is

mine?" The question has Thethelela winded.

"I'm not a prostitute. You're the only person I have slept with since my husband died. I'm carrying your baby." She cups his face.

"I don't want your money, it means nothing to me. All I want is you, I want you to raise this baby with me. We can be a family together, you, me and our daughter."

This must be the craziest thing he's ever heard, this woman was married to his uncle. What she is saying has to be a joke.

Ntaba pushes her hand off and drives on.

"Who else knows?" He asks coldly.

"What?"

"Who else knows that you're pregnant?" He sounds so casual and light.

"My mother, she threw me out because..."

Thethelela tries to explain but he eats the rest

of her words.

“You’re leaving the country, I will organise everything for you. No one should ever find out that you’re pregnant.” He gives out orders without looking over at her.

Tears have glazed her cheeks, Ntaba can hear her sniffing and refuses to give her a single glance.

“I’m not going anywhere, I don’t want to go.” She claims.

“It’s not like you have a choice, I will never accept that thing you’re carrying. I don’t feel anything for you Thethelela, there’s not even room for hate. You might as well be non-existent.”

Sometimes he’s an insensitive bastard who speaks without thinking about the consequences.

It must be pregnancy hormones that have

Thethelela tearing up like her heart has been broken in two.

“I don’t care, you can say whatever you want. It won’t change the fact that I am carrying your baby. I’m sure your father will be interested to know about his first grandchild.” That’s definitely a granite.

Ntaba sides eyes her, he cracks a brief chuckle, before his lip curls up and eyes flash angrily.

“What about that ugly maid you chose over me? How will she feel when she learns that you fucked your dead uncles’ wife and got her pregnant?” Thethelela continues.

In his ignorance, he’s given a name and a face to sadism. It lives in him, it is him.

Ntaba forgets the road ahead and slowly turns to face Thethelela, anger snatches away the frown on his face.

“I’m sure you’re going to be a good mom,” there’s a hungry look in his eyes, one you get from not eating for a while.

His words have brought a smile to Thethelela’s face, it fades a tad when Ntaba; while minding the empty road leans in toward her. His cheek lightly brushes against hers, making her shiver due to the contact.

There’s a sudden clicking sound that catches Thethelela’s attention, he’s opened the passenger door.

“Tell God I said wrong address, I’m sending it back to sender.” The whisper is eerily in her ear.

Without looking at her face, he pushes Thethelela out of the moving car and continues driving like nothing has happened.

From the rear view mirror, he can see her lying face down on the tarred road. Minus one problem.

Now, how to close the door while driving?

Argh shame! Vumile's son is going through so much.

MATHONGA-

Ninety-three

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KHETHIWE-

Bab'Manyanga has been a blessing, I can't thank him enough for what he's done for us.

My father was admitted into the hospital, he's not doing well. It started with bad dreams, before hallucinations. A stroke followed. My mother would call me in the middle of the night cursing and wishing me all the bad luck in the world.

I won't lie and say it doesn't hurt, I cut ties with both my parents.

Aunt Rebecca didn't know what my parents were up to, she knew there was a curse in the family but not where it originated.

It turns out their siblings are also up to no good, that's why there is a thread of poverty, unemployment and infertility in the family.

I have officially moved in with Ntaba, lobola negotiations were finalised two months ago.

My parents were not informed about the negotiations, I didn't want them knowing. There's too much witchcraft going on in that house, plus, they would've reminded me of Bahle and the bride price he paid.

I don't know where the guy is, neither do I care to know. I'm better off without him and the drama he comes with.

I'd like to think the party went well last night, I don't know about Nala. I'm surprised that she is still here after the man she loves made it known publicly that he will marry her sister as well.

I love my Ntaba but I will never agree to share him, even if God himself comes down and tells me that I have to share him with another person, I would deny his request point blank.

"Khethiwe are you in there?" I hear him shouting outside the door.

I wonder where he's been, firstly he came home late last night. There was something dark and unsettling about him, he was less talkative.

When I woke up this morning, he wasn't here.

"Yes," I answer and finish making the bed.

I woke up at my own time today, I should be

ashamed of myself.

The door opens just as I put the last pillow on the bed, his scent greets me first before I see his face.

“You’re awake?”

What is he asking me? I’m offended.

“What did you expect? It’s after 10:00.” I say.

His eyes seem to be digging for something, it’s the smirk on his face that bothers me. Does he know that I woke up late?

“You were sleeping when I left?” He says, walking in the room with dusty shoes.

I am not okay with what I’m seeing.

“Ntaba, I’m not going to spend the entire day cleaning this room.” I want to push him outside but he’s a rock.

“Yes, I know because today you are going on a cruise ship.”

Mother-Father say what?

He's taking out a suitcase from the wardrobe, my eyes follow his every move until he's throwing my clothes on the bed.

"Can you repeat what you said? I'm not sure I heard right." I ask as he starts packing my clothes.

"I thought you might need to get away for a while, live a little before we get married. So I got you tickets to a cruise ship to Pomene Mozambique, Nala and the others will accompany you."

Shocked is not the word I'm looking for.

"Ntaba, when did you decide this?" Wrong question. "We're getting married next week, I can't just up and leave."

"You'll only be gone for seven days, Peaches. I'll be here when you get back." He stops and looks at me.

“You won’t be going alone, Koti and the ladies will go with you.”

No, something is not right.

“It’s so sudden, plus we’re preparing for the wedding. Why do you want me away? What’s going on, Ntaba?”

His hands find my shoulders, he squeezes them.

“You are tense and under a lot of stress. So much has happened Khethi, you disowning your parents, finding out about the curse, and all the muti that sangoma made you drink. You need a break before you become my wife, I want you fresh and energized the night of our wedding.” He leans down, nuzzling my neck and pulls my skin with his teeth, it sends shivers through every bone in my body.

He feels and smells masculine, and clean. Sometimes I pinch myself to see if I’m still dreaming, if this Greek-God really chose me. It

feels like a dream most of the time.

“Nala and Koti have been through a lot as well, please take care of them. Make sure they have fun.” He folds his arms around my middle, crushing me against him and showers my neck with wet kisses.

I press my palms on his chest as I struggle to control my giggles.

This man is too sly for my liking, he knows which buttons to press.

“Fine, I will go.” The idiot in me whispers in agreement.

The smile on his face must cost the entire universe.

“I’m taking your card, right?” He smiles at my question.

The only trip I’ve been to was uShaka Marine world back in grade 09, my parents were never

interested in my school trips. 'Too much money wasted.' My father would say.

My mouth opens to tell him how much I need, but he shuts me up with a kiss. I don't get these every day, Ntaba is not the most romantic man ever to live. Days like these should be cherished like Ultramel on Christmas.

"You'll never leave me, right Khethiwe?"

I look confused right now, why would he ask me this?

"Will you ever give me a reason to leave you?"

For some reason my voice is accusing.

Ntaba doesn't give me an answer, he nuzzles my neck again, sniffing me.

"I'm only human," his breath is warm on my skin.

I don't know how I should feel about his answer.

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NTABEZIKUDE-

He's on the move again with his dusty shoes, he left Khethiwe packing in the room. It was a close call, he will need her gone while the family attends Thethelela's funeral. Khethiwe can't know about her death, she can't know that she was pregnant. He knows people will talk, especially since Thethelela's mother knew about the baby. His Khethiwe is smart, she will put two and two together and find him out.

Thethelela is still a threat even in her death.

He looks down at his feet, then at the door in front of him and prays that Nandi is not in the main house. She will shout if he walks into their room with dusty feet.

He's glad to find Mathonga in the dining room, his brother looks terrible. Like he's in the middle of a storm.

As their eyes meet, Mathonga makes a disgusted face.

"The smell of blood on you is too strong," he's accusing him basically.

Ntaba scoffs and goes for the pantry, he finds his favourite snack; chocolate flavoured toppers before joining Mathonga at the table.

"What are you eating?" He's judging the soft porridge in his little brother's plate, like he's eating anything better.

Mathonga has not removed his eyes from Ntaba.

"How could you kill her Ntaba? Are you trying to get yourself punished?"

The giant knows very well what Mathonga is

talking about, he's never hidden who he is and he sure as hell won't start now.

"It's not a big deal," really, he just wants to eat his toppers in peace.

"You killed your aunt, and say it's not a big deal? Are you kidding me?"

Ntaba is not one to kid, Mathonga should know that by now.

And Khahlamba and Nomkhubulwane should mind their own business. What right do they have to show Mathonga his sins?

"That's why I want Khethiwe out of the country, I don't want her knowing about Thethelela and the baby." Ntaba.

"Did the baby die too?" Mathonga asks.

As to why he sounds surprised is surprising, Ntaba fills his mouth with two pieces of biscuits and focuses on chewing than

answering his brother.

Perhaps he's thinking, the news was that Thethelela died at the hospital. His informant said the mother and baby both died. He wouldn't lie to him, he pays him well. But, why is Mathonga asking him this silly question?

"Thethelela and the baby didn't make it, her mother told me." Says Nandi striding in with two cups of tea, she places the cups on the table.

Ntaba and Mathonga glance at each other, the young one is reproaching his brother and Ntaba... well he couldn't be bothered.

Nandi stands with her hands on her hips, and a sad look on her face.

"How did Thethelela get herself pregnant? Bopha is still fresh in his grave and..."

Ntaba stands with his half eaten biscuits,
Thethelela is the last thing he wants to talk
about.

“I have a meeting, tell baba I said get better
soon.” He’s walking out as he leaves a message
for his father.

The meeting Vumile called should be peaceful
without Ntaba there.

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He looks back at Alfred walking behind him and
gestures that he waits outside.

He wouldn’t be here if it were not for Mathonga,
his little brother looks like he’s fighting the
entire world singlehandedly.

It takes one knock for the door to slide open.

“What are you doing here?”

Amandla was never scared of him before he became known as a serial killer... intimidated? Maybe.

Now he makes every bone in her body freeze.

“MaCele, how are you?” He greets like he’s a normal person in the head, the tilt of the head has Amandla gulping. She has a hand on the inside door handle, lest this man tries anything.

“Fine,” her answer is rushed.

The thing about Ntaba is that he can smell fear from a distance and Amandla is drowning in fear. He clears his throat, shoving his bloody hands in his pockets.

“That’s good to know, are you going to let me in?” Yeah, who would let a serial killer in their home?

“I’m going out,” she’s cold.

Ntaba takes in the clothes on her body, she

looks like someone who is going fetch water at the river.

“I won’t be long, don’t worry. His eyebrows rise in question, he wants her to let him in. When she doesn’t move a muscle, Ntaba pushes his way in. Amandla is beside herself with shock, her face says she’s trying to keep calm. The door will remain open for the duration of this conversation.

The tilted head and raised brows are back, it’s because of the fear he sees in Amandla's eyes.

“If I wanted you dead MaCele, you wouldn’t be standing in front of me right now.”

Now, why would he go and say something like that?

Amandla remains quiet and stationary at the door.

The giant is doing well, it’s important that he speaks to her. Humans are not ants you’ll

sweep away because they are annoying.

“What do you want to do in life?” He asks.

It is a nice way to start, he plans on controlling himself which is a good thing.

“Excuse me?” Amandla is stupefied.

“I know you didn’t do well in school, you have no qualifications. The only thing you can add to your CV is ‘Cashier at Sasol Garage.’ You must have a vision.”

Sure she does, who doesn’t?

The lady blinks a couple of times as if searching for an answer that won’t embarrass her.

“Teaching.” She replies, a little hesitant.

“Come on MaCele, you must have bigger dreams.”

How can she think when he's looking at her with those piercing eyes? It also does not help that he's intimidating.

"I don't know, but I want to be rich."

Her answer brings a smile to Ntaba's face.

"Good, you want to be rich." He removes his hand from his pocket and scratches his chin. The other hand comes out with a small white envelope, he steps forward and hands it to her. Her hand is shaky, but strong enough to hold the envelope.

"There's 3million in there," he starts, ramming his hands back into the pockets of his pants.

"In... in the envelope?" Amandla stammers, she can't be holding such a huge amount of money in the palm of her hand.

"There's a bank card with an available balance of 3Million and it's all yours," Ntaba.

Her mouth drops farther down, what is this man saying to her exactly?

“Plus a ticket to Dubai, your flight leaves tonight.” Eh!

“I don’t understand,” Amandla says.

“You, MaCele are going to board a flight to Dubai. You will start a new life there and forget you ever met my brother.”

Now she gets it, why would he randomly visit her? This man had no idea where she lived, although she spent so many years with his brother. Heck, he didn’t know she existed.

“Are you paying me to leave your brother?”

“No,” Ntaba’s headshake gives her the bad kind of goose-bumps. “I’m giving you a safer way out, it is better than being buried alive in a shallow grave. Don’t you think, MaCele?”

He’s not threatening her, it’s his love language.

Those closest to him understand it. Amandla has no business looking as terrified as she does.

“Mathonga won’t agree to this, we’re going to get married. That’s what your ancestors want.” Of course she will dispute this, her love for Mathonga is real.

“The ancestors want a lot of things, and my brother won’t even notice that you’re gone. He doesn’t love you MaCele, think of yourself. Unrequited love will send you to your grave, will you survive seeing Mathonga and Nala loving each other, while you get nothing?”

“He will love me again, I know I’m still in his heart.” There’s certainty in her voice, she is confident about the love she once had.

Ntaba disagrees with a shake of the head.

“Don’t do that to yourself, don’t be that woman.

