



Reborn

"Mamacita, I can see the devil in your eyes."

By Tshepi M

REBORN

01

Moremi moved the metal that was heavy on his finger up and down, his guilt drowning him. This past week has been filled with surprises and he didn't know how he was going to explain himself to Susan. She didn't deserve this. God knows she didn't deserve any of the hurt he was about to hurl her way. Was it better to save her the hurt? He would do anything to protect her from any kind of pain. He sighed and anxiously let go of the ring and placed his hand down. The ring feeling heavier than usual. A reminder of what he shouldn't have done to his wife. His phone rang on his desk and his wife's number flashed on the screen. Instead of speak, he would phrase it as 'think of the devil.' His throat bobbed as it rang for a minute before the call cut. He slowly picked the phone and not even a second later it started ringing. He answered the phone,

loosening his tie to breath a little and try to not let the guilt weight him down to the point of her noticing the change in his mood.

"Hello Su..."There was silence.

"Why are you calling me Su? What did you do dear husband?" She asked and he leaned back.

"Nothing. I'm just stressed mogatsaka." He said and there was a pause before he heard her voice on the other end.

"I'll let that slide. For now. Are you free tomorrow?" She asked as her husband's thoughts ran wild with what he was to do, the next step he was going to take.

"I have meetings with my bosses tomorrow."

"Okay. I understand. I'll see you at home. Bye."
Susan hung up and Moremi rubbed his temples, feeling a headache coming. The regrets are always going to be there but what was he to do with his current predicament? He was going to be scolded like a little boy but wasn't it better than to lose the woman he loves? She shouldn't even know.

At Susan's house she parked the small car inside the yard before she got out to go close the gate. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. It was a feeling that just couldn't go away. A year ago she felt like that but she thought it was her hormones playing on her since she was in her last trimester and she was anxious about the baby, the baby had been in breech position and she had been hoping she was okay but her little baby turned out to be fine. She sighed and walked to the door. She opened the door and found her maid watching television. She pushed her soft dreads hairstyle back.

"Ausi Lorato..." Her voice trailed off and Lorato turned to look at her employer. She was home early. She reduced the volume of the show she was watching and tried to smile.

"Dumelang. I'm sorry. I didn't know you'll be home

early." She started and Susan just nodded. Lorato quickly stood up in her maid uniform and headed to the kitchen. Susan sighed as she removed her pumps and walked to the bedroom she shared with her husband. In the room she stretched her body before she walked barefoot to the room her kids shared. They were all napping, her five year old with his thumb in his mouth, her, her three year old sprawled on the bed besides her brother and her 11 month old in his cot wide awake with his bottle in his pouty mouth. She was done with kids. There was a house full and she couldn't fathom another stressful pregnancy. She walked closer to the cot and she took his hand as he gave her a grin with one tooth showing. She should probably put him in his walker to enable him to at least try to take his first steps. She was always anxious about not being there when her last born takes his first step. Such special moments were precious to her and she wanted to know everything. She picked him up and he dropped his bottle and she smiled picking him up.

"Hi there, want to spend time with me while waiting for your siblings?" She asked the infant and walked out with him in her arms. She had to prepare food for her husband.

Lorato saw her employer who was just three years older than her make her way to the kitchen. Her only job was to clean the house and take care of all three toddlers. It was a good job, for an unemployed graduate who has been looking for work. She took what was available and as long as she was able to take care of her grandparents, anything was fine with her. Her boss didn't talk much except when she wanted to get her point across otherwise she kept to herself and observed silently.

"Let me leave you Mrs."

"Lorato?" She faced her boss.

"Thank you. You're the first helper we've had and I know we hear a lot about bad helpers but thank you so much. You're exceptional." Lorato nodded with a smile.

"You can have a day off from tomorrow. You'll come

back on Sunday." Lorato grinned.

"Thank you so much ma'am. Thank you." Lorato wanted to hug her but Susan had her youngest on her hip. Susan smiled briefly and nodded. Lorato turned around. She better go pack to go home and see her grandparents.

That same lunch hour, Moremi rapped on the door. His anxiety spiking and his breath coming out as uneasy. He needed a proper explanation and he didn't know how. His ring burned his finger and he closed his eyes, he could already see Susan's reaction and he loved her too much to have her experience this. She trusted him so much an- His hands got all sweaty as he wiped them on his grey slacks and he swallowed his own saliva. He knocked again and the door finally opened. He was met by a young lady who opened the door. The lady smiled.

"You're Mr Moremi?" He nodded and the lady opened the door wider. He walked inside the house, seeing toys scattered all around and a cot with a baby in pink. His head started spinning and he paused. The magnitude of his decisions coming down on him like a ton of bricks. The young lady paused and looked at the man then at the sweet little girl in the cot.

"Are you okay?" She asked and he nodded as he raised his hand. He rubbed his head then his chin looking at the cot.

"Ms Emily is in the other room." The lady said and he nodded as he followed her after stealing a glance at the baby in the cot. The door opened and he saw the woman he last saw a year ago. All frail and weak in the bed, her green veins showing on her arm and he paused at the door. Emily forced a smile, using all the energy she had to appear fine.

"Hi Moremi." Her raspy voice croaked up and he looked at her. Her eyes hollow sockets and the words died in his mouth.

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REBORN

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At Emily's house, their eyes locked and Emily coughed. Her brittle body shaking from what a healthy human being could consider a normal cough. The girl excused herself and Emily tried to sit upright.

"S-sit down." She instructed and Moremi sat down on the chair next to her bed. He didn't know how she fell pregnant. It was one night, one night that should have never happened and one night he

regretted more than anything. Emily could see the question in his eyes, how it happened. She coughed again and Moremi helped her sit up right and fixed her pillow. She said thank you softly as she looked at him. She could see the gold ring on his finger and it didn't sit well with her that she was about to be labelled a home wrecker. It wasn't supposed to get this far.

"How?" Emily didn't think he was going to understand her logic. Her reasoning at all.

"I was lonely." She said quietly.

"I used protection." He countered.

Emily breathed out heavily which was such a task. Her little baby needed a caring home and who better to call than her father?

"I-I-" She looked into his eyes and could see the shattered look in them. He wanted to understand how. She swallowed.

"I us-used the semen in the co-condom to make myself pregnant." There it was. The truth felt like a ton of bricks thrown into Moremi's face while it felt

cathartic to Emily.

"Y-you what?" Emily just nodded. She was desperate for a child and she never thought she would have to interact with Moremi again after that encounter, hell he wasn't supposed to be in her daughter's life until she got older but life had other plans and here she was. Moremi stood up and covered his face. Wow! He was right, he never got her pregnant. There was no way he would risk his marriage for a bastard child but this ambitious woman had the nerve to make herself pregnant. Emily breathed out.

"I-I was desperate and needed a companion." She said with a raspy voice and Moremi shot her a glare. If looks could kill, he would have killed her the moment he stepped into this room. Emily coughed and placed her hand over her chest. She said a lot of things that took too much of her energy but she had more to say. She weakly picked the glass besides her bed and the glass shook in her hand as she brought it to her lips to wet her parched throat.

She closed her eyes.

"I'm so sorry for imposing her on you." She says and Moremi's anger dissolved. He couldn't fight a woman who was at her lowest. Emily clutched at the sheets and opened her eyes, she looked at Moremi.

"She needs a guardian and I-I ha-" she coughed before she continued.

"Have no one but her. Just her." She said and he could see the look in her eyes. She didn't want to leave her infant. It was going to take time for him to be able to view the child as his but the child was his blood. God was this his karma for that one fuck up? He could already see Suzie packing her bags and walking out with their toddlers. That would destroy him.

"I'm so so sorry." Emily said seeing how his eyes had a pained look. He was most probably thinking of his wife.

She tried to get out of bed but failed. Moremi walked closer and helped her get out of bed.

"I'll introduce you to her." She said and Moremi nodded as he held her steady. She was only a frame of the lush woman she used to be. He sighed and walked slowly out of the bedroom with her to the lounge where the young girl looked at her boss and excused herself. They walked to the cot and Moremi could see the baby who was wide awake. No doubt she was his. She could tell looking at her eyes which looked so much like his mother's.

"That's Alora. Alora Moremi." Emily said. Pride in her voice at the little girl she had carried and birthed. Moremi looked at the girl who was light skinned than all his children, making her the odd one out. Probably because her mother was basically biracial. His large hands picked the baby who gave him a gummy smile. She was innocent. God what was happening here?

"Hello Alora." He said and the girl brought her wet fists to his face.

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03

Moremi looked at Alora then back at Emily as his throat bobbed. Alora was innocent. So innocent and what Emily did was wrong. He didn't know if he could say it was illegal but it was wrong. He never consented to the conception of Alora. Emily sat down on the couch as her knees gave out. Emily released a heavy breath as she looked at the duo.