Mathonga is done with you, his ancestors are forcing things. They think they know better because they are on the other side of life. If you marry my brother, you will never be happy. He'll only hold you back, I'm sure a beautiful girl like you doesn't want to be a housewife, popping out babies from January to December."

Amandla flaps her lashes, the look on her face says she's confused.

"What if I leave and he finds me? Your ancestors will show him where I am, and I don't want bad luck. Going against ancestors will only..."

"That's all in your head," Ntaba interjects as he moves to the door. "Mathonga and his ancestors will never stop me from making sure my brother is happy. Even if my grandfather breaks out of his grave to come find you, I will send him back where he came from."

Only a crazy person would say that.

Amandla makes sure to keep a safe distance between her and Ntaba, she has no reason to trust him.

Her eyes are curious as she watches him peep outside and utters something. A man materialises, making her heart react violently. Her wide-gaze scans the room, looking for an escape.

“Relax, he’s not going to harm you.” Ntaba says. “This is Alfred, a friend of mine. He will accompany you to Dubai, and make sure you’re settled in. I’d love to come with but I’m getting married.”

“Please let me talk to Mathonga first, I want to say goodbye.” She deserves to bid him farewell and maybe tell him she loves him one final time.

“Don’t worry, I have that sorted.” He winks as he fishes for something in his pockets and reveals

a piece of paper. "I had the letter printed, so he won't question the handwriting."

Amandla is defeated, there is no way out of this. Ntaba has really thought it through and from what she has heard, whatever this man wants, he gets.

"To whom it may concern," he starts to read.

Not wanting to hear the lies written in the letter, Amandla presses her hands to her ears.

"Are you sure you don't want to hear it? It is rather juicy." The bastard smirks.

"Don't you fear God?" Amandla spits, glaring up at him.

That's a good question, he should at least fear God.

There really is nothing to smile about, but Ntaba has a huge one on his face. It disappears as fast as it came, he towers over Amandla and

pecks her forehead.

“Ntokazi, I am god.”

And with that he’s gone like the wind.

Mathonga

Season Finale: Part 1.

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MATHONGA-

The voices in my head won’t let me rest, anger, complaints, and threats of death. I can’t really articulate them, they are giving me a splitting headache. I’m in my car, driving to god-knows-where.

Surely there has to be a destination, I know the forefather that lives in me has taken charge. She is sending me somewhere, but I don’t know

where.

“I need to know what you’re saying, please calm down.” I say through gritted teeth.

My head hurts when I speak, I can’t stand it. I’m on the highway, driving through light traffic. Where on this godforsaken earth are the ancestors sending me?

My phone buzzes, signalling an incoming call. It’s Vukuzakhe, I didn’t tell anyone before I felt the house.

“Bhuti,” I answer, pressing the phone to my ear.

“Where did you go?”

I can’t tell him the truth, he’ll worry.

“Have you heard from Ntaba? He’s not taking my calls.”

I hope he’s not planning on confronting him, I didn’t tell him what Ntaba did for him to interrogate the man.

“Let me call him, I’ll let you know once I’ve spoken to him.” I’m tempted to tell him not to go Chuck Norris on our brother, Vukuzakhe can be a father sometimes—make you conform involuntarily.

I have Ntaba’s number on speed dial, it’s ringing but he’s not answering. Worry attacks me and settles in, something is terribly wrong.

“Ntaba where are you?”

I try his phone again, it continues to ring unanswered.

The voices in my head have not stopped, what is it with Nomkhubulwane? She is usually blunt and outspoken. There’s only one person that can help me with this.

Bab’Manyanga answers his phone like he’s been waiting for me.

“Mathonga, what nonsense has your brother done? Your ancestors are seething, they are out for blood.” This is how the old man greets, with bad news.

“Bab’Manyanga, what do you mean they are out for blood?” I ask.

“You know what I mean, it’s too late to fix it. They have reprimanded Ntabezikude, ulaka lwaba phansi lunzima ndodana. Their wrath births tragedy.”

My head starts spinning, and the voices in it increase. I’ll go deaf if this continues. I have to slow down. I can’t pull over, they’ll think I’m disobeying them.

“Baba, I’m not sure I get you. Is my brother safe? And there are voices in my head, angry voices. I can’t make out what they are saying, please help me.” I’m desperate.

“Your ancestors are angry, there’s a war in the

spirit world. The old man and woman have waged war against each other. Your brother is in the middle of their wrath. One is for him and the other against him.”

Bab'Manyanga is not making sense, he's actually making my throbbing head spin.

“Just allow them to take you where they are leading you,” he continues to say.

“It better be to my brother, I can't be doing anything else. I'm too worried about Ntaba to focus on other things.” I tell him in anger.

After knowing what Ntaba is capable of, I am still baffled by what he has done. Where does he get the courage to challenge the ancestors? Does he know who he's dealing with? Those people don't have favourites.

“Mathonga don't be stubborn, do not play with fire. You will not like the heat.” Eh. This old man...

What do Nomkhubulwane and Khahlamba want now? What are they fighting about? Could it be about Thethelela's baby? She too was a Khanyile by marriage, it's possible that their death has angered them. Why won't they show me anything then?

I take a turn and instantly see the banner 'King Shaka International airport. Really? This is where they have brought me? I leave the car, ready to see why I'm at the airport.

What is Amandla doing here and with that old man? Is this what they brought me here for? To see Amandla's shenanigans?

"Amandla?" she turns, glossy eyes and all.

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That Alfred guy is annoyingly stubborn, I had to

threaten him to get him to back off. Amandla has agreed to come with me, it didn't take much convincing. It's not like I have any other choice, the ancestors brought me here for her, or they would have killed me. I can already hear people discussing my cause of death.

'What happened to him?'

'He started saying headache, headache, wathula.'

Amandla has made it clear that Ntaba scares her, she didn't want to take the money he offered but Ntaba threatened her. I'm not even mad at him, how can one be mad at a mentally unstable person?

"Please take me to my grandmother's house,

your brother will kill me when he sees me.”
Amandla says.

It’s understandable, a lot of people are terrified of him after what he did to the Sangwenis.

“My brother is not home, I’ll drop you off at the ranch before going to look for him.”

I’m only allowing this because Nala is leaving today, she’s probably on her way right now. Thobani will be staying with Zitha during her absence.

“What if he comes back while I’m still there? I don’t want to die Mathonga, I’m too young... I haven’t lived yet.” She’s too dramatic.

“You’re not going to die Amandla.”

“But he gave me money and said I should leave the country. I don’t want to fight. I want out of this, please. I know that Ntaba is capable of

anything.”

“He’ll never hurt you, I promise.” He wouldn’t hurt her. I might not be in love with Amandla anymore but I still care about her. My brother knows that and he wouldn’t do me like that.

“I want out,” Amandla randomly says.

I know what she’s talking about, it could be fear talking. But I am glad to hear those words. I decide to keep quiet and let her continue.

“I’m tired Mathonga, I loved you and dedicated my life to you. But you have hurt me. You chose Nala over me and you will continue to choose her, no matter how hard I try.”

“Hurting you was never my intention, I swear on the love we once shared. I care about you Amandla and I want the best for you.” She might not believe me but I am telling the truth.

I hear her scoff and sigh.

“How do I get myself out of this mess? I want to be with you Mathonga, I want you to love me but it’s all a dream. Wishful thinking. I don’t want to be bitter and hateful towards my sister, and you. Maybe it’s time I do my supplementary exams and go to college or something. I want to make something of myself, build a legacy for my future self and generation.” She says.

If this is what she wants, I’m not going to oppose it.

“Okay, there must be a way to appease the ancestors. They will surely understand if we do it the right way, I know who to talk to. We’ll perform the ritual and set you free, but I want to help you. I want to pay for your studies, help you get back on your feet.” It’s the least I can do after everything I have put her through.

I take her silence as a yes.

I'm not far in my thoughts when the voices in my head come with a threat to split my headache in two. I recoil, almost losing control of the steering wheel.

"Mathonga?" I catch the question in my Amandla's voice. I'm too far in my head to answer, struggling with the emotions simmering beneath the surface. Images flash between my eyes, I can't make out a single picture. It's too bright, a blinding light.

I pull over on the side of the road and sprint out of the car, dropping to my knees on the green grass.

Ntaba's face suddenly comes to light, he's in a car— driving 60mph. There's loud music blasting his speakers, a song from his umzabalazo album collection. I'm not sure what really happens next, but he's losing control of the car. The panic on his face is visible as the car skids out of control, and crushes against a

tree— a direct impact.

“Ntaba!” In between heaving and this gut punching vision, I hear myself scream.

Why am I being punished? I don't want to see this anymore.

I can still see him, he's trapped in the car—bleeding and barely able to move.

There's smoke everywhere, everything forward of the rear window is crushed and messed up. The engine is shoved back into the glove compartment, the entire front of the car is almost unrecognisable.

“Not my brother please, you can't take my brother.” I'm screaming, facing skyward—palms pressed on my temple.

As a spiritually gifted person, I should know this is not how I ought to speak to my forefathers.

The vision clears away like nothing happened,

Amandla is looking at me as if I should be locked up in a mental hospital.

“My phone is in the car,” I tell her.

She’s frozen, and staring with a wide gaze.

“Get me my phone in the car, Amandla.” My voice raises a little, she flinches and runs back to the car. I’m unable to move, or else I would be speeding home.

Amandla is back with the phone, her hand shakes as she hands it to me. I want to tell her not to be afraid, but there’s no time for that. I need to call home and tell them to find Ntaba.

“No one is answering their phone,” I don’t know why I bother telling Amandla. She’s lost in shock.

My hands are trembling as I redial my brothers’ numbers. What the hell is going on?

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NTABEZIKUDE-

“Come home now.”

That was the order from his big brother over 50 minutes ago.

He had no choice but to drop everything and head back to the house.

Vukuzakhe’s car is parked outside next to Ndleleni’s, they haven’t left for Durban yet.

He walks into a full lounge and his brows come together in confusion as he sees Khethiwe and the ladies squashed on a three seater couch.

Funokuhle is perched next to Vukuzakhe, strapped to him like a belt to pants.

Ntaba cannot understand why Khethiwe is still here, why they are all still here when he told them to go.

Khethiwe is looking back at him, she wants to say something but her shifty eyes keep finding Vukuzakhe.

“KaMadonsela?” He addresses her, while sauntering into the room.

“Don’t look at Khethiwe like that, I asked them to stay.” Vukuzakhe is on his feet, scrutinising the young giant under his gaze.

“Why?” Ntaba frowns at his brother.

He’s trying to stay calm, although his brother is ruining his plans.

“Khethiwe is family now, there’s a funeral and she needs to be here.” Vukuzakhe.

Ntaba turns his gaze to his wife, there’s fear in her eyes. It could be fear of him or Vukuzakhe, he’s not sure.

“KaMandonsela, you’re running late. Get your things and go.” His voice is a deep rumble

crusted with authority, his eyebrows have moved from their place, pulling his eyes up a bit.

Khethiwe stands, there's uncertainty in her movements.

“Ntabezikude!” The big brother has always been stern, it solidifies with age.

Forget that he has a tiny voice, Vukuzakhe can be intimidating and strict like a parent. He did raise them and has every right to discipline them.

“Khethiwe is my wife bhuti, if I say this has nothing to do with her then please respect that. If you want Koti to stay behind, then whatever. I will not go against your decision, but my wife is leaving for Mozambique.”

He takes notice of the anger laced on Zakhe's face, the jaw tick and dark eyes and heavy aura permeating from him.

He is sure now that Vukuzakhe knows what he

did, Mathonga must've told him.

“Are you going against my word Ntaba?” The man in question is graced with a frown, he doesn't move an inch when Vukuzakhe charges at him.

It all happens so fast, Funokuhle is gripping his hand. Ndleleni is in front of the elder, sporting flaring nostrils and a puffed up chest.

“Get out of the way Ndleleni,” Vukuzakhe snaps.

He'd push but the minion has a tight grip on his arms, Zakhe can feel how terrified the kid is becoming.

“Please bhut'Zakhe, we won't go. Just don't do anything to Ntaba, we won't go.” Khethiwe pleads her man's case, however Ntaba is not okay with her staying.

She can't find out about the baby at any cost.

Nala, Banami and Kushi have never felt so

uncomfortable, they are on their feet as well, waiting for the final word.

“You have ten minutes to get your bags and leave,” the giggling giant says stubbornly.

“Let them go, bhuti. You know how stubborn Ntabezikude is, he won’t back down.” Hlabela says.

“That’s the problem Hlabela, we always use his stubbornness as an excuse. That’s how he gets away with every bullshit he does out there.” Vukuzakhe.

The ladies are startled by his roar, meanwhile, Funokuhle tightens his grip on his arm, silently begging him to stay calm.

“I don’t think we should discuss this in front of the women, please bhuti. Let them go to the trip.” Ndleleni intervenes, refusing to move aside.

He knows though that this will not stop

Vukuzakhe from getting to Ntaba.

An exhausted sigh escapes Vukuzakhe, he yanks his arm from the minion and rubs his hands together.

“Go,” Vukuzakhe says.

The ladies understand the order is for them. Each to their own but Nala.

Ndleleni offers to walk Banami out, Hlabela and his wife follow suit. Khethiwe has pulled Ntaba aside.

“Please don’t say anything that will get you in trouble with your brother.” She means, try not to get hit.

“I’ll be fine, you should go.” Ntaba says.

Does no one get that this is an emergency?

She’d kiss him goodbye, but Vukuzakhe is staring.

“Take care of yourself, I don’t know what I will

do if anything happens to you.” She knows what she will do. It involves a coffin and after-tears.

Their hug is brief.

Vukuzakhe has Funokuhle in a tight embrace. Why not, when he’ll be seeing his person after seven days?

“Don’t be hard on your brother,” Funokuhle implores against his ear.

It’s a dazing moment for Zakhe, this is the same Funokuhle who hated Ntaba months back.

He pulls out of the embrace to kiss his lips.

“Don’t be gone for too long,” Zakhe can be needy at times not that Funo is complaining.

“I love you,” Funokuhle confesses, burying his face on Zakhe’s chest. Khanyile kisses the top of his head and suffocates him in a bear hug.

“I love you too, Kid.”

Once the room is cleared of anyone who is not a Khanyile, Vukuzakhe turns his attention back to Ntabezikude.

“How far are you willing to tarnish your father’s reputation?” Zakhe is asking the unbothered brother who’s standing with folded arms over his chest.

“What did I do?” Ntaba answers with a shrug, he sounds like a child being accused of stealing sweets.

“What did you?” Zakhe scoffs. “Ntabezikude, you got away with killing Funokuhle’s family only because the ancestors were part of it. But that is no excuse for you to go around killing people, what the hell is wrong with you?”

“Not everyone deserves to live bhuti,” a careless shrug as he scratches his five o'clock shadow. “I did what I had to do.”

“You killed your child, are you aware of that?” Zakhe is slowly losing his mind, he tries to not show it.

“Who said the kid was mine? Besides, I saved it from the evils of this world, it would’ve died anyway.” Ntaba speaks like a man who does not care about anyone.

Vumile is not well and he needs to take over as the older brother.

Taking over means putting the younger ones in line, it means slapping them when he feels they are too stubborn. The back-hand slap he rewards Ntaba creates shocked silence in the room.

Hlabela and Ndleleni try to intervene but Zakhe is not having it.

“Do you know what you have done?” He asks the third born, landing another back-hand slap on the other cheek. It has Ntaba stumbling

backwards, he's expressionless, giving no flying cow.

"You killed one of your own Ntabezikude, how could you be so heartless? Will you be able to face the repercussions of your actions?" He slaps him for the third time and the fourth and the fifth, the giant finally tumbles to the ground and only then does he raise a hand to nurse one of his throbbing cheeks.

"What about Khethiwe? Did you stop to think of her, if your sins will fall upon her?" Zakhe asks, towering over him.

Ntaba has not looked Vukuzakhe in the eye, his gaze is lowered. There's an incoming wrath surging through his veins, he can never act on it, Vukuzakhe is his elder. He deems him higher than his own father Vumile.

"Are you even sorry for what you did?" Zakhe

asks.

Not once has he raised his voice at him, that's how he raised his brothers. They never listened when he shouted, calmness was always the key. It still is.

"Look at me," Zakhe snaps and leans down to grab him by the hood of his sweatshirt. Ntaba lifts his empty eyes to his brother.

"I asked you a question." Zakhe grunts.

"No," is Ntaba's answer.

The muscles along Zakhe's jaw flick angrily, he scurries behind the couch and comes back with a sjambok.

"Bhuti, no." Hlabela jumps in, shocked to the core.

"You can't do that Zakhe, he's your brother." Ndleleni adds.

Vukuzakhe ignores their complaints, his blazing

eyes are on Ntaba who is on his feet now. The giggling giant is doing what he's notorious for; giggling. He stops and averts his eyes elsewhere at the scolding in Zakhe's eyes.

Vukuzakhe hesitates a second, he thinks of not affording his brother any sympathy.

The rage simmering in him just won't allow him to, he lifts his hand and whips Ntaba on his side. The giant hisses in pain and runs to the other side of the couch, he's not fast enough, the sjambok lands on his back. He arches his back, trying to sooth the pain with his long fingers.

"Vukuzakhe stop, please." Hlabela is behind him, Ndleleni has left to call for help. Only Vumile can stop this nonsense.

Ntaba jumps over the couch he thought would shelter him, but Zakhe is right behind him. Landing the whip anywhere on Ntaba's body.

"Vukuzakhe stop," Ntaba growls.

His instruction falls on deaf ears, Vukuzakhe doesn't think he's had enough. Ntaba is scuttling towards the kitchen, with plans to run out of the house. But the next whip that lands on his back throws him on the floor, a humpty-dumpty fall it is.

For the first time, fear has painted his eyes. He's looking up at Vukuzakhe, hovering over him.

Hlabela has given up, he folds his hands on his head and sighs in exasperation.

"What kind of a human being are you, Ntabezikude? You kill your own child? A Khanyile and say you're not sorry." Vukuzakhe.

"He was going to be a problem between me and Khethiwe. I couldn't allow that, I would never let anyone come between us." Ntaba justifies his actions.

It sounds so perfect in his head.

The eyes gazing down at him are condemning him as a person, looking at him like he's lost all his marbles.

"That is a stupid excuse, are you going to kill everyone who threatens your union with Khethiwe?" Zakhe is heaving, tired from running after his giant of a brother.

"Yes," Ntaba replies honestly.

You spoil a rod, you spoil a child. That's something Vukuzakhe is not going to do. He continues to thrash his little brother, it's a form of discipline. Ntaba is curled up on the floor, taking every painful lash like a man. He is not weak to be taken down by another man. But Zakhe is not another man, he's his big brother, the one who loved him when his parents couldn't. He respects and worships zakhe, like he does Hlabela.

"Vukuzakhe!" Vumile growls, he's behind him.

Ndleleni came back with help, two actually.
Nandi is here too.

“That’s enough.” Vumile.

Zakhe has stopped mid-way, there’s an eye lock moment between him and Ntaba. He wants to help Ntaba up but that will be the same as giving him permission to repeat his mistakes.

The sjambok drops to the floor, right where Ntaba is. Vukuzakhe steps back, he’s sweating pearls.

Hlabela offers Ntaba a hand.

“I’m fine,” he rejects it and tries to stand on his own. It takes a while to get his tree-self to stand up straight.

“Ntaba are you okay?” Nandi is worried.

They are looking at his back, as he’s limping his way towards the fridge and gives her a thumbs

up. He has to hold on to the wall to maintain his balance.

“Ndoda, where are you going?” Hlabela shouts, he’s ignored.

Ntaba winces in pain, pulling the fridge door open.

He dips his head in and takes out a carton of pineapple flavoured Mageu. He shakes the box, before gulping down a measurable amount.

He doesn’t turn to his family, but limps out through the kitchen exit, and slams the door behind him.

“Let him go, he’ll be back.” Vukuzakhe says and exits using the other door. The others are left dumbfounded.

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MATHONGA-

Season Finale: part 2

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MATHONGA-

Looks can be deceiving, you'd swear Bab'Manyanga is a clean freak when you meet him on the street. His consultation room looks so shabby, something I didn't expect.

"Sit down," he instructs us and keeps his inquisitive gaze on Amandla.

"Sit with your legs straight young lady," the sangoma tells her.

Amandla appears to panic a bit before she stretches her legs forward.

Her agitation is understandable, she grew up in the Sabbath. Ancestors are a topic that is never to be touched. God is a jealous God— one of the

ten commands.

You do not put other gods before him.

“Your grandmother blames herself for what your mother did to you, she wants to make up for it and that’s by getting you married to the man you love.” Bab’Manyanga says.

After throwing his bones this is what he gives us? Another thing, what does Amandla’s grandmother have to do with my ancestors?

“How is that possible baba? I was told by my ancestors that I should marry Amandla.” I state judgementally because what he just said makes no sense.

He regards me with judging eyes.

Please, I’m new to this. Besides, if Nomkhubulwane and crew saw it fit to fill me in on many things, I wouldn’t be here seeking help from other people’s ancestors.

“Did they give you a reason why?” I don’t know if he’s trying to intimidate me with that look, or I’m solely intimidated by him.

“They didn’t.” I say and drop my eyes when disappointment flashes in his.

“You should know better, ndodana. Ancestors know everything, but they still want you to communicate with them. Tell them what’s on your mind, ask questions if you have to. Communicate with them.” He says.

“I know baba,” not really. I want him to get off my case and tell us where to go from here. I will talk to Nomkhubulwane later, my brother is in the hospital, I need to go and see him.

“Gog’MaCele was able to find favor in the eyes of the great Khanyiles. She pleaded for her granddaughter to be considered and her request was heard.”

I’m not sure I follow what he’s saying.

“How was Gog’MaCele able to communicate with my ancestors? Amandla and I are not married neither do we have a child together.”

“Did you not take the girl’s virtue?”

Bab’Manyanga asks.

What does that have to do with all of this?

Amandla clears her throat, she’s uncomfortable.

“People who date do that baba, we don’t wait for marriage like they did in the old days. But having sex with someone you’re dating does not mean you are tied to them for life.” That’s my theory, I don’t know how my forefathers feel about it.

“I know how you youngsters do things, you need to be careful who you sleep with ndodana. You too young lady. You don’t know what people are carrying out there. Soul ties are nothing to be taken lightly, ucansi is not something to be taken lightly like you people do.”

It feels strange to be having this conversation with Bab'Manyanga, he's suddenly become a father and temporarily ceased to be a sangoma. Very unnecessary, we need a sangoma not a father.

"I hear you baba, but how can they agree to such a big thing without my approval? Do I not have a say in what happens in my life? I'm not the first guy to have an ex-girlfriend. Why am I being punished for having once loved a girl?"

Amandla eyes me, she's hurt by my choice of words. Directness was not what I was going for, my heart decided to sign an agreement with my mouth to assassinate me.

"It is not a punishment Mathonga," Bab'Manyanga chides. "Never question the gods, they are wiser than us."

Not from where I'm standing.

"Is there a way to change their minds? Amandla

is not alone, I will never abandon her. I will make sure she has everything she needs in life, but I don't have to marry her in order for that to happen.

Gog'MaCele will have to forgive me, I can't give her what she wants."

The woman hated me when she was still alive, her granddaughter was too good for me. How did Nomkhubulwane agree to this?

"Like I said, you should've asked why they want you to marry her and told them you were against it. Instead, you cried like a baby and threatened to kill yourself." Blunt aren't we?

"I'm new at this baba, but I will try to communicate next time. I will ask when I have questions." I tell him, feeling a bit relieved that this matter can be resolved.

"Is there a way to talk to my grandmother? There is so much I need to tell her." Tears have

come to Amandla's eyes.

"There is, first let's sort out the issue at hand."
Bab'Manyanga says.

That's what we are here for.

He instructs us on what to do and buy, and tells us to come tomorrow.

Now that that's done, I can rush to the hospital to see Ntaba. The call came in when we were scattered all over the village searching for him. His car crashed into a big tree like I had seen in the vision. The accident was close to fatal, almost claiming his life. He hasn't woken up yet, the doctors don't seem to have hope.

He's going to be okay.

The mantra lives rent free in my head, he's all I ever think about, no matter where I am.

Two weeks later, the media still won't leave us alone. The news of the accident is all over every news channel.

Khethiwe has it the hardest, they should be married by now and figuring out life in the prison of marriage.

"Are we going to buy the items today?"
Amandla asks.

"I thought you had a date with Nala?"

That's what Nala had told me, they are working things out. In a way I'm relieved, I wouldn't want to be the reason behind their squabbles. They are both orphans, their relationship should come first.

"There's still time, we're meeting up at 6pm."
Amandla.

"I have to go see my brother, let's reschedule for tomorrow."

She nods and looks out the window.

Silence falls between us, we have a lot of these awkward moments lately. I turn the radio on to ignore the fat elephant crowding us.

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NTABEZIKUDE-

Pain!

A splitting headache is what welcomes him, he can barely flap his eyes open. The next thing he's introduced to is the surface he's lying on, his brain tells him it's a bed, he is immediately aware that it's not his. His bed feels softer, and his bedsheets smell like Khethiwe.

Khethiwe!

She should be back from the vacation, he opens his mouth to speak but there's something stuck down his throat. He gags and his brain sends a message to his hand to pull whatever it is out. Why can't he move?

Panic!

He thinks he's dreaming because there is no way he can't move. He loses track of his breathing, as he tries to get his muscles to toe the line- follow his instructions.

"Ntaba?" The voice of the one to cross his mind first, calls out. She's here—with him. "You came back to us, I told them you would but no one wanted to believe me."

That's probably not what happened.

Her arms are warm around him, they should be calming him down. But confusion won't abandon him, his brain won't stop reminding him that his muscles feel dead.

“Your brothers are outside, I’m going to get them and the doctor.” She says.

Doctor? That could mean he’s in the hospital?

It feels like Khethiwe has been gone for a century, his eyes are heavy, dragging him back into a deep slumber. Like the fighter he is, he keeps them open and on the door where his Peaches disappeared.

The sound of many footsteps trampling on the ground are too loud in his ears and bring a deep frown to his face. His hospital room is crowded before he knows it, the faces are familiar except one of a potbellied, medium-height man in blue scrubs.

“Mr. Khanyile, we’ve been waiting for you.” What a way to start the day, having your family name butchered by a white man.

There must be something amusing about the

state he's in, otherwise the doctor wouldn't be smiling like a fool. Maybe, he's getting a raise for saving a life.