"I am so-sorry." She said with a dry voice and Moremi didn't know how that sorry could turn back the hands of time. His wife would never accept Alora. He knew that. Tears filled his eyes as he

thought of Susan. He was bringing home evidence of his cheating? And the child was light skinned? His wife was not light skinned. She was a dark skinned woman who was beautiful inside and out and he had spent the first years of their relationship assuring her that she had a beautiful skin tone and she shouldn't even try to buy bleaching creams to lighten her skin and he cheated with a light skinned woman.

"Fuck!" He muttered under his breath and Alora's wide eyes were on him before she giggled and touched his face. She was beautiful but she wasn't a priority right now. His marriage was.

Emily could see how he was fighting his thoughts. Maybe she should have gone to the sperm bank but the assurance of knowing your baby's father in case something happens to you won and she decided to use his semen. Now she knew that even though she created more problems for him, her little girl was going to be okay.

"I'll see what to do." He said finally and Emily nodded. It was better than nothing. She will have to

accept that.

"Thank you." Emily said and Moremi nodded placing Alora down in the cot.

"I'm sorry." Emily said once again and Moremi blew out a breath. It was time to come up with a solution.

"How old is she?" Moremi asked. Alora looked older than three months.

"Five months. She was a premature baby." He nodded.

Hours later, Susan waited in the house. Her husband wasn't home as of yet. She tried calling his phone but it wasn't going through. She placed the phone down with a long sigh. Maybe he had a long day or was working late even though he usually tells her. She couldn't help but wonder if something was wrong.

Moremi rasped on the door, waiting for Tsholofelo's door. The lights went on and the door lock turned before the door opened. Tsholofelo held a knife in her hand before she squinted her eyes and her grip loosened on the knife.

"It's me Tsholo."

"What are you doing here? Go bosigo kana."(It's late.)Moremi rubbed his chin and Tsholo tilted her head. She noticed the fine lines around his eyes and the lost look in his eyes. Was something wrong? Did he fight with Susan? She didn't want to believe he fought with his wife, Susan wasn't the kind to fight and she was too soft if she may say that. No wonder their mother walked all over Susan and could even utter horrible things about Susan who usually sighed and walked away. The fact that the children had Susan's skin tone too was just more ammunition to their mother who always said Susan ruined her grandchildren and asked Moremi why he

didn't marry a light skinned woman instead of-
She stopped her trail of thoughts. The words were harsh anyway. She waited for Moremi to say something.

"Can I come inside?" Moremi asked and Tsholofelo stepped back so her brother can get inside. She walked to the television and placed the knife on the tv stand before she folded her arms and gave her brother all her attention.

"I messed up." Moremi said as he covered his face with his hands and sat down on the couch slowly.

That same night, Emily sat on her bed as the cool wind blew and she could feel her chest closing in on her as she held Alora in her hands. Her little baby.

"I'm s-so sorry I'm leaving." She whispered to the sleeping baby. Her brittle fingers touched those pink sweet lips. She gently placed the baby on the

bed and held onto the headboard to get up slowly. She wanted to look at the stars with her baby and talk to her. She was never going to have such an opportunity ever again. She drew the strength to pick her baby and Alora opened her eyes before she started to cry her lungs out. Emily rubbed her back. "We are going-" she coughed.

"To look at the stars." She took small steps to walk out of the room with her wailing baby. The girl who helped around the house opened the door and she looked at the crying baby. Alora must be so heavy, Emily was barely holding her right.

"Let me help."

"No. I want to do it." The girl sighed and watched Emily walk out slowly.

"Can you open the door for me?" The girl nodded and walked to the front door to unlock it. Emily arrived five minutes later as she stepped outside with a quiet Alora who was quietly observing her now. The cold wind blew across Emily's face and she looked at Alora who was dressed warmly. She

called the girl to take Alora from her hands so she can sit down. She sat down and instructed that Alora be placed in her arms. She looked at her little baby.

"I am so sorry Alora." She coughed before she continued.

"If I knew everything would go wrong all of a sudden, I would have never brought you into this earth." She said. She didn't even know what was wrong with her and the doctors said maybe a severe infection but they couldn't detect a thing. Tears filled her eyes. She had thought of her friend to stay with Alora but she didn't know her friend that long to leave a newborn baby with her. She didn't know how she suddenly fell ill two months after delivering Alora via a c-section what went wrong but there was nothing she could do.

"I guess we're all going to die at some point." The tears fell on Alora's face and Emily sniffed.

"At least I birthed you my little princess. You were always my dream, keep dreaming little one. No one

can stand against your dreams." Emily said and the tears came like a flood and she sobbed looking at her baby who started to cry too sensing her mood.

"I am so sorry." She said. She apologised over and over again before she placed her lips weakly on Alora's forehead and the tears fell on Alora's red face.

"I love you." She said weakly.

The girl watched them on the stoep and she sighed as she walked away, taking out her phone. It rang for a minute before it was answered.

"Is she dead yet? Who is she leaving Alora with? She doesn't have family."

"There has been a new development. Alora has a father." There was a pause.

"What?"

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The girl repeated her words and the woman at the other end of the line sighed.

"I'll pass by tomorrow. I don't know how she hid that from me. Is Alora going to go with the father?"

"Seems so." The woman at the end of the line wanted to punch the wall. This was some reverse uno card right? Everything had been going according to plan and all of a sudden there is a father in the picture? She sighed.

"Any trace of papers around? A Will maybe?" She asked again. She didn't even know Emily's

goddamn lawyer and it was proving to be a harder task no matter how much she was there for Emily.

"No. Nothing."

"Okay. Thank you so much for updating me."

"It's the least I can do after you found me this job." The girl said and the call was cut. She looked at the blank screen before she slid the phone in her back pocket and walked back to the sitting room. Emily was humming to little Alora in between sobs and she walked away. It was too painful to listen to.

Emily kissed Alora again.

"I swear, I'll be the best guardian angel there is. Your conception was not a beautiful one but you are one beautiful girl." She said before catching her breath.

"Alora, I hope the night becomes your friend because that's when dreams come alive." She said and looked up the sky.

Tsholofelo shook her head. She couldn't believe this.

"So you're actually saying you-"

"Ee." Tsholofelo clapped her hands once. Twice.

"You cheated and fathered a child?"

"She made herself pregnant."

"The child is still yours." Moremi covered his face.

"Yes."

"You cheated. On Su? Su wa go go rata o se motho wa sepe when she was just a secretary, Su who is still with you regardless of the insults that are hurled her way every time she is at her in-law's place? Su who was stressed during the last pregnancy and you cheated on her that time?"

Tsholofelo asked.

"I-I don't know how to explain myself. I don't know how to apologise to Susan. She'll never forgive me."

"I encourage her not to. Susan has been nothing but a good wife to you. How would you feel if she fell

pregnant with another man's baby?" Moremi fisted his hands. He would obviously kill the man she cheated with.

"You see? You're already angry and she hasn't even cheated yet. You are on your own." Tsholofelo said. Moremi begged her with his eyes.

"I can't afford to lose Susan. I am begging you Tsholofelo. Just this one favour. Ke a go kopa nna." Tsholofelo reluctantly looked at him.

"Please, at least while I find a way to tell her and to try and deal with whatever punishment that's going to come my way." He said.

Tsholofelo fixed the doek on her head and let out a sigh. It felt wrong to do this.

"I can't tell the family, mother will gloat in Susan's face and hurt her. I don't want to hurt Susan." He said and Tsholofelo could hear the desperation in her brother's voice. He loved his wife but cheating was just, unforgivable in her books anyway.

"Okay."

"Tanki. Thank you so much. It means a lot to me. I promise, I'll talk to Susan."

"You better."

"Can this stay between us for now?"

"Of course."

"Thank you. I have to go home now, she is probably worried about me." The two siblings stood up and Tsholofelo walked her brother to the door. He gave her a grateful look as Tsholo opened the door and he walked out. Tsholofelo closed the door and locked it before she sighed.

Susan pulled her gown and tied it tighter as she finally started switching off the house lights. She heard the car engine outside and paused before she continued with her task. The car door closed just as she walked to the bedroom. He didn't bother picking

up her phone calls or even sending a text message. She switched off the bedroom light as well and walked to the bed where she got undercovers.

Moremi used his spare key to unlock the house, she was probably pissed off right now. The kids were asleep, he was sure of that but she must be angry right now. He pushed the door open and switched on the light as he stepped inside the house. He closed the door, locked it and switched off the light again. Using this as his chance to navigate to the bedroom in the dark. He switched on the lights there and he placed his bag down before he undid his tie.

"Hi Mrs Moremi." He said and Susan didn't turn. She just remained in the blankets and Moremi had to act normal or else his wife was going to ask questions.

"I was at work and there was a lot to do. I'm sorry I didn't return your calls or send a text telling you I'll be home late." He said as he unbuckled his pants and they fell to his feet. He groaned. He should have removed his shoes first, Moremi awkwardly

walked to the bed and sat down to remove his shoes.

"Su, you're not asleep. I saw you switch off the lights." He continued and he got no response. He finished getting undressed and he slid in besides her. He touched her waist and she removed his hands. He laughed.

"You're not asleep. Look at me." He asked her and she remained in her position. He held her waist and picked her so she was on top of him.

"Mrs Moremi, look at me." She tightly shut her eyes and he laughed some more.

"Themma Susan, I'm sorry I came home late." He said and kissed her cheek. He could see she was blushing even though he couldn't see any colour on her cheeks. She finally opened her eyes.

"It shouldn't happen again." She said and he nodded.

"Ee mma. It won't happen again. Ever." He moved his hands up and down her waist and grinned against her lips. He opened his mouth to enclose her lips in a kiss but she moved her head.

"Not so fast. You have to be punished." She said and he looked at her, moving his hand down to squeeze her butt.

"Ao Suzie mma?"

"Goodnight Moremi." She rolled to her side and she gave him her back as she moved closer. Moremi held her. He'll take that. How could he tell her when she loved him like this? How could he break his beloved's heart with his selfish ways?"

The following morning at Emily's house, the house helper fed Alora who woke up a happy baby. The little girl was so beautiful and one could tell she was going to be the centre of attention. The house helper went to check on Emily who was awake but staring at the ceiling. Emily turned to face her house helper and tried to smile, her eyes were filled with despair.

"Is this some form of punishment?" Emily asked her house helper.

"I don't think it's punishment."

"The doctors don't know what's wrong. I don't know what's wrong. Ke a momonega hela ke bopame."(I'm fading away and losing weight) The house helper looked at her boss. She shook her head.

"You'll get better. For Alora. She only has you."

Emily's eyes filled with tears.

"Can I see her? I want her near me." The girl nodded and walked out of the room to go pick Alora. Emily coughed and coughed before she laid her head on her pillow. She closed her eyes temporarily, to ease the tension. She opened her eyes when she heard Alora's gibberish. Her heart did a back flip. Alora was her world now and she didn't know how long Moremi is going to take to think about it.

Outside, Lina's car parked and she placed her head

on the steering wheel. She was going to have to pretend when she gets there. Same goes for when she visits her sister, she has to pretend to like that she is married with a happy family and a loving husband. She wanted to gag. When will it be her turn? She asked herself everyday but she had started to figure out that if you want something, you go for it. Full force and damn the consequences or should she rather collateral damage. She was close to getting what she wanted and she had hoped that it worked faster and now there was a new factor to consider. Great! The witch doctor never told her about that other factor. She sighed and picked up the yoghurt. She opened it and then her compartment to take out the powder in the small plastic. She poured it inside and closed it. She is here to take care of a dear friend.

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Lina knocked on the door with plastics and the house help opened the door.

"Hi. Where is she? Is Alora okay?"

"She is in the bedroom with Alora." The house helper said and Lina stepped inside the house. She looked around and saw the toys on the floor. Soon. She said ti herself and she walked to the bedroom with the plastics in hand. She lightly knocked on the open door and she smiled seeing Emily with the cutest baby she has ever seen.

"Hi Em, how are you?" She asked and Emily gave her a genuine smile.

"Still weak but we keep fighting." Lina nodded and

placed the plastics down to sit on the side of the bed. She fixed Emily's pillow as she looked at Alora who gave a gummy grin. That baby was beautiful.

"Did the doctors find anything?" She asked.

"They can't find anything to be honest." Lina let out a fake sigh.

"I'm so sorry that this is happening to you. You have a lot to live for, including this little cutie." She said as she touched Alora's cheek and Emily gave a sad smile.

"I know. I-I maybe it's fate."

"Have you tried the spiritual route?" She asked. Testing the waters to see if Emily might be onto her.

"I don't believe in that bogus because it makes people believe in things that do not exist to be honest."

"I see." She said and she took out the yoghurt from the plastic. She picked the teaspoon from the table besides the bed and looked at Emily.

"I brought yoghurt and fruits. Is it okay?"

"Thank you so much." Emily said and Lina nodded with a smile. She opened the yoghurt as Emily shifted her attention to Alora. She mixed the yoghurt and she smiled at Emily.

"Should I feed you?" Emily gave out a dry chuckle before she coughed.

"I'll do it myself." Lina mixed the yoghurt and placed it on the table. She got on her feet and fixed Emily's pillow so she could sit up right.

"Can I hold her?" Emily nodded and Lina picked up Alora. She looked at the cute baby.

"Hey baby Alora." She said softly and the baby scrunched her nose before she started crying. Lina tried to hush Alora as Emily took one spoonful and placed the spoon back.

"Sssh it's okay." Lina cooed but Alora cried till she went red still not stopping.

"Bring he-her." Lina sighed as Emily opened her skeletal like arms and she put Alora in her arms. Emily bit her cheek as she placed her baby on her lap and she went silent immediately. Lina humphed.

Why was the child acting up? She was going to take the baby anyway once Emily dies.

Emily smiled and kissed Alora's forehead while wiping her cheeks. Alora touched her mother's face and giggled as if she wasn't crying a few minutes ago.

"She doesn't like being touched by other people." Emily said.

"I understand." Lina said. She didn't understand. The child was acting up but not to worry.

"I was just checking up on you. I have to go back to work."

"Th-thank you so much Lina. It means a lot." Lina nodded with a smile.

"Can't wait to see you at work Em." She said before she walked out and Emily looked at Alora. She didn't cry like this when Moremi held her. Emily kissed Alora's face before she picked the yoghurt to try and resume her eating.

At Susan's house, she played with the kids as Lorato did the laundry. After all it was her day off even though her husband was not off. Her phone rang and she watched her sister's name flash on the screen. It took her energy to talk to Lina because it was either she was throwing subtle subs at her or plainly telling her that men disappoint. She picked up the phone.

"Hello Lina."

"Hello nkgonne. I was just checking up on you and wondering if we can do lunch."

"I am spending the day with the kids."

"Well you stay with them everyday, I'll book a table for us and you can show up." Susan sighed.

"Lina if you want lunch, why don't you come over? Lorato can make lunch and we spend time together."

"Ng ng. I can afford to pay for lunch at a restaurant

Susan, I won't subject myself to lunch yeo when I have the money." Susan sighed.

"And I can't haphazardly waste money." Lina shook her head.

"I'll pay ee, why marry a man and give him a lot of kids if paying for a mere lunch seems like a task?"

"I don't want your lunch if e tla ka tshele Lina."

"Sorry. I'm sorry. I'll send you the location. Bye."

"Bye." Susan hung up and looked at Rebantle, her three year old daughter and smiled. She hoped she wasn't going to be bullied because of her skin colour, she was dark but not too dark like her so it was better.

"Hey little Reba.." she said and tickled Rebantle who laughed out loud. Rebantle's younger brother crawled closer and he held Rebantle's foot which was a bit big for his small infant hands.

"Mooketsi ae..." he grinned revealing his front tooth and she smiled. Their older brother Bokamoso was busy with his toy cars in the room all the three

children shared.

"Mama?"

"Ma?" She had stopped tickling Rebantle who was now catching her breath.

"Ka o lata."(I love you)

"I love you too baby." She smiled before she got up. She should get ready for the lunch. She sighed. She didn't want her mother to be on her case about how she has abandoned her younger sister and being asked if she is jealous that her sister is more educated and has a higher paying job.

Around lunchtime, Susan walked inside the fancy restaurant wearing a white dress that was a contrast to her skin tone. She spotted Lina who waved her hand and she walked to her. Lina smiled as Susan sat down.

"That dress doesn't look that good." Susan's smile dropped and she sighed as she sat down.

"Hello Lina, how have you been?"

"I'm okay. How are your kids?"

"Growing Lina, growing." Lina nodded as the waiter came with the menu and Susan's eyes widened as she looked at the menu.

"I can't afford this..."

"I'll pay Su, relax and order anything on the menu." Susan gave her a wary look. She can't make her sister pay for this. She tried to look for the cheapest item she can afford but it was worth her week's salary. She can't be spending such a bizarre amount when she has kids.

Lina watched her sister, it was always fun seeing her squirm over prices she can't afford and trying to look for the cheapest thing to buy. Susan lifted her head and her large forehead shined. Lina was glad that the genes that made Susan that dark skipped her, what did Moremi see in Susan? Oh Moremi wasn't exactly rich so like poles attract. She guessed.

"I'll have water." Susan finally said and Lina burst

out laughing.

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Susan placed the menu down, embarrassed. Lina didn't have to invite her to an expensive diner.

"Just order anything you want. I'll pay." Lina said and Susan sighed.

"It's a lot."

"I don't mind. Not at all." Susan reluctantly picked the menu and she tried to find something cheaper

than the rest. She looked at Lina who was snapping her fingers to call the waiter to come take their orders. Lina turned to face Susan.