Ntaba wants to push the doctor's hand away when he forces his eyes open and flashes a bright light in them, as a doctor he should know that his patient is suffering from a headache.

"How many fingers am I holding up? I want you to hold your fingers up if you can hear me." The doctor again, holding two fingers up.

Ntaba doesn't care, he's not in crèche to be asked such a senseless question. His stubbornness has a question for the doctor, like, why is there a tube thingy plunged down his throat?

Why is he connected to so many machines?

Why can't he move? And can the doctor turn off that bloody beeping sound? It's torture to his splitting headache.

All his brothers are here, along with Nandi and they are watching with big eyes as the doctor moves to his feet with a worried frown on his face.

“Yesterday you said he can hear us, why won’t he respond to you then?” Worry is present in Nandi’s voice.

It’s a hint for Ntaba, he needs to follow the instructions so his family knows he’s okay. He thinks he’s okay, he is after all Ntabezikude Khanyile.

“Nod for me if you can feel this.” The doctor says, totally ignoring the patient’s stepmother.

Ntaba waits to feel this thing he’s supposed to feel according to the doctor.

Why is everyone gawking at him in expectation? The doctor is the one in charge.

“I’ll try the other leg,” says the doctor.

Ntaba's frown deepens further, he wants to ask the doctor why he's not feeling anything. The bloody tube in his throat prevents him from uttering a word.

"He's supposed to be feeling something, right doc?" Mathonga asks.

"You're not poking harder, poke harder dokotela." Hlabela snaps.

"Wedokotela, you're tickling the feet of a black man, they are hard as a rock. How will he feel anything?" Ndleleni shifts closer and snatches the needle from the annoyed looking doctor. He pushes the needle into Ntaba's heel, there's no movement but a small drop of blood peeks out.

"Do it again Ndleleni, he didn't feel it the first time." Vukuzakhe says.

Panic has settled in all the brothers, so deep they can't help but freak out.

“You can’t do this,” the doctor snatches the needle back, chiding Ndleleni with a frown. “It doesn’t work like that, I’m not trying to make the patient bleed. That’s exactly what will happen if I plunge this needle in his foot.”

Doc is frustrated, being grilled by giant Zulu men towering over him is stressful enough.

“Is he going to be okay though? Will he ever feel his legs?” Khethiwe questions.

She’s crying and Ntaba’s not okay with it, there has to be a way to tell her to stop. That he’s here and she’ll never shed a tear as long as he’s alive, but his vision is plummeting.

It must be because of the unbearable headache, he tries to retrace the cause. Nothing comes to him, something must have happened for him to end up in here.

“We can talk outside, I don’t want to say anything that will upset the patient.” Are all

doctors so frustrating?

Ntaba also needs to know why he can't move his legs.

"What are you not telling us doctor? Will my husband ever be able to use his legs?"

Khethiwe's question has the doctor sighing, he's realized he's dealing with a stubborn crowd.

"No, that can't be possible. Ntaba is a Khanyile, we are stronger than lions." Ndleleni says with confidence, his brothers begin to add their two cents and ignore the white man who has turned red from irritation.

The noise is too much for Ntaba's headache.

The complaining voices begin to fade, eventually they become background noise. He's grown tired, his eyelids feel heavier each time he blinks. He doesn't want to sleep, what if he doesn't wake up? Fear dares to test him. He's a stranger to fear, just like he's a Stranger To

Love.

MATHONGA-

Season Finale: Part 3

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NALA-

I've had my suspicions for weeks now, I guess I was too afraid to confirm it. The doctor had a huge smile on his face when he told me the news, I couldn't return it. Why would I when it's the last thing I expected?

I don't know about Mathonga, he's never tackled the topic before. Having a child is a big step, there's a human growing in my womb. It's been in there for six weeks. It scares me that I will be responsible for another human, a human

that will completely change my life.

It was different with Thabani and Thobani, Mam'Julie had taken the role of mothering them. Although she did a crappy job, in the first few years she was there and hands on.

After a good wipe, I pull my panties up, wash my hands and head back to the bedroom. He's hidden under the covers.

"Baby," I wake him up with a kiss. He stirs and turns with a soft smile, his arms capture me and pull me into him.

"What time is it? You should be in bed, I don't want you falling sick." His voice is scratchy and hoarse.

"I didn't know getting up early can make a person sick." I'm actually questioning him. His tired eyes come to life, I'm tempted to iron out the crinkled brows.

“I’m feeling cold, can I wrap myself with my favorite blanket?” Mathonga says, pressing his pair of lips against my ear.

“Wow, and the award for the most romantic man in the world goes to chief Mathonga.” I’m unfortunate... a blanket, of all things?

He’s laughing, I am spent. His hand slithers beneath my pyjama top to caress my breasts, I’m given a seductive look as he pushes the top up to my neck. He’s looking at them the way I look at food when I’m hungry.

“What are you doing?”

The feel of his hand rubbing my breasts makes me shiver pleasantly.

“Your boobs are bigger, I love them.”

What do I say to this?

“Why are they so hard?” He asks.

Should I tell him there’s milk in there? It would

be a good way to tell him we're going to be parents.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think there's milk in there." The smirk tells me he knows. "Let me suck and see."

This moron is actually sucking my boobs, hard.

"Mathonga stop, are you crazy?"

"I want to see the milk." He's smiling up at me.

"Why would you think there'd be milk in them?"

Spiritually gifted people know our secrets, what's the use in hiding things from them?

"You can never hide anything from me, Nala."

"I wasn't hiding anything, I just found out yesterday. I was looking for the right time to tell you... today seemed suitable." I'm explaining more than I should, aren't I?

He puts his lips on mine, chills go up and down my spine.

“I’m terrified as you are, but we’re together in this. We will figure it out, when we feel it’s becoming too much, we’ll hand the baby over to Nandi.”

He’s crazy, Nandi has a sick husband to take care of.

The couple will be travelling to Greece after the wedding, they want to add to their memories together.

“We will do no such thing, it’s our mess and we are dealing with it.” I debate.

I want to do this right, for my child. I want to give them everything and love them unconditionally.

Studying through Unisa is so fitting, especially now that I’m expecting. I’ll think about work after the birth of our child, this one wants me at the Khanyile Holdings offices. Isn’t nepotism a

crime? Still, I don't want to work in the same building as him, we'll bore each other if we're together all the time.

"Can you massage my feet? It feels like I've been standing for hours." He denies my request by pushing me off him. I'll excuse it, he's been lying down for too long, a man must sit.

"Yoh, Nala!"

Please don't get it twisted, he's not really a lazy person. My feet aren't even sore, I'm testing the waters, preparing him for when I'm heavy with swollen feet.

"Are you okay with being a father?" I need him to be okay with it because my baby is not going anywhere.

"I don't know, I think I'm doing okay with Thobani. We get along pretty well."

Okay! I didn't expect him to bring my brother up, all this while I thought he saw him as that; my brother.

"Do you think he would like it if I asked him to call me dad?"

Wow! This man continues to win my heart with every breath he takes.

"Thobani would love that, he's never had a father figure in his life." For his beautiful soul, I allow the temptation to place a kiss on his cheek.

He looks in to my eyes, a reason for my heart to leap with joy.

"I can't lie, I'm afraid of getting married. The thought is pretty scary, then again, I want you as my wife and the mother of my kids. There's no one else I'd rather knock up than you MaShange."

"Knock up?" I question, taking an Indian style

sitting position while judging him with narrowed eyes.

“Isn’t that what I did?” In his head, knocked up sounds normal.

I’m startled when he shifts and gently lands on top of me, his body pressing me down. He has a tight grip on my waist.

“Mashange wam. May I put another baby in your womb? We’ll have twins, two is always better than one.” He says, pressing his face onto my chest.

That’s not how it works, my womb is booked for the next nine months. Nothing goes in, but I’m not going to tell him that. Let him act a fool for a while.

“We can’t have sex before you give Ntaba his bath and massage.” I dodge his lips, trying to push him off me.

This giant believes he has rights over my body

because of love.

Anyways, Ntaba came home last week after spending two months in the hospital, his legs aren't working. Mathonga was instructed by his great- ancestors to gather certain types of herbs and add them into Ntaba's bath, Mathonga is the only one who is allowed to touch the water.

"I already did, he woke up early today." He answers.

How early is early? It's only fifteen minutes after 8:00.

He glides a hand to my nape, takes hold of my neck and pulls me in toward his lips.

We strip each other naked, our lips meeting gracefully and hands wandering over heated skin. I spread my legs wider to make enough space for him to fit in.

Hungry kisses travel down my chest, and linger on my breasts. The sounds escaping my lips should have me hiding away, but I don't want to care about that right now. I'm craving the intimacy.

He penetrates me without a condom, this is what got us into where we are. I'd have to tell him when we're done with this marathon. If I could pay him with love for his sweet strokes, he'd be the most loved man in the world.

My throat is heaving with each breath, his body covering my breasts and his erection plunged fully and deliciously inside me. His touches are dignified and slowly driving me insane. He moves like a mad man at my desperate behest not to hold back.

I can only gasp when he pushes deeper, sinking me into the mattress. I'm a tad bit surprised by his change of rhythm, he's not pleasing me anymore. It never takes this long for him to hit

my g-spot, I'm starting to worry, yet he's clearly having a blast.

This man is enjoying every second, pounding me harder, with eyes tightly shut.

"Let me have this one baby, I promise to make it up to you." He's groaning as he races to the end. My life ends with the last drop of his semen spilling inside me.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry." He's heaving against my neck like an overused hairdryer.

"How could you do that?" I ask.

I am shocked, this has to be the biggest sin ever committed.

"I'm sorry I couldn't take you with me, I was so close I had to ejaculate."

"What about my morning glory?" I push his sweaty body off me and kneel on the bed. Lucky bastard. I didn't even get to sweat.

“It won’t happen again, I promise. I got too excited and burst.” That’s his explanation?

He looks like a fool with that ugly grin on his face.

“I’m going to bath,” I’m done talking to him for the day. Like a shameless woman, I’m walking around naked, the evidence of his betrayal dripping down my thighs.

“Can I join you? We can continue from where we left off.” The sarcasm in his tone is the last straw for me.

He jumps off the bed, against my will my eyes land on his dangling shaft. I’m angry with it as well.

“Stay away from me, you and your selfish... selfish stick made in China.” I storm out.

I should’ve called it a short pencil. My brain is always on vacation I hate it. I leave him laughing like a fool. He must stop breathing for

two seconds.

He's out of bed, wrapped in a white towel and typing away on his phone when I exit the bathroom. He's so engrossed on it that he doesn't sense my presence.

Mathonga hardly ever uses his phone, unless he's talking to his brothers. It can't be them because they are around here somewhere.

"Is everything okay?" He catches my question as I walk past him, headed to the dressing table to lotion my body.

"Y... yeah!"

You know a man is up to no good when he stutters, it's not that I don't trust him. I'm only human and it's normal for me to feel jealous, especially when there's another woman out there who will always love my man.

I feel him standing behind me, I'm not going to turn around. This man owes me an orgasm and my goal in life is to remind him at every waking moment.

"Amandla texted," he starts.

I knew it was her.

Amandla relocated to Dubai, it was her decision. Our relationship is okay, a little awkward at times but we will be better than okay.

"Dubai is treating her well." He adds, his tone undecided.

"I'll call her later." That's my final answer.

Matter of fact, I have nothing to discuss with him concerning Amandla.

I don't hate my sister, I just happen to think her friendship with her ex-boyfriend who happens to be my fiancé should be nonexistent. This

comes from deep in my heart, no girl wants to share her man, not even with his mother.

My ears are ringing with a piercing silence as a long tense moment moves past us. His presence is heavy behind me.

“MaShange, will you make me a permanent resident in your heart?”

What is he... Oh my God! He’s on one knee, looking up at me.

“What are you doing?” It can’t be what I think it is.

“I love you and I want to put a stamp on it,” a nervous smile loiters on his face. “What do you say Nala? Let’s do life together.”

He holds up something, a string. It’s orange in color and... it’s a string from the sack used to

store oranges. We use that to clean the bathtub and sink, he must be asking me to throw it away because wow...

“What do you say? Let’s get married?” He’s holding his breath, it’s easily detectable. That fear of getting married he spoke about harasses me, for a while I think I know what he meant. Maybe I am afraid too, maybe it’s not all glitz and glamour. Fear put aside, I love Mathonga. I’m his and he’s mine. Maybe this is the reason I agree to be his wife.

“Yes, I will marry you.” The smile on my face shows what’s in my heart.

Lord have mercy, I’m stretching my hand out for him to tie the string on my ring finger.

Mathonga stands and kisses me softly, he looks into my eyes and kisses me once again.

“I’ll buy the ring soon,” he says pulling me closer to him and locking me in a tight hug.

I'll believe the ring story when he buys it, Khethiwe is getting married on Saturday, yet she still has no engagement ring. These Khanyile men are something else.

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MATHONGA-

No one had anticipated what has befallen baba, we spend as much time with him as we can. The symptoms have improved, due to the medication and management strategies he's undergoing.

We have hope that he will be fine, if only the great Khanyiles can step in and heal him. I know Alzheimer's disease is incurable, I also know that with God, nothing is impossible.

I will never stop praying for him.

Today, like every day, under Nomkhubulwane's instructions, I'm taking Ntaba for a stroll in the bush. It's imperative he inhales fresh air and the smell of trees, it's part of his healing process.

He doesn't get it, nor does he see any results. As long as my guides can see it, then we will continue till we see the results.