"Have you made your decision yet?" Susan shook her head and Lina placed the menu down.

"I'll have French pork rillettes for my starters. Susan, pick a starter." Susan's eyes skitted over the menu before she chose. She had never had most of the meals on this menu.

"Cheese broccoli soup." The waiter took the order and looked at the ladies to make sure that was all. Lina nodded and dismissed him. The waiter walked away and Susan rubbed her palms on her dress.

"How is everything? Work?"

"Work is good. I might get a promotion soon. How long are you intending on being a secretary?" She asked Susan and Susan sighed.

"It pays well."

"Does it? Are you convincing me or yourself Susan?" Lina asked and Susan closed her eyes for a brief

second before she opened them.

"It does. I can pay my bills and we can buy food as well as pay our helper."

Lina chuckled.

"You're convincing yourself sweetheart. Why let your husband make you pregnant this much when your joint income is not even enough?" Lina asked.

"Lina, our household finances are not your business." Susan said and Lina leaned back and thoughtfully looked at her sister.

"When was the last time you bought yourself clothes? Your hair is old and you look so old Susan it's not a pretty sight." Susan consciously touched her hair. It had to survive one more week.

"Anyways you do you, marry poor and still remain in poverty." Lina said and she glanced at her phone.

"But if you need anything including money, I'm here to help."

"We're okay and can we drop this subject?"

"Sure."

"Have you thought of having kids?" Susan asked and she saw Lina pause, her eyes hardening and then a smile on her face.

"I don't want kids."

"Oh."

"I'm built different Susan, I am not that desperate to have kids with just anyone including a struggling man who won't provide for the kids as efficiently as he should."

"Ok."

"But you have kids so that should be enough that I have nephews and a niece. Why do you never let them visit me?"

"Your busy schedule shouldn't be interrupted by kids, it's okay." Susan said. Ten minutes later, their meals came and Susan looked at the food while Lina smiled.

"Go ahead and eat, I have tried that soup before. I didn't like it but you might like it."

"O sure?"

"Everyone has different taste buds. You won't know unless you try it. Nja Susan." Susan picked a spoon and it was the wrong one. Lina shook her head. How was Susan going to eat her other meals when she used the wrong spoon?

At Emily's house, Emily smiled as she saw Moremi walk inside her room. She had gotten weaker. She looked at him.

"Hi."

"Hi. I'll take her." Emily's eyes lit up.

"You will?" Moremi sighed.

"I can't ignore my own blood regardless of how she was conceived." Emily's eyes filled with tears as she looked at Alora. She kissed Alora's cheek and forehead then her head.

"Thank you." She coughed before she looked at him.

"I'll have her bags packed. All of her stuff." She said.

"I want to take her right now." Emily's smile faded. She wanted to say no but she is getting weaker by the day, it was better Alora adjusts to a new environment right?

"So soon?"

"I just wanted to get everything over and done with."

"Okay." She touched Alora's cheeks.

"I'll ask my Nelly to pack her stuff." Moremi nodded and he walked closer as Emily coughed before she called Nelly. Nelly, the house help walked in and saw Alora's father. She will update Lina later tonight.

"Can you pack Alora's stuff?" Nelly frowned but quickly plastered a smile.

"Of course." She walked out and Emily kissed Alora. Whispering stuff in her ear.

"Uhm can you get that suitcase for me?" She asked. Her sudden sickness had made her prepare for her daughter's future. She started coughing all over again and it took a few minutes till she was okay.

Her eyes were teary and she touched her throat. Moremi put the suitcase down and Emily gave a weak smile.

"Go with it. It-" she rubbed her chest.

"Has some of her stuff, documents for stuff. My other copies are at the lawyer's office." Moremi looked at Emily. She had really prepared for her death, he knew he wasn't rich but the fact that Emily had material things and he had been looking for a quick f*ck. No wonder she called him while she was on her deathbed. She didn't need him in raising their daughter.

"I'm sorry." She said again to Moremi before she looked at her child. She will miss her. Dearly.

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[06/02, 19:33] : REBORN

07

Moremi parked his car outside his sister's yard and walked to the back to open the door. Alora had been peaceful on her way here and he was wondering if it was because she could sense or what because Susan had once said babies sense emotions so he guessed it was true for Alora. He unbuckled her baby seat. The fact that Emily had went all out for this baby and bought her things that even he couldn't afford for his children and she thought it would be a good idea to use his sperms. He sighed and held the five month old in his arms and walked to the door. He knocked on the door and Tsholofelo opened. She gasped seeing the child. She looked back at Moremi.

"Is this her?" Moremi nodded and Tsholofelo looked at the light skinned baby. She touched her cheek

and looked at the band on her hair. She was so pretty.

"Ngwana o montle jang."(she is such a beauty) Tsholo said as she smiled at the baby. Something stuck in Moremi's throat. His sister never had that reaction when he saw his daughter Rebantle. She had said she is a beautiful baby but it had lacked this much enthusiasm. He licked his lips as she opened the door wider and he stepped inside.

"I'll tell Susan." Tsholo nodded and focused on Alora who was curiously looking at her.

"Who did you say her mother was? O go direts e ngwana o montle jang Moremi."

"Thanks."

"Let me help you with her." He gave her the baby and he walked back to the car to get Alora's many baby bags. Tsholofelo sat on the couch and she looked at Alora.

"Mma lekgoa batho!" She smiled and touched her chubby cheeks. It took Moremi ten minutes to place everything Alora owns in his sister's bedroom. He

took the suitcase Emily gave him and put it there. It had a code and he wasn't sure if he should give his sister the code. Tsholofelo stood by the door and looked at the suitcase.

"Whose suitcase is that?"

"Alora's."

"It looks like those ones from films which people put numbers to open them."

"It is." Tsholofelo nodded. He said and he looked at Alora.

"I'll budget and give you P500 or P600 a month." Tsholofelo nodded. It took more to raise a baby but he had brought Alora's stuff from the unopened milk tins to the unopened diapers and the car seat. She will have to sleep with the baby on her bed but it was a small price to pay.

"You know what it entails to raise a child but for now it's okay." Moremi nodded. Emily had extra of everything, he could tell Alora was her world yet in his, she was more of a weapon to destroy his marriage.

He slid his hands in his formal pants and nodded. He can work hard for that promotion and maybe just maybe make enough money for his family to move out of that house and then bring up Alora's existence.

"I have to go back to work. Thank you so much Tsholo." Tsholo nodded and Moremi flashed a smile at Alora before he walked out. Tsholofelo looked at Alora. She practiced what she was going to say, she had adopted her friend's baby. That was the story. No one was this light in the family so it was going to be easy.

"Hi Alora, should I call you Rora? O montle gore nnana. Wena wa go re tsenya stress ka bontle jwa gago."(You're so beautiful baby. You're going to stress us with your beauty.) She heard the engine and smiled.

"I'm aunt Tsholo, I'll stay with you while your father sorts out his issues and hopefully you' meet your step mother and siblings. Your stepmother is a nice woman." Tsholofelo said. Alora started crying and she held her while patting her back.

"There, there. Do you need a nappy change? Or food? Let's try a diaper change first."

At the fine dining restaurant, the bill came and Lina looked at the total before she looked at her sister who was uneasy. She could tell from the way she looked around then she smiled looking at her.

"Su, relax. I said I'll pay." She looked at the waiter to bring the swiping machine so she can pay off their meals.

"What is the total?"

Lina looked at the bill again.

"1.5 Susan. Relax, it's nothing." Susan's eyes popped. That was a lot to be wasted on food for a day. With the money she could fill her tank for the month, pay Lorato for her services and maybe buy icecream for the kids to share. It would be enough for at least some of their costs. The waiter came

and Lina swiped her card before she pressed her card pin. The transaction went through and she shooed the waiter away. Susan looked at the time.

"I think I have to go." Lina stood on her feet and went to hug her sister.

"Okay. We'll talk and I loved spending time with you."

"Me too."

"Mother would be proud we are getting along." Lina said and Susan chuckled.

"We have been getting along mme kana." She said and Lina chortled.

"True. Let me not keep you here." She broke the hug and Susan smiled before she walked out, the guilt on the amount of money spent today eating her up. She was coming up with ways on how to pay her sister back, maybe pay her half of the money.

Lina watched her sister walk out before she leaned back. Why was she jealous of a sister who was struggling with her husband? They had kids and she

was envious of that. She sighed. She was lying to herself, she wanted a husband too and kids but she couldn't have kids. She really couldn't and the men always left after a week. Saying she was too possessive and crazy for them. She sighed. At least if Emily could leave Alora and she will have a mini little best friend. That was the purpose of all her efforts. She didn't want Emily's money. Just the beautiful little baby girl who caught her attention when she was a month old and Emily told her she could visit. She smiled. She had already placed orders on baby stuff, the adoption process was too long for her liking and she was a busy woman it was not going to be granted but a child whom she is made a legal guardian of was easier. She had thought about this for weeks before she went ahead with it. Besides Emily had no other family to the point of saying she was really important. She smiled. She was going to be a mommy.

At Moremi's office, he took out a pen and paper and just for reference he wrote down his property. The little he owned and divided it among his four children and wife. He didn't have much to begin with. He stopped writing. It was useless. He put that rough draft in between a diary he used for his schedule. A house and a car plus a small moraka wasn't a lot of property. He struggled for those and it wasn't much. He looked at his ring again. The gold band he wore everyday to show he was a married man yet he had a child outside marriage. He closed his eyes and leaned back. He will tell Susan. He will. He told himself.

At Emily's house, she coughed more than usual, coughing out blood which hasn't happened in weeks. Nelly was by her side with water and painkillers. Emily's eyes watered. She didn't want to fight. Alora was safe and she didn't want to fight.

"N-Nelly m-my bag." She said and Nelly rushed to get her bag.

"Op-open it." Another coughing fit hit her and she wanted to cry in pain. Nelly did so, her boss seemed worse after Lina left. Nelly had one job and that was reporting to Lina about Ms Emily's state of health and Alora's wellbeing. That was it.

"Money. Take..." Another cough.

"Take money." Emily took out the purse and she found a lot of P200 notes in there.

"Wh-when I die..." she coughed again. It seemed so painful and Nelly's eyes filled with tears.

"You're not dying."

"I am Emily. Cremate me..tell..."

"Tell them I want to be cremated." Emily shook her head.

"Alora. Ms what about Alora?"

"She's okay." Emily stopped talking as she coughed and looked down. Her head hurt and ached so bad. It was actually worse than on other days.

"Than-thank you for being with me on my last days."
She said and she forced a smile. Nelly wiped her
tears and walked to the bed to hug Emily.

"You'll be okay. J ust have hope." Emily just nodded.

"Sleep..."

"Of course." Nelly fixed the bed and she helped
Emily lay her head down. Emily knew that she told
Moremi what there is to know about Alora and
Alora's inheritance.

"Th-thank you." Emily said and Nelly nodded. She
got up and walked out. Emily closed her eyes, her
chest going up and down. She wanted peace. J ust
peace. She said again and again till she couldn't
hear her own thoughts and she went still.

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SIX MONTHS LATER

[06/02, 19:33] : REBORN

08

Susan's eyes filled with tears as she looked at the letter on the boardroom table. Her boss gave her a sympathetic look.

"We have no choice Mrs Moremi, the company has been operating at a loss and we have to let some employees go." She bit her lower lip and nodded. What was she going to do with three kids? Three kids? She wasn't alone yes, she had her husband but then they would have to let Lorato go as well.

"We have recommended you to other companies since your work ethic is something to be proud of."

"I understand." She said. She took a deep breath and she picked the termination letter. She stood up

and ran held it tightly in her sweaty palms, not allowing herself to breakdown at work. So today might has well been her very last day.

"You'll get your pay for the days you worked. That is all the company can afford." She nodded. She knew what she had been getting into working for a small company. Such was bound to happen.

"I loved working in your company and thank you for hiring me." The boss nodded. Knowing he had ten more employees to do the very same thing to. Knowing he was taking their source of income. He released a sigh as Susan walked out and he had his PA call the next employee who was terminated.

Susan forced herself to work to the office she shared with four other ladies. Time to pack her things and go. She didn't even need a big box.

At Moremi's office, his phone started ringing and he saw Tsholofelo's name flash. He wanted to ignore her call, she was going to say the same thing she always said whenever she called. He took a deep breath before he picked the call.

"Hello?"

"Moremi, have you told Sue yet? Rora is almost a year old and you haven't told your wife about her. What are your intentions? If you don't tell Su I'll tell her. You can't keep a whole human child a secret and nna yaanong sephiri sa gago sa nkimela rra." Moremi swallowed.

"I'll t-"

"If you don't tell her I will. Yoy cheated and you have to own up to your mistakes. I know Su met Alora thinking she is mine but own up to the truth, you're old and you have to deal with the consequences of your actions." Moremi rubbed his face.

"I'll tell her. Today."

"Please, this child needs a family and I am not her mother, she is my niece but she is about to speak

and very soon she'll start calling me mama. You rarely visit your own child. Just send money and you think it's enough, she also deserves the love you give your other children." Moremi rubbed his chin.

"I hear you."

"Good. Bye." Tsholofelo hung up and he leaned back. He loosened his tie, his bodu getting hot all over. He tried to tell himself it will be okay but he was about to break Susan. He swallowed. He took his phone and dialed Susan's number. The phone started ringing and wiped his forehead, his heart beating fast as he waited for her to answer. She answered after a few seconds.

"Hello.."

"Hi my love. I wanted us to talk about something tonight at home." There was silence.

"I agree. We do need to talk." She replied and his heart rate sky rocketed. Did she know? Did Tsholofelo tell her? Why was she agreeing so easily.

"Tonight at home then. Bye bye love." Susan said

and hung up.

Moremi rubbed his head as the call cut. He unbuttoned the first two buttons of his shirt.

Lina closed the laptop. How did this happen? All of a sudden Emily gave Alora her father and she died? Her plans backfired. Badly for that matter. Who was Alora's father? She didn't even know.

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[06/02, 19:33] : REBORN

Moremi watched time move as swiftly as the wind. Why was time rushing, he had delayed this and he closed his eyes, imagining his wife crying. He hurt her and had proof. How cruel was he? His phone rang, pulling him away from his thoughts. He answered his mother's call.

"Hello.."

"Moremi, you didn't send money dikgwedi tse dingwe." Moremi sighed. His hands were tied. He had four kids, he couldn't afford to take care of his mother and his two sisters and their kids who lived on his money.

"I was using it."

"That you forgot about your mother and siblings. Is it that burnt charcoal refusing with your money?"

"Mama ke kopa le buise mosadi wame sentle. And no it's not her, I have my own priorities. If you are

going to insult my wife you shouldn't call me, I've had it with your insults because my wife has done nothing but respect you. Bye."

He cut the line before his mother could respond. He didn't need any more stress adding onto the stress he had. He rubbed his temples. He checked the time again and leaned back, his heart telling him to not tell Susan. He didn't want to hurt his wife. Tears filled his eyes and he rubbed them as pain choked him. What had he been thinking? He didn't know to be honest.

Susan sat on her bed at home. She was waiting for her husband to tell her what he wanted them to talk about before she drops the bombshell about her sudden termination at work. She rubbed her tears, she didn't want to break down, her kids might walk in and Bokamoso might walk in. He was about to start standard one soon. This was the worst time to

be unemployed. Should she ask Lina to help her look for a job? Lina knew people. She picked her phone and moved from the bed to sit on the floor against the bed still in her formal wear.

The phone rang and she waited for Lina to answer.

"Hello Lina?" She said at the other end of the line.

"Hi sis. How are you?" There was silence on Susan's end.

"Not so good. I never do this and I hope I won't be inconveniencing you."

"You can never inconvenience me Su." Susan swallowed her pride, Moremi's income alone won't be able to maintain their household.

"I-I lost my job today and I am looking for employment." There was silence.

"Okay. I'll see what to do. Send your CV and everything."

"Just like that?" Susan asked.

"Yes. I think by the end of the week you will have something." Relief washed over Susan's features

before she was guilt ridden. But then there were people who were going to apply for the job and they wouldn't get it because she had been favoured.

"It's okay if you can't."

"Su, I'll find something for you. Wena send your CV hela o tla bona dilo di itobetsa."(You'll see things working out.)

Susan bit her lower lip, there was no need to stress Moremi now. She should wait on Lina to give her feedback before she breaks the news that she had been retrenched.

"Su I have to go. Mama wa letsa."(mom is calling)

"Bye." Susan hung up and bit her lower lip. Where was Moremi? She rubbed her chest and smiled. Lina was serious?

Lina answered her mother's call as she opened her laptop to see what posts were available in the

company she worked in.

"Hello Katalina..." Lina rolled her eyes.

"Mom Lina is fine, I sent money yesterday for all your bills."

"I am not calling about money Katalina, you are getting old." Lina chortled.

"Not this marriage talk again. And I am not old."

"You'll be lonely and bitter, your agemates have stable homes and families. Look at your sister."

"Ng ng. I would rather remain single and alone than marry a man who can't provide and is dirt poor."

"You also started from the bottom."

Lina shrugged.

"And I worked hard, Moremi depended on Su at some point. Le ha Su e se motho wa sepe, Moremi ene ke mowa hela and Su allows his equally poor family to mistreat her. Love ga ya nna sentle."

"Katalina, you are being bitter." Lina sighed.

"Can we drop this marriage talk and children talk?"

"But you know I have a point. Your cousin is getting married an-"

"I'll be busy on the day."