"Are you ready?" Ntaba glares up at me and shrugs. "Same answer as every day, but we're still doing this ndoda. Let's go, the forest awaits. You need to be refreshed on Saturday, Khethiwe will not marry a zombie."

"What's the point? We've been doing this for a while and nothing has changed." Ntaba.

"Hey, put a smile on that face. Or you will push yourself today." I won't really do that to him.

It's hard for me to get used to the snappy and grumpy Ntaba, his stinking attitude can be a lot

sometimes. It's understandable though, I can't imagine how he feels each time he has to sit on the wheelchair.

He ignores me like he does most of the time and focuses on putting on a cap to shield himself from the sun.

It's mid-day, a perfect time for the sun to show off.

"She loves you," I remind Ntaba as I push his wheelchair towards the back of the ranch.

"Who?"

"Ugogo." She's not his favorite topic, he knows there is a higher power but refuses to believe in it.

"Why put me in a wheelchair if she loves me?"

"You know why ndoda, the things you did. You almost killed your own blood."

He looks up at me, I can't see his eyes through the dark shades covering them.

"Almost?" He asks.

"I think Thethelela's mother lied to us, the baby didn't cross over. It could only mean that he's alive, you need to find the baby and do right by it."

"I'm not going to do that, after everything I have done to stop that woman from ruining my plans with Khethiwe. I can't... I know how she felt about Thethelela."

"How sure are you that Khethiwe won't forgive you? She has a pure heart Ntaba, have you forgotten that she is the same woman who put up with your nonsense for so long? She stayed when you couldn't love her, today you're able to feel because of her. Give her a chance, give the baby a chance." There has to be a way to smack the truth into his stubborn skull.

“Yeah, KaMadonsela is special.” He laughs for the first in months, I didn’t realize he had a nice one until today.

“Then don’t be stingy with her, share her with the baby. Bring the child home, give her your surname, it’s what your forefathers want. I don’t want their wrath falling upon you, you’re my brother. Do you think I love seeing you this helpless?”

When Ntaba takes too long in his silence, he never comes back. I’m not going to push him, he’s old enough to take my advice and ponder on it.

“By the way, I’m going to be a father.” He’s the first person I’m telling.

“Asbonge ndoda, you’re finally growing up.”

“I grew up long ago, it’s you who treated me like a child.” It’s my brothers’ love language, I will

never complain about it.

“I’m happy for you Thonga lam, you are a good man. Your child will be lucky to have a father like you.” Ntaba.

I’m utterly at a loss for words.

“Just like Sponono will be lucky to have you as a father,” I’m rubbing salt on an open wound. This is what my guide expects from me, I have to pass the message no matter how hardheaded the receiver may be.

“Who the hell is Sponono?” He’s laughing again.

“Your baby, she is a Khanyile, surely she is the most beautiful girl in the world.”

Again, he has nothing to say about this matter. His body is sagging on the wheelchair, to put him in a good, I tell him about my engagement. He’s excited and worried at the same time, he thinks we’re rushing things. If my decision to marry Nala is wrong, I trust my elders to let me

know.

We pass through the graves on our way to the forest, the morning air is refreshing—a bit chilly but bearable.

“Can you stop here?” He says, removing his black cap.

We’re in front of Khahlamba’s grave, there is no tombstone, just a flat surface and a pile of rocks. I want to have tombstones put on their graves, perform a ceremony just to please them. They are our elders and deserve to be taken care of.

Just like you should never wear a hat in the house, you don’t do wear one in front of elders. I shove it in the pocket of my pants.

“Do you think he’s still mad at me?” A lump forms on my throat, I don’t know how to answer Ntaba’s question.

“I can tell you that Nomkhubulwane is not, she’s always with you.” Me.

Her grave is at the far end, right where the graves start. The grave yard is huge, the Khanyiles are a nation on their own.

“Talk to him and tell him how you feel.”

Khahlamba wouldn’t ignore him after this.

“I don’t know how it’s done. What do I say to someone I cannot see?” He asks.

“You might not see him but he sees you,” well, I believe so.

“You mean he’s here... with us?”

I want to laugh at the fear in his voice and how he’s frantically scanning our surroundings. He can’t still be afraid of ghosts.

“Relax ndoda, he’s not a ghost. Tell him anything that’s in your heart,” silence joins us.

He’s crushing the cap in his hand, a nervous

trait I've come to take note of.

"I'm scared," he mumbles but I heard him.

"Khehla lam, I was unfortunate to be born in an era where you didn't exist. You didn't have to die so young you know? Couldn't you wait a few more years, I was going to find you here and learn so much from you." Ntaba

From what I have heard, Khahlamba was in his 60's when he died. That's not young in my books but whatever strokes Ntaba's ego.

"I wish you were here to guide me, and show me the way through life. I'm not justifying my actions Khehla lam', but maybe your upbringing would've shaped me into a better man. Maybe you would've loved me better than my father ever did, his love was different. It made me insecure, it made me question love itself. I was just a boy with no direction and when baba

turned his back on me and found another reason to live, my life changed drastically. I shut my heart out from the world, and built walls around me. All I wanted to do was punish him.”

This is getting too personal, I shift aside to give him some privacy. But it's too quiet as a tomb here that I can still hear him.

“I was livid, I hated Vumile and Dalisile. You remember her right? She's in Kampala now, you probably don't know the place. The world was not advanced during your time.” He says.

That's not true, he's our father's grandfather. They had just discovered technology during his time... I think.

“Maybe I took the anger I felt for him out on other people, maybe killing them was like killing my parents. I have a heart too, I've seen and been through things that made me question God's existence. Your punishments are harsh

muntu omdala. I've been sitting on this wheelchair for far too long..." He stops, I think he's crying—taking time off to gather himself but no, what he says next finishes my strength.

"A wheelchair is a chair that has..."

"I'm sure he knows what a wheelchair is, he was born in 1912." I can't help but roll my eyes at his stupidity.

It's hot out here, he'll never finish if he's here to educate Khahlamba.

"I don't think he does, he wouldn't have put me in one if he knew how uncomfortable and depressing it is to sit in one." The seriousness in his tone takes me by shock. "How do I explain this in a nice way, without sounding disrespectful?"

"Explain what?" Why am I even asking?

"That he needs to come and walk a mile in my... no, no. He needs to sit in this damn thing and

tell me how it feels.”

What’s wrong with him? He was doing great, who changed the channel?

“Ntaba...”

“Is this about the baby? I haven’t had sex since the accident, I’m sexually frustrated. Peaches is kind enough to want to ride me but I’m not going to lie down like a wounded deer while she...”

“I’m sure Khahlamba does not want to hear all of that, spare him please.” I interject. “We should go, we’ll talk to him tomorrow.”

Tomorrow is a new day, this grown child is getting too much.

“Okay, we’re leaving Khehla lam. While you’re in there, idla amathambo enqondo. Tell your fellow tenants about this chair with wheels, think of me. I’m getting married on Saturday, I want to stand at the altar, not sit. I will probably

fall asleep while waiting for my bride. She takes forever to get ready.”

He drops his head, it's either he's crying or paying respect to the old man.

MATHONGA-

Season Finale: Part 4

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KHETHIWE-

“When you get there and you find them climbing tress at night, you also hop on and climb the tree. If they eat poison, you also eat poison. If they tell you to stop breathing, you stop breathing.”

Please! The house executives think they know it

all, telling me to ask how high when my in-laws tells me to jump.

That's how I spent my morning, surrounded by women in pinafores and head wraps telling me how to behave in my matrimonial home. The only advice I pocketed is giving him sex whenever he wants it.

If Hlabela knew where his wife has brought us, he'd drag her to church every Saturday. A club of all places, I had my bridal party last weekend. But someone's wife thought I needed a second one.

She dragged me, Nala, and Funo to this place, kicking and screaming.

I'm not going to mention Banami, the criminal profiler is in on it.

"Earth to Khethiwe," drunk Khushi's voice jolts me back to life. We're hurdled up on a long

couch, waiting for...

What are we waiting for again?

“What?” I mumble.

This woman works on my nerves more than my periods, come to think of it, they all have been annoying me throughout this day. It could be that I’m home sick and terribly miss Ntaba.

“Why do you think we were sent away?”

I don’t get Khushi’s question, I honestly didn’t know that an all-expenses paid holiday means you’re not wanted around. My mother would chase me outside when she didn’t want to deal with me anymore, no trips were ever mentioned.

“Why are we talking about this now? It happened months ago?” I question her.

Boredom can be a pain in the ass, where is the entertainment anyway?

“I think something happened during that time,

something they didn't want us to know. I know Hlabela when he lies to me, he blinks a lot."

Khushi knows what's happening in this family. She's well aware that Ntaba is special but has the guts to dig for bones. I'm too tired for this.

"I don't think we were sent away, it was just a romantic gesture." Argh! Funokuhle is so sweet, bless his pure heart.

He's too innocent and still very much quiet and reserved, I have lost count of the number of trips he has made to the bathroom. Drinking Fanta orange while everyone is getting drunk must be sad, I understand why Nala has only been pumping her stomach full of juice... babies don't drink alcohol.

"Vukuzakhe has a romantic side, he always does nice things for me." I'm loving the wide spread smile on his face.

He's lucky, Ntaba's romantic side is non-existent. I swear sometimes it feels like I'm dating a member of the EFF.

"Well I happen to think they are hiding something, the trip was so sudden. Too sudden if you ask me." Kushi.

She is always suspicious of everyone, I blame her past. Her life was a Bollywood movie.

"Can we not talk about the past and get this party started? It's getting late." I announce, impatiently.

And my frustration is frustrating me.

"I agree, Mathonga was against me coming here." Nala says.

Mathonga is against her doing anything, she's carrying his golden egg in her womb.

"Our guests should be here any minute from now," that's Banami.

I'd be lying if I say she's not drunk.

"What guests? I thought it'd be just us." That's right, I'm judging her with my eyes.

The look she gives has me shaking my head, I don't trust anyone at this point. Women do strange things at bridal showers, last week I was made to wear a giant penis and speak to it like it was my husband's eggplant. I have not recovered from that.

Fifth Harmony's Worth It' bursts through the speakers before Khushi is on the dance floor, shaking what her mother didn't give her.

Banami joins in, I should take a video to show Hlabela and Ndleleni how their people act when they are drunk. If only I was that girl.

Khushi pulls Funo to the dance floor, it's an awkward moment for him. But I'm not imagining the smile on his face.

"Go ahead Funo, you know you want to." I yell

over the loud music, he's not shy, just a little antisocial. The only thing he's moving are his feet, I'd pay 80 cows to see him break out of his shell.

"Come on, you're getting married tomorrow." The same Khushi has my hand and is dragging me to hell, I love parties but I can't dance, so I let my body control my moves.

I'm actually having fun, until I feel someone grinding behind me. None of these girls have a penis, what the hell is this thing poking my ass?

I turn around and to my shock, there are two strippers in my personal space. Bodies drenched in baby oil, or is it cooking oil?

The only thing they have on is a pair of black leather underwear and facemasks covering their eyes.

"Whoah! What the hell?" I scream, jumping back.

“Surprise!” Khushi and Banami.

“No, no. What have you guys done?” This is not happening.

Ntaba will know, and who the fuck said I love watching half naked men acting slutty? Their face masks are quite creepy.

“It’s your last day as a free woman Khethi, come on, let loose.” Is Khushi not religious? I’m starting to wonder.

“I didn’t order for this...” I yell.

The dude with the black mask takes my hand and pulls me to a chair in the middle of the dance floor. My eyes can’t go this wide for no reason, it’s really shocking.

I’m waiting for one of the ladies to stop this nonsense, also, is it too late to tell this black masked guy to get off me because the man I’m marrying tomorrow is Ted Bundy’s sidekick?

“This is so uncomfortable,” I mumble, trying to stand and hopefully run out of here.

He pushes me back on the chair, straddles me and starts grinding on my lap. Eww, his penis is rubbing on my thigh. The second guy is beside, harassing my shoulder with his... This is too much.

“Help!” I mouth the minute my eyes land on Funokuhle, I trust him to get me out of this. But no, my friend is watching like the rest of the ladies and... they are cheering these men sluts on.

And Nala? As my maid of honour, she needs to stop this.

This is a ticket to hell, God has given my mansion in heaven to someone else.

The ladies and Funo join the sinful party at the behest of the strippers, look at them, looking like thirsty housewives.

“This is amazing,” Khushi shouts above the music.

She thinks having a half-naked man touch her is amazing. Maybe Hlabela never takes his clothes off during... sigh!

“Excuse me, stop touching me.” I shout at this man dancing like he’s going to get a share of Ramaphosa’s billions after this. He’s too close, how is it I can’t get away from him?

He grabs my hand, I yank it back but the fool has handcuffed me, he cuffs his wrist too.

“What are you doing?” I gasp, eyes wide.

I’m all squirmy as he pulls me to him and whispers, “Relax baby girl, let me cater to you.”

Cater to who? I’m about to protest when he pulls me towards the bar.

“Funokuhle, help me.” He has to save me from this idiot.

“Stop complaining Khethi, I asked him to give you a private session.” Khushi will hear it from me when all of this is over.

The only comfort I’m getting from being alone with this stranger is that there’s a curtain in place of a door. The music is not so loud in here, I clear my throat to get it ready for an ear splitting scream, just in case he tries anything stupid.

“Don’t try anything with me, I grew up in a family of boys. I used to watch Power Rangers.”