"Katalina!"

"I am a busy woman. Other family members are there."

"Okay. Bye Katalina." The call cut and Lina sighed as she leaned back on her chair.

Moremi, who had finally gained some liquid courage to go home and face the music, stood up from his chair. He got his work bag and his phone. Susan must be cooking right now in that white apron he gifted her. His heart broke. He walked out of the office. In minutes he was at the parking lot, his mind coming up with various scenarios that were likely to take place after his untimely confession. He didn't have a good feeling about

today or was it the anxiety talking?

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[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

10

Moremi drove at a slow pace as his thoughts took over. He was so scared about Susan's reaction as he drove through the heavy Gaborone traffic. In his case, his mind wandered off for the millionth time ever since he said he will talk to Susan. What if Tsholofelo already got to Susan and she was waiting for him so she could divorce him? That filled him with so much dread and he had to fight

his thoughts. Susan loved him, she would never divorce him. Not by a long shot. Yes she was going to be angry but a divorce was too drastic. The traffic lights went green and since he was slow, cars hooted and he panicked. Instead of taking the curve, he drove straight ahead and collided with an oncoming car. His last thoughts were of Susan as his body moved forward as he collided with the broken glass and hit the steering wheel with sheer force then backward and his body shot out of broken window.

On the road cars stopped moving. This happened so fast and they didn't expect it as his body landed on the side of the road. They heard the bones break and some held their hearts. Just like that, Gaborone's late afternoon traffic turned into a tragedy. They weren't even sure if he was alive or not because the way his car spit him out was too violent. Some dialed the police while some dialed paramedics.

Lina looked at her laptop and opened Susan's CV. It was good. Well she can't exactly complain since Susan knowing that people went for courses like Accounting, Medicine and Engineering in the country, she went for a silly little course like Journalism. It was a relevantly new course and the country had few newspapers but still, it was silly. She sighed and picked up the landline. She dialed a number and it rang for a few minutes before it was answered.

"Hello."

"Hi, I saw your opening for a new PA. I have a recommendation. Just a recommendation."

"Okay. Send the person's CV and I'll get back to you."

"Thank you." She sent the CV and closed her laptop. She leaned back and sighed.

"The things I do for you Su."

At home, Susan checked the time. There was still no sign of Moremi. She gnawed on her bottom lip as she sat on the bed. That same bad feeling she had when the day started was back again and she wanted to ignore it because already something bad happened. She lost her job today, what more can go wrong in her life? He is probably working late and they will talk in bed when he arrives. She stood on her feet and walked out to check on her kids.

Two hours elapsed and she was now dialing his phone but it wasn't going through. She sat on the couch and sent a message. She worried a lot, especially about the people she cares about. She leaned back on the couch when she heard a car outside. She walked to the window and instead she saw two police officers inside a police van. What's going on?

She opened the door just as the men stepped out of the car and opened the rusty gate. The police officers saw her standing there in a black dress, the shorter one nudged at the taller one. She was like a Nubian beauty or something, her dark skin looked kind of exotic. They cleared their throats.

"Mrs Moremi?"

"Yes.."

They looked at each other before the tall one got close.

"I think you might want to sit down for this Mrs Moremi." The air around her shifted and she nodded as she opened the door wider to let them inside. She closed the door as soon as they were inside.

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[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

11

Inside the house, Lorato looked at the uniformed men before Susan gave her a quiet look to excuse them. Lorato greeted before she went to her small bedroom inside the house. Susan placed her hands that only had a gold band on her ring finger as she faced the police officers. She was hoping it was nothing serious but she was not God so she couldn't know.

"Mrs Moremi, we hate to be bearers of bad news..." The shorter police man paused as Susan tapped her thigh with her finger. Bad news? What could be bad enough to make this day worse? She looked at her hands before she forced herself to look at the police officers.

"I'm listening."

"Today, this late afternoon an accident took place." Now that sent warning bells to Susan's mind. An accident? Today? Late afternoon? Her eyes fled to the wall clock as she held back tears. She looked at the police men and she could see the pity in their eyes. Why were they pitying her? Why? She didn't need their pity. Maybe the accident was nothing.

"Mr Moremi got into an accident."

Susan touched her heart as she opened her mouth but no words came out.

"He was alive and just bleeding profusely when the paramedics arrived. Unfortunately he died twenty minutes after arriving in the hospital."

"Bommaaaaaa weeeee!" She screamed as tears quickly filled her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. She fell to her knees in agony. They were lying. She spoke to her husband around lunch time and he had said he was on his way. They were lying to her.

The two police officers looked at one another as the lady who left them a few minutes ago came into the

small sitting room and found Mrs Moremi on the floor.

Lorato bent down and she touched her boss's shoulder as she cried out loud to the point of the two older kids coming out to see what was wrong. Lorato shooed them away and looked at the police officers.

The taller one removed his police cap and lowered his head. It was painful to deliver such news but they needed Mrs Moremi to identify the body, maybe they got the wrong household and they were making her agonize over something that doesn't concern her.

"Mrs Moremi, we understand your distress but you need to come with us to identify the body."

A chill ran down Lorato's spine. Body? Her eyes widened as realisation set in and she now could understand her employer's agony.

"He's alive!" Susan half yelled as she lifted her teary eyes. Moremi wasn't dead. They were playing with her. It was a joke. A big joke.

Lina dialed Nelly who answered immediately.

"Nelly wa re who is Alora's father?" There was silence.

"Nelly I have asked this question for months, it's not as if I want Emily's houses. I do not care about that. Not at all. Who is Alora's father?"

"I forgot."

"Maaka. You're lying to me, how much do you want ee? It's not as if you have a job anyway."

"Three thousand."

"For a fucking name? You have got to be fucking kidding me Nelly."

"Goodbye Li-"

"Okay fine. Fine. I'll give you the three thousand. Who is he?"

Nelly breathed in and out. Hopefully Lina didn't know the man and how can she get a baby from it's legal guardian? It's impossible.

"Moremi."

"Hng? Just that?"

"Moremi Moremi. That's his name." Lina paused. Wait a damn minute. Wait a fucking damn minute.

"Moremi Moremi?" She asked slowly.

"Are you sure?"

"Ee mma. When are you giving me the money?"

"Tomorrow morning. You're sure sure?"

"Very. He is tall, has a connecting beard with a faint scar on his cheek, he has a light brown complexion." Nelly added and Lina's eyes widened. She was describing her brother-in-law to the T.

"You'll get your money. Bye." Katalina hung up and bit her lower lip. Aha! Susan's marriage is not so perfect after all. He cheated and fathered a child? Does Susan know? Maybe she can blackmail him into giving her Alora because if Susan knew she

ould be taking care of that cute baby or better yet despising Alora because she is nothing like her charcoal like biological kids. She laughed. Okay blackmail will work on Moremi, maybe offer money. The man is poor anyway. She turned in her office chair with a huge grin on her face as she devised a plan.

At the hospital, a distraught Susan walked behind the police officers as a nurse led them to a room. They were lying. Her husband was still alive. Very much alive and he was on his way back home from work. They stopped at a door and the police officers stopped outside. The nurse opened the door and prompted Susan to get inside. Susan held herself rigid as she walked inside. The nurse closed the door and she could see the white sheet covering the body on the bed. Her tears were quick to spring out as she shook her head, taking in that form she

recognised.

"Nononono!" She cried out quickly, not wanting to believe what her eyes were seeing. They walked closer to the body and the nurse gave her a sympathetic look. Death always broke even the strongest of people and she wasn't sure if the lady would survive this. She looked at Susan once more before she removed the sheet. Susan paled and stood there in horror as her knees failed her and she wished she wasn't seeing this.

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[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

At the hospital, the nurse held Susan steadily to keep her from falling down and hitting the floor.

“Not my husband!” She wailed as her cries tore through the room where the body was kept. Another nurse walked through and saw the scene. It was not always easy to break down the news let alone allow the family to identify a body after an accident. The nurse who held Susan led her out as the other one walked to the corpse to cover it. It should be taken to the cold room and the family will have to pick a mortuary where the body will go. As health care workers, they saw this everyday and had grown numb to it. It was part of their job and they had to do it somehow. The nurse led a crying Susan to the benches as she broke down crying into her hands as soon as the nurse let her go.

“We were fine you know?” Susan says mid tears.

“A normal day today an-“ she covered her face and cried some more. People stared at her and wondered why she was crying this much. It was at

this point Susan knew her life has irrevocably changed.

Lina laughed as she sat on the couch, that poor useless man had the audacity to even cheat? She didn't know he had it in him. She cracked up once again knowing it was going to be easy to get Aurora because it looks like Susan didn't know. She sipped on her orange juice and placed the glass down. Her plan was going to be fool proof. Nelly was the witness, she was going to drag Nelly from whatever hole she was in to identify if she was talking about the Moremi she knew as her brother in law. Her phone rang and she saw the caller. Susan. She chuckled. Poor Susie. Her picture perfect home is not so picture perfect after all.