I have never seen a single episode, I’ve heard Lethiwe’s kids talking about it in passing.

The stripper chuckles and for a second, I kind of recognise his voice.

“My fierce Khethiwe, you haven’t changed a bit.”

What?

“Bahle?” These wonders insist on finding me all the damn time.

He removes his mask, revealing a bright smile.

What the hell happened to him? He lost so much weight.

“What’s going on Bahle? What game are you playing?” I want to be away from him, but there’s no escape because of these stupid handcuffs.

“I heard you were getting married, this is the only way I could get to you.” He said ‘get to me.’

“Get to me for what?” I’m angry, this is stalking.

“I wanted to talk to you, are you sure you want to marry him? Do you know who he is? He’s a murderer Khethiwe...”

“Get these cuffs off me now,” I’m trying to keep calm although he is driving me crazy.

His black leather underwear has a little pocket,

that's where the key comes from.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ambush your party. It's the only way I could talk to you." I don't care what he has to say, I'm done with the drama in my life.

"Stay away from me, Bahle, I want nothing to do with you and your family." For all I know, his witch of a father sent him here.

His eyes are apologetic, "Can I at least apologize for the lobola thing. I didn't mean to hurt you Khethiwe. I was only following my heart."

He rubs the back of his neck as his eyes find his feet.

"Your father is not a good man Bahle," I wonder if he knows what Ndimande and my father did.

"He's my stepfather, and he's not that bad."

He doesn't know about him, it's not my job to

tell him.

“I’m not here to talk about Ndimande, I want to ask for your forgiveness. I’m not your enemy Khethiwe, I want the best for you.”

“Let me guess, Ntaba is not it?” He doesn’t really have to answer me, it’s evident in his eyes.

“I care about you, I don’t want you making mistakes. Are you sure you want to have kids with a man who kills without remorse? Think about it Khethiwe, your children will be calling a murderer baba.” Maybe if he wasn’t wearing those stupid underwear I’d take him seriously.

“What if I want to be his Mrs. Smith? What if I love him for who he is and wouldn’t change a thing about him?” Bahle must Google ride or die, my name is right there next to the definition.

“Khethiwe...”

“We’re done Bahle, please don’t ever try to meet me again. You know about the man I’m going to

marry tomorrow, I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. Respect my husband please, do it for the sake of our friendship."

There's no friendship here.

I'm leaving, this party is over.

"Khethiwe," I stop but don't turn around.

"I hope you find happiness." He says.

I continue my stroll, the ladies and gent are still dancing with Bahle's stripper buddy. The mood that took forever to get here is gone, Bahle took it.

I'm about to tell them the show is over when my phone vibrates in my pocket.

"Stop the music," no one pays attention to me, I have to run outside. Ntaba is so unpredictable he probably knows what I'm up to.

"Ntaba yami," it's the first time calling him this.

"Where are you?" His voice is stoical, some

people were never taught respect.

“Is this how you greet the woman you’re marrying tomorrow?” I’m trying to soften him up.

“Where are you, Khethiwe?”

“Ntaba you know where we are, I told you.”

What he doesn’t know is that there are strippers here and one of them is Bahle.

His silence can be nerve wrecking, you never know what he’s thinking.

“Are you there?” I ask because, why is he silent?

“Your mother called, I don’t know how she got my number.”

Strange! What does she want now?

“Why would my mother be calling you?” I ask.

“I don’t know, maybe she wants you to help her choose a coffin for your father.” It’s not like him to be so snappy... Wait, did he...

“What are you talking about Ntaba?” My heart drops to the pit of my stomach, drowning in the acidic liquid.

“Call your mother Khethiwe, and don’t come home smelling like that mampara. Angzwani nama simba mina.”

The calls dies, leaving me perplexed. I know Ntaba, he knows where I am, what I’m doing and with who.

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The ladies and I have been staying on the east wing of the ranch for over a week, Ntaba is not allowed to set his eyes on me. Something about bad luck which I don’t believe.

Tonight I’m needy and shaken, I need to see him and be under him, beside him and in his skin.

21:06 finds us at the ranch, too early if you ask Banami and Khushi. They are both against me going to meet up with Ntaba, what they don't know is that you don't deny that man. Nothing will stop him from coming to meet me.

I find him waiting outside the main house. He looks up at me, an undecipherable frown on his face. Is he upset? Is he judging me? I don't know what's happening.

“KaMadonsela!”

Jeer, can he be readable for once?

“Hey,” I want to kiss him but... bad luck.

His eyes run through every inch of my body, from the top down to my last toe. He lifts his eyebrows, now I'm certain he is judging me. It must have everything to do with this little number I have on. Too tight, too small and too... argh! Who cares? I'm getting married tomorrow.

I'm ready with my A4 page speech about how I don't know how Bahle got there, I will do it once my heart calms down.

Ntaba makes me nervous sometimes, I just need a minute.

"Did you call your mother?"

"Not yet, I'll call her when I get to the room." I'm scared to ask about my father, I'm scared to confirm if he really died. My hand is pulled in a split second, he makes me sit on his lap and wraps his arms around me.

"You will never be alone Peaches, I promise."
He says.

Something tells me this is about the death of my father, I didn't want to dwell on it.

A lump forms on my throat, I don't want to cry... I can't cry for him. Bab'Manyanga said if anything ever happens to either my mother or father, we shouldn't shed a drop of tear for

them. He gave no reasons, I've learnt never to question him. He knows what he's doing.

"Is he really dead?" It takes a lot for me to ask him this without sounding like I'm going to break down, I keep my focus on the vast darkness before us. If I look into his eyes, I will burst into tears.

"He's gone Khethi, I'm sorry."

He's not really sorry, if anything, he is glad the man is out of my life.

"We can postpone the wedding if..."

"No," I whip my head to glance at him. "We are not postponing the wedding, we did that when you were hospitalised."

"But your father..."

"No Ntaba, postponing a wedding is considered bad luck. I'll talk to my aunt, maybe we can send someone from the Khanyile family to go on our

behalf.”

“I’ll talk to bab’omncane Dumile,” he gives me an apologetic stare. Perhaps he sees the tears wanting to escape my eyes.

My face is quick to hide on his shoulder, I might just cry with how he’s looking at me. His fingers are fiddling with mine, I love the feel of his hands on mine. They are a bit rough, but I wouldn’t change anything about them.

Something is placed in my hand... car keys.

“What’s this for?” I ask.

“Look over there,” he says gesturing to the left with his head.

There’s a small car parked right next to his SUV, it must belong to one of his uncles.

“What’s that?” Honestly, what am I looking at?

“A car for you, it’s your wedding present.”

He’s kidding me, right?

“That old junk,” it must be April fool’s today, forget that it’s February.

“It’s still a Mercedes, I know how crazy women are over that brand.” He says it’s still a Mercedes.

My grade 9 English teacher drove a better car.

“What model is it?” Maybe knowing that will make me feel better about driving it.

“It’s a classic W124,” the excitement in his voice though.

I think I’m supposed to know what a W1234 is, I know nothing about cars. On that note, I will not be getting my driver’s license soon. All that cramming just to drive Bab’Pete’s old junk?

“Thank you baby, I love it.” Lies.

I’m thinking who I can gift it to, Lethiwe would love it.

“Now go on, go and show your friends.” Is he

serious? They will laugh at me.

“They’ll be so jealous,” he says.

I doubt it.

“I’ll show them when we come back from our honeymoon.” Another lie from me.

There is no honey moon. He said he’s not going anywhere with the wheelchair.

“I can’t wait to make you my wife,” his declaration makes my heart jump with joy. Unfortunately, I can’t kiss him yet but I can hug him.

MATHONGA-

Season Finale- Part 5

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KHETHIWE-

My father deciding to die the day before my wedding is utter cruelty, couldn't he wait a little longer?

Why did he have to ruin things for me? Force me out of his house due to his poor parenting skills? That's where I'm supposed to leave in a white dress with my mother and aunts ululating behind me.

I can't help the heaviness in my heart, it's not fair because today is supposed to be the happiest day of my life.

Aunt Rebecca is here, along with my brothers. Lethiwe will be the one walking me down the aisle. My father's side of the family couldn't make it due to the funeral, they know I can't postpone the wedding. It's not done, next thing there's another death in the family and they will be pointing fingers at me.

I wish my parents were better people, I wish

they were here. I wish my mother was the one standing in front of me, looking at me with tears of joy in her eyes. She hates me, and wants nothing to do with me.

How did I become so unfortunate where parents are concerned?

The wall length mirror is doing justice to my plump body, I think I look good in this mermaid/trumpet wedding dress. It's a V-neck and has long sleeves. Hands down, I have never looked this good in my life. Tomorrow I will be back to looking like a hobo.

We're having a white wedding, we'll do the traditional to wedding when Ntaba is up and running and I mean that literally.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

What is my aunt asking me? Such a question should not be asked a girl who is already wearing a wedding dress, ready to marry the love of her life.

“He loves me aunty, I know he doesn’t say it much.” I would marry him even if he didn’t.

“I know you do, you’re very open about it. But Khethiwe, your father is being laid to rest today, I hate that you’re not there to pay your last respects.” I don’t have to pay anything to that man.

Bab’Manyanga said not to go to the funeral, or cry for him. I shouldn’t even be bringing him up. Besides, why does he have to die on the day of my wedding? That’s so selfish of him, does he have to ruin me even beyond the grave?

I turn to look at her, she looks saddened obviously, her beloved brother died.

“You said it yourself aunty that cancelling the

wedding is bad luck, I sent some of my in laws to go on my behalf. That's what is to be done right? Some attend the wedding, and some attend the funeral?"

How do I tell her that the sangoma told me not to go, for my own safety?

"Let me not stop you my child, today is your day. Your father's family will understand." She says, nestling my cheeks.

Yet she's looking at me like I'm a monster, aunt Rebecca is old and old people think their peers are always right.

It will take time for me to forgive my father. I don't hate him, my heart is bruised that's all.

We're having a garden wedding right at the palace, having found no suitable venue, the palace became my second choice.

It is beautiful and spacious enough to accommodate over 100 guests. Ntaba wanted to keep it small because my man is in a wheelchair, but invitations were sent out before the accident.

I guess my family did me a favor by choosing to bury my father instead of attending my wedding. Amafu will be attending, Sono was invited too but declined. I know, I know... I'm an idiot. Maybe I want to make things right, we were once close.

There's a knock at the door before Nala shows face.

"It's time, we need to move." She says, a huge smile on her face.

My heart is not okay, it's hammering too violently. I'm about to marry the man of my dreams, maybe that's why my stomach is churning. It's in knots, I think I need the toilet. It

must be because of the food I ate last night or I'm nervous.

Aunt Rebecca is suddenly in tears, she better not be mourning at my wedding.

"You look so precious my child, I'm proud of you." She says, placing a kiss on my cheek.

That time I have not achieved much in life, life doesn't stop after marriage, right? I will better myself for myself, my husband and children. If God blesses me with any.

Aunt's hug feels homely, like a mother's touch.

"You guys go ahead, I want a few seconds with myself." I tell them.

In actual fact, I need to use the toilet. This dress better not disappoint me.

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NTABEZIKUDE-

He is convinced that their love or whatever he feels for her is timeless, that she is the only woman he wants to spend the rest of his life with.

It has to be her or no one, that's why he is standi... sitting at the altar, dressed in a black tuxedo, waiting for his bride to walk down the aisle. All his brothers are his groomsmen, standing behind him ready to accompany him to a lifetime of prison...

Argh, marriage is not jail... marriage is not jail... marriage is... Sigh!

The beautifully decorated garden is packed, from distance relatives to acquaintances.

Ntaba almost startles when someone grips his shoulder and squeezes

“Breathe ndoda, you look like you’re about to pass out.” Mathonga is trying to get him to calm down, the man is sweating under his melanin skin.

“You mean he looks constipated,” Hlabela steps in. “I told you to stop eating boiled eggs, just hold it in ndoda. The bride will be here soon.”

The bride will be here soon... these words alone are comforting, and that’s all he wants, his bride.

“But she’s taking too long, we said 12pm on the dot. We made a deal that if she’s a minute late, she owes me 10K.” Ntaba reveals to his brothers, his heart won’t stop pounding in his ribcage.

“And that 10K will be coming out of your pocket even if she wins, the partners we chose are bullies. Trust me, all my cards are in

Funokuhle's possession. I have to ask him for my money." Vukuzakhe states, his sally resulting in laughter between the boys. Ntaba can't bring himself to cracking a twitch of a smile.

"Speak for yourself, Nala is not controlling." A proud Mathonga sings, he's taken aback by the laughter that erupts. The loudness of it turns heads.

"Ndoda don't even go there, we all know Nala wears the pants in the house. You're too weak for MaShange you need a punch in the face, making us look bad." Ntaba.

It's good that he's talking, a bit of distraction is what he needs.

"That's your observation Ntaba, how will you see properly from down there?" Mathonga's clap back has all of them chuckling.

"Khushi and I both wear the pants in the house,

we're a couple. Adam and Eve." Trust Hlabela to bring the bible into the topic.

He's laughed at like everyone else.

"You mean Khushi borrows you her pants when she's tired of wearing them," a clap back from Ndleleni. If they continue laughing at each other like this, someone might start to worry and call Sterkfontein.

Hlabela smacks Ndleleni on the head, "Shut up, virgin boy."

They are suddenly silent, glancing down at a worried Ntaba.

"Kodwa madoda, it's been fifteen minutes. Someone needs to check up on her." Ntaba says, worry playing in his voice. He is sweating meatballs.

"Let me ask Funokuhle what's taking so long." The big brother offers.

Someone makes a joke about how he's using that as an excuse to see Funokuhle, Zakhe ignores them.

Minutes pass by like hours, the bow tie around Ntaba's neck feels tighter with each given minute. He unfastens the damn thing, removes the suit coat because well, it's getting hot in here.

"Calm down Ntaba, Khethiwe loves you. She probably didn't sleep last night thinking about the wedding, I know she can't wait to spend the rest of her life with a loser like you." Mathonga.

Ntaba believes him, he knows she loves him. What he is not sure of is why she hasn't come to him like they promised.

Vukuzakhe comes back hand in hand with his lover, his eyes are everywhere but on the groom.

"What's happening?" Ntaba asks, seemingly too

calm all of a sudden.

“Khethiwe is gone.” Oh, Funokuhle! Opening your mouth is not always necessary.

“What do you mean she’s gone?” Not wanting to alert the guests, Ntaba has to keep his voice down.

“Her aunt said she wanted to be alone for some time, I don’t know where she went.” Funokuhle.

Panic strikes Ntaba like lightning.

“Mathonga push this damn thing, and take me to her.” He grunts, trying to push it himself.

“Relax, you’ll hurt yourself.” Mathonga says, steadying the wheelchair so Ntaba won’t fall.

“What’s going on?” That’s Vumile behind them, he’s with his wife Nandi.

“Where is Khethiwe? The wedding should have started already.” Nandi.

“Don’t tell me the bride got tired of your ass and

ran away.” Where did Khothama come from? Ntaba regards him with a frown, had it been under different circumstances, he would be laughing his head off. But he’s terrified as fuck.

Mathonga explains the issue at hand.

“We should split up and search the premises.” Hlabela offers, they all scatter to different places.

The guests are left in awe, harboring faces filled with questions.

“Do you think she found out about Sponono?” Mathonga asks.

He's pushing the wheelchair down a passage that leads to the room Khethiwe was supposed to be in.

“Maybe, she wouldn’t just leave like this.” Ntaba. He knows this for sure, Khethiwe would rather die than live without him.

“Where are the ladies?” Ntaba continues.

“Probably looking for her as well, the homestead is huge. She must be somewhere around.” That’s Mathonga trying to comfort his brother.

It takes them less than ten minutes to check the entire building in search of Khethiwe, she’s not in her room. She is nowhere to be found.

“Ntaba,” his brothers scurry to him heaving and unsettled. “We looked everywhere, she’s not here.”

He ignores Ndleleni’s report and keeps his focus on a tired looking Nala sauntering towards them, hands on her waist and face snapped together.

“MaShange, have you seen Khethiwe?” He asks.

They are waiting for Nala to say something, when they see Khethiwe approaching. She doesn’t look tired but weak.

“KaMandonsela!” He calls out as soon as she is within earshot, he’s never been so happy to see her.

“Where have you been? We have been looking for you, are you trying to kill me?” Ntaba chides.

He’s a TV person, he’s seen a lot of runaway brides, men crying after being left at the altar.

“Didn’t aunt Rebecca tell you? I had to use the bathroom.” She explains.

“Aunt... no she didn’t... she didn’t tell me anything.” Well this is frustrating. He’s been searching for her like a maniac while his wife-to-be was having a meeting with nature. The brothers condemn her with narrowed eyes, and like it’s planned, they shake their heads and leave them to talk. Of course Mathonga stays behind with Nala.

“Sorry, I blocked the toilet in my room and had to use the one in the main house.” Khethiwe

says.

No one bothered to look in the toilets.

“Who does that Khethi? Who uses the toilet on their wedding day? You were supposed to dispose of everything last night, what were you doing last night?” Ntaba wipes his sweaty forehead, and sighs in frustration.

Khethiwe has found a joke in his irritation.

“Last night I was busy eating Indian cuisines, I didn’t know that hot food would upset my stomach. Hot-wings treat me well, so I thought the samosas would...”

“Let me guess? Kushi right?” He folds his arms, and cocks a brow. “You know what? Don’t answer that, please get ready KaMadonsela. The guests are getting restless.”

It’s not about the guests really, he wants to get this over and done with before another disaster happens.

Khethiwe makes a sour face, she has her hands clutched on her stomach. It's boiling eggs in there.

"I just need to use the bathroom one last time, I promise I won't be long." There is urgency in her tone.

"Khethiwe you..." It's too late to stop her, she's taken off running.

"Where the hell is Khushi?" He grunts, looking up at Mathonga. The little brother is suppressing a serious laugh.

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She's walking down the aisle in a white dress. Her brother striding beside her, ready to give her away to a serial ki... ahem! To the man of her dreams.

“I have a sjambok that was soaked in chilli powder overnight. Break her heart and I will whip you so hard you will...”

“Bhuti!” An embarrassed Khethiwe scolds him with a serious look.

He smiles and hands her over to Ntaba.

The wedding has started, nerves kick in when it’s time to recite their vows.

“I have waited for you all my life Ntabezikude Khanyile, you were nothing but a dream to me. A distant dream I couldn’t reach. God favored me and gave me you. I promise to stand by you all the days of my life. I will love you till my last breath.”

Khethiwe’s A4 page speech is cut short, she will finish all her tears if she continues.

The mic is handed to Ntaba to say what’s in his heart.

“Stand me up, madoda.” Ntaba.

The eldest brothers, Vukuzakhe and Hlabela help him up. He gestures that they let go when he feels he’s got it. They have to be slow in doing so, his legs are clearly wobbly.

Khethiwe is all teary eyed as she watches how Ntaba is standing on his own, but his face is pinched motioning the pain he’s under.

“I think that’s enough now,” she says worried he might injure himself. Ntaba takes her hands into his.

“I’m fine, KaMadonsela. I want to look you in the eye when I tell you how happy you have made me.”

That just stirs more waterworks in her eyes.

“All my life I have been running, mostly from myself. But you came and held me down. For that I will forever be grateful to you, love is a language that sounds foreign to me. It will take

a long ass time for me to get used to it, but I promise to be open minded and learn from you Peaches. You've taught me patience, and made me believe in life again. Ngyabonga KaMadonsela, iyakthanda lensizwa."

That took long, his impatient legs are done for the day.

He almost falls, Zakhe and Hlabela help him back on the chair. Ntaba glances up at Khethiwe and sends a smile her way.

"Now that that's done, let's go home Peaches." He extends his hand out to take hers. Khethiwe answers him with a giggle first.

"The wedding is not over yet," she tells him.

How long does these things take?

"Slima," Mathonga pulls his ear.

Ntaba has to be patient, weddings take the whole day.

MATHONGA-

Finale-

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FUNOKUHLE-

Sometimes when I can't sleep, I take a walk outside. Tonight I'm thirsty and maybe hungry. I'll decide when I get to the kitchen.

It's Thursday night, we're at the Khanyile residence, here to celebrate Vukuzakhe and Mathonga's birthdays, and to witness Mathonga and Nala tie the knot.

The merged party is tomorrow, and the wedding on Saturday.

I find a slice of cheese cake in the fridge, I'm

too lazy to boil water from scratch and make tea, so I settle on a barstool with my cake.

As the spoon slices into the cheese cake, my mind starts to wander. For some reason, the smoothness of it reminds me of Vukuzakhe. His gentleness, his irrefutable love.

I recall the day I opened up to him.

For the first time ever, we talked. He asked me one question, "How are you?"

The most difficult question I was always afraid to answer because for many years I didn't know the answer. He asked and I thought hard about it, it took a while to reply because I had to search myself. I wanted to give him the right responses, I wanted to let go of the past.

When all was said and done, I did something I hadn't really done since my father and brothers started abusing me. I cried.

I let go of repressed tears, emotions that I didn't want anyone to see, feel or hear.

The copying mechanism my mind forced me into had not been easy, hiding away the suffocating pain, tears and not being able to express myself emotionally.

Vukuzakhe hugged me with everything he had, while my body shuddered in his arms. He held me down with a silent promise to never let go.

I forgave myself, and everyone who ever hurt me intentionally and unintentionally.

Today here I am, picking up pieces of myself. Slowly building what I had lost all those years ago, my confidence.

"Hey, why are you sitting in the dark?" I didn't see him come in.

"I couldn't sleep," I say.

“I couldn’t sleep either,” he kisses my cheek, grabs a chair and settles down beside me.

I think I might know why insomnia has visited him, his divorce with Bongiwe has been finalised. She’s taking half of what he owns, but that’s not what he’s worried about. He wasn’t ready to separate from her, he never says it but I see it when he’s talking about her.

There’s guilt too, how she left and never looked.

“I can’t stop thinking about Bongiwe, I wish I could turn back time and fix what I broke. She had dreams but I crashed them with my selfishness.”

“You’re not selfish Zakhe.” It can never be him.

“How is she?” I have to ask, I am the reason that they broke up. Maybe one day we will meet and I’ll get a chance to apologise to her. I was ready to share this man with her, he was never mine

to begin with.

“I think she is okay, she is a strong woman. She’s starting work on Monday...” his inquisitive eyes find me. “At Khanyile Holdings. Now that she has shares there...”

Yeah, that was part of the divorce agreement. My eyes follow him as he stands and strolls towards the fridge. He opens the door then turns back to me.

“Dance with me?” That’s random, we were in the middle of a conversation. Dancing around the kitchen in the refrigerator light, in the middle of the night is somewhat strange. But I love it.

His touch is different tonight, he’s holding me like he’s never done before.

“When are we going back home? I miss making love to you everywhere in the house.” He’s insane, we just got here.

“Everywhere? Why do I not remember any of

that?" I ask, looking up at him.

"Oh really?" That's a challenging question.

"Yes, my memory is blank." I say.

"Oh, I see. You don't remember doing it on the kitchen counter? The lounge? The toilet?"

"Toilet? Vukuzakhe, what do you take me for?"

He laughs softly, a familiar sound that always offers comfort and love.

"What about the river? We can drive there right now for a little reminder." Him.

My cheeks flush, I'd be beet red had I been a few shades lighter. He captures my cheeks, bringing my eyes back to his. I lock my gaze with his, searching for something I find each time I do—belonging.

"I don't regret meeting you at the river that night, Kid."

I don't regret it either.

“You wouldn’t let me die, I’ve never met someone as stubborn as you.” I say.

A brief chuckle escapes me, bringing with it a lone tear. Vukuzakhe uses the pad of his thumb to wipe it away.

“It’s a good thing I stopped you, we wouldn’t be here today if I didn’t.”

He’s right, my life would still be the same. I wouldn’t be wearing his engagement ring. I’d still be a prisoner to my family and myself, perhaps there is a God and he really does care. I try to form words of gratitude, but nothing seems to be enough.

I fill my lungs with air and exhale slowly.

“I will forever be grateful to you, my gentle giant. I love you Mr. Khanyile.” The words roll off my tongue with ease.

“I love you too Kid,” he says, gently placing a soft kiss on my lips. In him I find my worth.

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MATHONGA-

Twisting and turning every sunrise has become a routine, my morning alarm changed seven months ago when Nala came home with a whole stranger.

He cries like he pays the rent in this place, tells us how high to jump and has us running around like headless chickens. We'd chide him and tell him to behave because he is a stranger but his innocence and beauty won't let us take that step.

We love him like he's the only one in this world, well... I love him because he looks like me.

Kwakhekonke Phakade Khanyile was born over

seven months ago, weighing 2.4kg.

He was a very tiny baby that the nurses scolded Nala for not eating enough while pregnant, on the contrary she ate more than anyone I've ever known. She just didn't gain much. She wasn't allowed to leave the hospital until the baby weighed 3kg.

"Nala, he's crying again." I groan while digging my face in to the pillow.

"It's your turn today," Nala reminds me that we actually take turns in taking care of Phakade.

The crying won't stop, willing me to leave the warm bed to tend to the baby. Babies are fun and adorable until they start crying.

His wailing seems to be getting louder, he's looking up at me from his crib expecting to be carried.

“What’s wrong Zandla? Must you make a noise every morning?”

The nickname Zandla came from Zakhe after taking note of how much Phakade loves being carried by everyone. He cries for anyone who enters or is leaving the room.

“How much time do we have?” Nala asks from beside me, her hands touching my skin and lips seeking contact. A peck should be enough, I don’t want my baby seeing funny things.

“About an hour or so.” Phakade has calmed down, I don’t trust his silence. It usually means he’s passing stools.

“Baby, we’re going to be late.” She’s bustling around in a flash, touching this and that.

Today is my birthday, we’re having a party. And hey, bless amathonga, it’s not going to rain today.

Phakade has his head on my chest, he wants to

sleep again. He's forever sleeping, I can't enjoy my son because all he thinks about is napping.

"Was it not you who set the alarm for 9:15?" I don't want to be blamed for things I know nothing about.

"It was, I was too tired and thought I'd need an extra hour to sleep." Nala replies.

"Listen, don't put him to sleep before you change his diaper. I don't want him to have nappy rush."

She continues while tossing clothes on the bed, they were supposed to be ironed yesterday. Literally, there is no time, we're having a family breakfast and Nandi wants everyone at the table.

I'm stunned by the amount of stools Phakade has released, it's going to be messy.

"A little help Nala, I think he wants to be changed by you." I'm lying. I need break.