“Hello Su.” She answered with a happy voice. There was silence and she frowned.

“Su, hello...”

“Gone, he’s gone Lina.” Susan said as she tried to hold back her tears.

“Stop speaking in riddles Susan.”

“Mo-“ Susan broke down crying and Lina moved the phone away from her ear. She wasn’t going to listen to Susan crying really. She did know why Susan was even crying.

“Susan themma a ko o bue.”(please speak up!)

“Moremi is gone! He is dead!” She screamed and Lina paused. Wait. She missed a chapter somehow. What did she mean gone? There were a few missing chapters in this story.

“What do you mean Su? He killed himself?” Lina asked. That was the reasonable explanation since he had a secret and secrets are heavy.

“What? How could you even think of that?” Susan exclaimed mid tears. She has never heard Susan that heart wrenched.

“A car accident! He died today in his way home!” Susan teared up again and Lina breathed out.

“Calm down Susie, you crying isn't going to help...”

“Wow!” Susan hung up and Lina threw her hand up in the air. It was the truth. With Moremi gone there were other impending issues. Susan had to deal with the family and three kids with no income, well if she gets hired it's okay but what inheritance was she going to get? That stuffy house and those two old cars they owned? She shook her head. She told Susan to go for a rich man but did she listen? Now, look at her now.

Lina's phone rang again and she answered her mother immediately.

“Mom...”

“Katalina stay with your sister, I'm on the way..She needs a lot of support and help her call other people. She is no state to deal with her in-laws. I'll have to take the evening bus.”

Lina sighed.

“I have to go to that musty house mama?” Ma Su

sighed.

“For a night, your sister just lost her husband. It’s not easy to lose the one you love and the kids must be so clueless and have no idea what is happening..”

Katalina sighed.

“Fine. Don’t take the evening bus. Accidents happen. Come in the morning.” Lina hung up. The secret will have to wait or will it? She will see how to deal with it.

She got up from her couch and stretched her slim body. She walked out of the lounge heading to the bedroom to get her car keys.

At home, Susan cried her eyes out on the bed she shared with her husband. We’ll late husband and just that word starts a new batch of tears that she

can't seem to stop. Lorato is with the kids and she is grateful even though she know she will have to let Lorato go after a week because how will she pay Lorato when she has the heavy burden of taking care of three kids?

The bedroom door open and she doesn't lift her head to look at the person who just walked inside the bedroom.

"Hi Su. I brought food for you and the kids." Lina starts out as she hold her hands and then looks at the crumpled mess her sister was. Susan wouldn't be crying like this if she knew her husband was such a cheat, she knew her sister detested cheating with every fibre of her being. She was tempted to stop this sudden mourning but telling Susan what she knew so they can find Alora and let Lina take the child.

"Mom says I should help. With the calls and everything." Susan finally lifted her head and it has only been two hours since she found out but her eyes were red and swollen with tear streaks visibly showing on her dark skin.

Susan pointed to her phone and Lina picked the phone so she can start calling Susan's atrocious in-laws. She hated that family with passion. She almost gagged at the thought of talking to that old woman who was still taking care of grown women with children. Disgusting.

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[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

13

Lina held the phone to her ear as it rang and Susan sobbed on the bed. She sat down by the corner and waited for Susan's mother-in-law to pick up the

phone. It just rung and she placed the phone on her chest as she looked at Susan.

"Su, are you guys going to Molepolole to bury him? I have to know these things." Susan nodded as she tried to wipe her tears.

"Okay. Mom is on her way and they are not answering the phone."

"Hello." Lina heard the muffled hello and she put the phone on loudspeaker.

"Hello Ma Moremi..." Lina said.

"Hey wena! You are the one who said my son shouldn't send money? O moloi ngwanyana ke wena. O moloi!" (You're a witch)Lina rolled her eyes.

"Reetsa ha! You have no right to call my sister a witch." Lina looked at Su. She tolerated such bullshit? Ng ng. This woman was getting a piece of her mind.

"O mang wena?"(who are you?)

"If I were you I would speak to me nicely but legale le mo lehumeng ebile la go oketsega kaore

breadwinner e tlhokafets e."

"Lina!"

"What? Ae Su, mosadimogolo yoo ga a na botho ke raa, why call you a witch? Her son is no more so wa go ja madi a ga mang?"

Ma Moremi paused. What did they mean her son was no more?

"What do you mean?"

"I called to tell you that Moremi died in a car accident a few hours ago. Happy? Good. Start making funeral arrangements." Lina said before she hung up and looked at Susan.

"Now does that lady sound like the type to comfort you?" Lina asked and Susan rubbed her eyes. She was so stressed.

"As long as we get the funeral out of the way, everything will work out."

Lina and Susan looked at each other and Susan breathed out.

"As much as you're intolerable, thank you for

showing up."

"I would say anytime but-" she shrugged and Susan smiled. That was her obnoxious sister alright, the one who felt like she deserved everything. Lina had her flaws but it's okay to accept people with their flaws.

"Now eat. I have a feeling your mother in law will start calling again. Do you have to wear all black now?" Susan's small smile faded and tears filled her eyes again as she looked at the gold band on her finger.

"I have to." Lina nodded.

"I'll bring the food." Lina stood up and Susan watched her sister leave before her mind replayed all the memories she shared with her husband. From holding down two jobs while trying to find ways to pay for his diploma in accounting so he could at least have something. They came a long way just for everything to abruptly end like this. They had plans to do better and get better. Tears burned her eyes and she rubbed her chest, trying

not to cry because she was not going to stop crying the minute she let the tears fall.

"Oh Moremi, why you? This was too sudden." She said with a shaky breath and picked the pillow that still reeked of his scent. She placed the pillow on her knees before she laid her head. Tears threatening to roll down her cheeks.

Tsholofelo put Alora to bed as she folded her arms. She hoped Moremi was serious he told his wife, as much as she was covering for him she wanted to live her life and not be held down by a child who was not hers to begin with. Her phone rang and she picked it up. She hoped her mother wasn't asking for money. She was not going to support two grown women who sleep around and stack children like they are bottles. She answered.

"Hello." Her mother's words were muffled by tears and Tsholofelo frowned as she walked out of the

bedroom, heading to the small sitting room to clear Alora's toys and everything.

"Moremi! Moremi weee! Ngwanake o ikets e badimong!"(my child is gone)

Tsholofelo paused. Wait what?

"Ma?" She slowly sat down on the couch.

"Moremi is no more! Bakwena weeee!" Ma Moremi cried at the other end of the line and Tsholofelo's heart pounded. Moremi? Gone? She couldn't believe it. She quickly hung up and looked around the room. Her head dizzy. He can't be gone. What was she supposed to do with Alora? No! No! She called Susan. The phone was answered but not by who she was expecting.

"Hello, can I speak to Susan?"

"She is sleeping."

Tsholofelo swallowed. Susan was probably with her rich sister. They have always been intimidated by Katalina who had everything and Moremi always said he hated his sister-in-law.

"Is Moremi actually dead?"

"Ee. An accident after work. Confirmed a few hours ago by Su, anything else?"

"No. Thank you."

"Alright." The line went dead and tears filled Tsholofelo's eyes. What was she to do with Alora? She really had no choice but to tell Susan because she can't keep a whole child a secret and take care of a child while she was still young. She had been doing her brother a favour. She got up and wiped her tears. She needs to pack Alora's stuff. Susan is understanding, she won't refuse another child. It was he husband's child afterall.

Lina sat on the couch and she sighed. This was so uncomfortable. She looked around the house, hopefully she will get the job and she can move her nephews and niece to a better place. Susan refuses

her money but she will see. She sighed. She will come to the Alora issue after the funeral. It was just on standby.

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A WEEK LATER

[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

14

Se mphete wena yoo rategang

Mmoloki waaka

Fa o ntse o sesa ba bangwe, se mphete le nna

Kgosi J esu. J esu!

J esu, ke a go rapela

Fa o ntse o sesa ba bangwe, se mphete le nna

The church ladies ended the song as they walked to their seats. Susan was sitting next to her mother and sister who were comforting her as she cried while they were singing. She didn't think she was strong enough to see his coffin go down or even hear the death recital by the pastor. Ma Moremi was crying with her daughters surrounding her, she lost her one and only son and it was so painful. Tsholo had decided to leave Alora at her house. It was too early to cause a stir. The obituary was read as Susan continued sobbing on her mother's shoulder. Once it was read, it was time for the coffin to be laid down and that was the hardest part. Susan's heart broke, it was still hard to believe that her lover and the man she had known for most of her life was gone. Just like that, she was expected to move on with life as if she never shared her life with him. As

if he never existed on this earth. Quick tears rolled down her cheeks. God she didn't know how to take away this pain. She clutched her chest as she let out that sob and her mother rubbed her back.