She puts her tasks on hold and rolls her eyes at me.

"We're a team, right?" I know what she means by this, we're equal in this relationship.

"Yes, my precious Nala, we are a team." There's a smile on my face when she takes over from me.

"I'll handle it, you go take a shower. We're running late." She's the boss.

My phone buzzes, I shot a glance over at Nala. She's thinking what I'm thinking.

"Is it her?" She asks.

It is her, my mother Dalisile. The first time I received her call was the day Nala gave birth, somehow she knew about the baby. She congratulated me, although it lasted a few

seconds before she was asking for money.

“Are you going to take it?” Nala asks as she sits to breast feed the baby.

I don't know if I should, I don't want to talk to Dalisile today. Maybe one day, honestly I have nothing against her and Mgobhozi. They are family, I'm hoping though that Dalisile becomes a better person one day.

“If she wants a second chance, she needs to earn it. She owes all of us an apology, my uncle Phumlani was accused of rape and banished from the village.”

That was very low of Dalisile.

Phumlani's healing process didn't drag, I was shown what to do in order to remove the curse.

He's sane now, and starting life from scratch.

The woman whose daughter had accused him of rape and cursed him after her daughter

committed suicide, died a long time ago. Her family came forward during our investigation, he never raped that girl. My uncle was falsely accused.

Phakade has fallen asleep in her arms, giving him a bath will be a mission. He'll wake up and start crying again.

"Don't rush it, just take it one day at a time."
Nala says. "I'm going to bath him."

She leaves for the bathroom.

I take my phone with the intent to text Dalisile,
"Don't call me, I'll call you."

I don't know when, but definitely one day. As far as finances are concerned, I will help where I can.

Nothing grand, just enough for her to go to bed on a full stomach. She's on probation, if she

proves herself worthy, then I will treat her like my mother. A woman who is deserving of the world.

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KHETHIWE-

“Khethiwe what is this? What happened to the face-beat we talked about? Girl it’s a party, you can’t be looking dowdy. Like you just came from farming.”

As always, Khushi is looking at everyone from her high horse, nose in the air and right hand dangling, ready to wave people off.

It must be the colorful clothes she’s wearing, they make her think she can say anything to anyone. It has taken some time and controlling

my anger to get used to her.

“Why are you in my room, again?” I don’t remember asking for company. She rolls her eyes, and trust me, it’s coming from a good place.

“I wanted to check up on you, you’re a wife sis. You need to keep the image.” Did she just call me sis? Next thing she will be calling me ‘moghel’

“And who gave you the fashion magic wand? There is nothing wrong with her face.” Banami steps in, placing her hands on her hips. She is a lover of red, so I’ve noticed. She has the full face-beat Khushi wants on my face.

I bet Miss. Make-up has everything to do with it because Banami is simple like me.

People are out here looking like Bonang’s photocopy, while I look like a female version of Steve Harvey.

“Sweetie, I’m the fashion goddess.” Khushi declares, as she takes a spin to show her lime pink two-piece suit. And I mean that “piece” part, that skirt is barely covering anything.

She’s a real definition of ‘umfazi wephepha.’
(City wife.)

“We are in the village, if you haven’t noticed.” I stand my ground, this one thinks she’s the fashion guru.

“You guys are not hearing me, pictures are forever. They’ll still be around when we’re old.” Like I care what Khushi thinks, I love my simplistic look.

“Please don’t tell me that’s ponds on your face.”
Ouch.

This one woke up and chose violence today.

My idea of dolling up is wearing Vaseline on my lips and ponds on my face, who cares? I still look good.

In fact, the Ponds Company should start paying me. I'm one of their loyal customers.

"I'm out of here, Khushi go find your husband and ask him to give you a quicky. Your wrinkles are starting to show."

I leave her with her mouth hanging, she must eat my words while at it and do as I say. We'll die young because of that girl.

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Over the past months, I have tried to connect with my mother for the sake of my children. I want them to have someone they'll call gogo, but she's shut me out. Eventually I gave up, perhaps one day, if God wills it, she will come around.

She is left alone in that house, aunt Rebecca and the twins moved to Port Shepstone. Lethiwe won't let his children visit.

It's almost lunch time, the big birthday lunch. I need to find my husband.

"Makoti," uncle Qinisela calls me. He's sitting under a tree with Vumile, Dumile and Phumlani.

"Yes?" I should have walked behind the house, that uncle talks for the entire nation.

I have to greet respectfully when I get to them, the head bow is very important when addressing elders, it makes them feel important.

"Please get us some beers," if that's all he's going to say to me then I'll dance to the kitchen.

"Okay," I could say more, ask how Vumile is doing but I don't have the time for that. The medication seems to be going well for him, sometimes he gets confused and forgets but bounces back.

"It smells like home in hear," I tell the ladies

busy in the kitchen.

“It always smells like home in here,” Banami’s reply brings a smile to my face.

Maybe I’m thinking of asking her to serve the elders, but Ndleleni has not made it ‘lobola official’ yet.

Zilile should do, she’s Khothama’s wife now.

“Hey, please do me a favor. The pensioners want a second round of drinks. Won’t you be kind...”

The smile on her face must be a yes.

“Khethintaba has fallen asleep, let me put her to bed first.” Zilile says, rocking her baby who is soundly asleep on her back.

The name took me by surprise really, I’m honored that Khothama named his child after Ntaba and me, especially knowing the tight bond they have.

“You look restless, are you okay?” Nandi asks, taking a break from slicing greens.

“Have you seen Ntaba ma? I’ve been looking for him.”

Ntaba sure knows how to disappear on me, he does that quite often lately. I’d walk in on him and his brothers muttering and mumbling, it’s the looks they’d give me when my presence alerts them.

“He’s in the throne room with the boys,” by boys she means his brothers.

What are they doing there?

“Tell them lunch is almost ready, I need everyone at the table outside, now.” Nandi.

I take her message and exit the kitchen.

I find the door half open, and get a chance to hear Ntaba’s chuckles, soft rumbles that warm

me from the inside.

“Baby language is strange, what is she saying?”
That’s Khothama’s voice. Phakade only says ‘gaga’ and leaves it to us to guess what he’s trying to say.

I’m about to walk in when Mathonga’s voice stops me.

“Phakade can’t wait to meet his cousin, you should tell Khethiwe already. It’s about time we introduce Sponono to the ancestors.”

Who is Sponono? Phakade does not have a cousin, he’s actually Vumile’s first grandchild.

“Who gave you the right to name the baby?
What kind of a name is Sponono anyway?
You’re embarrassing yourself Mathonga.”
Khothama says, adding to my confusion.

“The only one who has the right to name the baby is Ntaba, he’s the father after all.”
Khothama.

Wind is knocked out of my lungs, it shouldn't hurt like this. Maybe it's my heart reacting to what I have just heard.

“Speaking of being a father, you have to tell Khethiwe about Thethelela and the baby before she...”

I find my way in, interrupting Zakhe. Khothama is holding a baby in his arms, dressed in a yellow jumpsuit. She's well over fourteen months. The brothers look like they have seen a ghost, I wish I was a ghost. Maybe I wouldn't be in so much pain.

I look at the man who might further break me, or heal my heart with what he's going to say to me.

He stands, yes he can walk now. I try to read his expression, I can't— he's giving me nothing.

“I think sis'Nandi is calling us, lunch is ready

madoda.” Khothama is the only one who calls Nandi sis’Nandi, something wrong with his left brain.

I struggle to look at the baby as Khothama walks past, the others fail to spare me a glance.

It’s just us two now, my mind is all over the place when I should be focusing on him.

“You slept with Thethelela and got her pregnant?” The question drops out of my mouth, leaving me feeling like hell.

He drops his gaze briefly before he’s looking back up, the bastard.

“When?” I’m asking because he’s standing there like he’s lost his voice. “Were we together?”

His gaze finds the floor, this time I get a subtle nod that throws me into the pit of despair.

There’s an undeniable tightness on my chest, my feet are shaky and so are my hands. I need

to sit down but I can't seem to move.

Why her? Why Thethelela of all people?

"Do you know I esteemed you higher than God?"
I ask him, and drink the tears trying to
embarrass me. I never should've followed my
heart, my feelings for him were insufferable but
there had to be a way to control them, hide
them from him.

Maybe I wouldn't be here today, standing in
front of him, thinking of how we will move on
from this.

"Khethi-"

I interrupt him, stepping away when he moves
closer.

"I'm still talking," I snap.

There's a way in which he flares his nostrils that
tells me he doesn't like my tone.

"I think you knew how much I love and worship

you, and you took advantage of that?”

This is so funny, my idiocy is the funniest shit ever known to the world of idiots.

“Why are you laughing?” He does not get to ask me shit, and he sure as hell does not get to frown at me like that.

“Because I’m an idiot,” I have not mustered up the strength to scream. I don’t think I ever will.

“Don’t say that Peaches.” The devil says, smooth like a criminal.

His touch burns, I escape it while a muffled gasp escapes my mouth. It’s the damn tears fighting back, I refuse to let them out. I will not let Thethelela and this man make me cry.

“You’re my Peaches, umkami. You are not an idiot.”

“I am. I’m an idiot and you bloody know it... You know that eleven times out of ten I would give

my whole existence for you. Only an idiot would do that for a man who has hurt her countless of times. Only an idiot would choose to love a stone-cold man like you.”

His eyes are so close to popping out of their sockets, I may have stabbed his black heart with my declaration.

“It was a mistake please, I would never hurt you like that.”

“But you did.” I didn’t intend to scream and bang my fists on his chest, I want him to fall and hit his head. I want him to feel my pain but it’s not happening. He’s a wall in front me, a wall with arms that have brought me closer to his body.

“It was a mistake, I swear on my love for you. I had a moment of weakness, a moment I regret every day.”

I don’t care, he shouldn’t have slept with her, even if I personally asked to do it.

“Please don’t leave me, I’d crumble without you. Give me a chance to make it up to you and I swear, I will spend the rest of my life doing just that.”

“Let go, Ntaba.” I scream, pulling myself off of him. He won’t let go, instead buries his face in my neck and tightens his arms around me.

“Please,” he randomly says the word.

I feel a wetness on my neck, the fool is either crying or sweating from his sins.

“I’m a bad man, but bad men deserve to be loved and given second chances. Punish me any way you like... just don’t go.” His words are said against my ear. “Take a chance with me.”

Dammit!

I’m sending my body back to its maker, it’s betraying me by leaning and crumbling into his arms. I hate myself for this, why am I this person?

“I love you KaMadonsela.”

I love him too, more than the word itself.

I'd take a chance with him, I did, I am. That's why I'm here, loving him every day since the day my heart could recognise him.

I'd die a thousand deaths if he asked me to, heck I'd tell him how much I love him after he's plunged a knife down deep in my stomach.

But this... I don't know how to feel about this.

There is always a calm at the heart of the storm, I'm not sure if I will ever get to the heart of the storm. I don't know if I will ever heal from this.

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MATHONGA-

Life really has tested us, we've had our fair shares of trials and tribulations. Our different issues kept us from fully bonding and getting to know each other, while I had my family problems, finding myself and spiritual journey.

Nala had to deal with her traumatic past and the loss of her brother.

In the midst of it all, we managed to make time for each other.

I'm standing in the garden, beside a marriage officiate and in front of family and very close friends. Ntaba is behind me looking prim and proper, he's my best man. We didn't want to do the five groomsmen and five bridesmaids, tradition, since it's a small wedding.

My other brothers have occupied the front row with their partners.

Khushi's kids are here, Hlabela has conquered

his phobia of kids. He's good at this fathering thing, he's still a church goer. What he's not interested in is being a pastor. Khushi has not bothered to go with him, Hlabela thinks one day she will follow him, my brother is a patient man.

They have plans of moving provinces one day.

Phakade is in Khethiwe's arms, Ntaba told me she didn't take the news of the baby well. She's a good woman, she needs time to get over the betrayal.

Sponono's grandmother has allowed Ntaba to have a relationship with her. She fetched her yesterday, Ntaba needed time to speak with Khethiwe.

Thethelela named the baby Zamangwane, it was a shocking revelation. We're yet to do a ceremony where we ask my sister Zamagwane to use the name.

Ndleleni is seriously serious about Banami, his

first love.

There's a stone pathway where Nala will walk down on her way to me.

Everyone stands when Zitha appears, she's her maid of honour. I spot her husband Kenneth with their son Dlozi and Thobani. The only family of Nala's that couldn't make it is Amandla, she prefers to stay where she is.

Bambindlovu winks when our eyes meet, I want to punch him in the face when he blows me a kiss. Our friendship has grown, I will always see him as my brother.

Nala is next to walk down the aisle, she looks beautiful in her white dress. Our eyes meet, promises wander in my head.

I can't promise a perfect life, nor a smooth ride. I can't promise to always be the best husband or father, but I promise to always be steady, and

sure. For all the harsh realities and doubts, I will be here, grounded.

This is the beginning of the rest of our lives.

The best things in life come when you least expect them, I will forever be grateful to aMATHONGA and God for the life they have given me.

The End*

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A/N: Firstly, I'm sorry for how long I've made you wait for this last update. I didn't know how to end the story, it's the most difficult story I've

ever written.

Another royal journey done and dusted, thank you so much for staying with me throughout this long journey. Without your support, I doubt I would've been able to finish it.

I wouldn't trade you for the world, sending all my love to each and every one of you, kings and queens of Ashanti Kingdom.

You're fabulous.