Lina watched carefully before she turned to look as the coffin was lowered. He died with his secret.

Lucky bastard. Lina thought to herself before she glanced over at her mother who was comforting her older sister. Once the coffin was lowered, family

was called to throw soil into the grave. Ma Susan

helped Susan to stand and Susan looked at her

oldest whom she brought to the funeral. He was the

only child she brought because she felt the other

were too young. Bokamoso sat there on the chair.

Rigid. His immature brain tried to process

everything that was happening. His father was

longer coming home to them? He was in the ground?

He shook his head. Their dad always comes back to

them. He looked at his mother who extended her

hand to hold his. They walked to the hole that was

six feet deep. She told him to grab a handful of soil

and she did the same. She looked down on the

grave and her tears rolled down her cheeks. She was saying goodbye to her soulmate. She squeezed them shut before she told Bokamoso to throw the soil down and she did the same before she walked away in her black pumps and black shawl.

More family members did the same until it was time for the men to fill the grave with soil. Each shovel made it too real for Susan. He was gone, he wasn't going to get out of the casket and say it was a prank. He was really gone. She was a widow. She closed her eyes. Tsholo watched Susan and she felt immense guilt. How was she going to tell her kate brother's wife who was grieving that the man she grieved for cheated on her and fathered child outside of their marriage? She had to do it. Yes Alora was her niece but sooner or later Su had to know. It was inevitable really. She sighed. She will call Susan to the side to tell her about it. She won't cause a scene or any commotion.

It hadn't even been ten minutes since the guests and family were back from the burial site when one of Moremi's sisters threw subtle subs at Tsholofelo.

"Tsholo, you have nieces and nephews and you decide to take care of a friend's child?" Tsholo rubbed her head.

"Not now. The guests need to eat and we need to discuss the way forward as a family."

Ma Moremi looked at Tsholofelo.

"I am still disappointed that you decided to take care of a stranger's child when your sisters have nieces and nephews that you can offer to take care of."

"Those nieces and nephews have their mothers. Ga se nna yoo ke rileng borraabone ba ba itatole."(I didn't say their fathers should deny them)

"Tsholofelo that's rude." Tsholofelo sighed. She didn't want to do this now. Her sister-in-law was

mourning. She stood on her feet and went outside where the guests were being served seswaa and phaleche. The reality of the death was going to hit once everyone was gone and only family remained. How they lost a brother, a father and a husband. A son. Tears filled her eyes and she looked up.

"Brother I promised but I'm sorry. I'll have to break that promise and tell her." She said under her breath. She waved at the guests who waved back and sat down in the tent to eat the food. The whole week was everyone extending their condolences. Susan was going to sit on that mattress and she had no idea how Susan was going to cope, at this point she can only offer to babysit. She had paused her own life for so long to try and hide her brother's infidelity but he was not here to answer for himself.

Outside, Lina wore a hat and sighed as she helped serve the guests. Her mother forced her and it looked awkward for her in a tight black skirt and stockings and heels to be serving people. It was not even her funeral and the only feeling she felt for Moremi was disgust. Disgusted that he would die

poor and leave Susan to deal with his equally uncivilized family and his audacity to take Alora and yet she couldn't find the little girl. She was almost a year now. Only two more weeks left till her first birthday. Basically Alora was an orphan. That made it better somehow, she would adopt the child legally. She had the funds but first she had to find the damn child.

She looked at the next person in line, an old woman who shook her head.

"Your heart is dark ngwanaka." The old woman said and Lina served the seswaa onto the plate the old woman held.

"Dark hearts attract bad things, you won't be happy. You have blood on your hands." The old woman said and Lina paused. She kept a face of indifference.

"I'm sure you're talking to the wrong person."

"Pelo ya gago e maswe e tlo go bolaya nako nngwe ngwanaka." (your dark heart will kill you one day)

The old woman walked away and Lina shrugged.

She was not going to stress herself. She refused to stress herself with whatever that old woman was saying.

Two hours later, all the guests were seen out and only family remained in the house. Susan sat on the mattress as her mother-in-law walked inside the room.

"I know you had a hand in my son's death." Susan sighed. There was no need to fight this woman. She didn't want to.

"You don't deserve anything that my son worked for with his hard earned money. That house you live in is not yours." Susan raised her head.

"That's my house, I built it with 75% of my money." She said and the old woman clapped her hands.

"We'll see about that. You deserve nothing, o les we. Letlakala la mosadi, you and your ugly children will not inherit a thing."

"They are your grandchildren." Susan countered.

"They don't even look like Moremi's children, tota ke nts e ke sa batle go bua mme ka tswa o pateleys a ngwanake bana e se ba gagwe. You are getting nothing. I will make sure." The old woman walked out and Susan brought her knees ro her face. She held back the tears. She wasn't going to cry. She wasn't going to cry. The door opened and Tsholofelo walked in.

"Don't tell me I deserve nothing." Tsholofelo frowned.

"What do you mean? You built all of that with your husband and you have to get his things because you have to take care of his children, which is why I'm here." Susan looked at Tsholo with her chin on her knees.

Tsholofelo's heart pounded.

"I have to tell you something." J ust as Tsholo said that, Lina was passing by the room and she paused by the door.

"Tell me something?"

"Yes. There is no right or wrong time but it's

important." Lina leaned against the wall and waited to hear what Tsholofelo had to say.

"I'm listening."

"Well Moremi-

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[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

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Tsholofelo breathed in and looked at Susan's puffy eyes, the way her cheeks were hollowed and the tiredness in her eyes. She shook her head. The more she delayed, the more it was going to be hard

to tell her. Susan waited for Tsholofelo to continue, what did Moremi want?

"Moremi, well my brother made a mistake." She said and Susan tilted her head. What mistake?

By the door Ma Susan saw Lina.

"Lina, let's go clear out the things." Lina rubbed her head. Her mother ruined everything. Her mother held her hip and Lina turned on her heel to walk away from the door.

Meanwhile inside the room, Susan anxiously waited.

"You know Alora?" Susan smiled.

"She is sweet and beautiful. That was kind of you to stay with your friend's daughter. Not many would do that." Tsholo clasped her hands together as she sat on the bed and looked at Susan.

"A-Alora is not my friend's child." Silence. A second went by. Followed by another as Susan gave Tsholofelo a perplexed look, making Tsholofelo explain her last statement.

"Alora is-Alora is my niece." Silence. Susan slowly

looked at Tsholofelo. Niece? None of Moremi's sisters were pregnant looking at Alora's age.

"Niece?" Tsholofelo slowly nodded.

"Your nieces stay with their parents." Susan didn't want to believe what her mind was telling her.

"It's Moremi' child." Tsholofelo waited. To hear screaming, crying or some kind of reaction. She has never heard silence quite that loud. She didn't know how much time passed in that silence. She finally lifted her head to look at Susan who was wiping her tears and trying to stand up from the mattress.

"Su what are you doing?" Susan chuckled.

"I'm leaving. Not going to mourn a man who cheated on me. Wasn't I enough? Wasn't I enough? Is it my skin colour? Am I too docile? Whyyy?" She covered her mouth as the tears came and she fell to her knees crying. Tsholofelo quickly stood to hug her. She bent down and held her. Susan pushed her away.

"Wh-why are you telling me this?"

Tsholofelo breathed out.

"You had to know. Moremi died on the day he was supposed to tell you, I forced him to tell you." Susan let out a bitter chuckle. Her husband actually broke their vows? The audacity. She let out a laugh that didn't sound like her own.

"You were taking care of the child so you can still do that."

Tsholofelo sighed.

"I can't take care of her now, I have my own life to live and she was surviving off the money Moremi sent me. Her mother died six months ago and now her father is dead." Susan let out a loud laugh.

"How is that my responsibility? I didn't send him to go insert his penis in another woman's vagina did I? That child is not even related to me. I don't know her, she is going to be the source of my pain. A reminder that my husband cheated on me and broke his promises to me." Tsholofelo nodded. She could understand. Susan was hurt. Really hurt. Susan shook her head. How could she even mourn him?

Now all she could think was him sleeping with another woman, her memories of him were already tainted. He really blew this. No. She was not mourning him. No. She held onto the bed and got up. She walked to the wardrobe. She was leaving with her kids today. She wasn't waiting. If they come for her house, they know where it is. She is not spending another night here mourning a cheater.

"Su, calm down."

"A se wena o cheatilweng akere Tsholofelo and have three kids to take off and jaanong o batla ke tlhokomela ngwana wa nyatsi..."(you're not the one who was cheated on and now you want me to take care of a side chick's child.) Tsholofelo shut up.

In ten minutes Susan was finished packing. She looked at her black attire. She wasn't doing this. No! She chased Tsholofelo out of the room and Tsholofelo had never seen Susan angry. She assured herself it was just anger speaking. She walked out and found the family in the lounge.

"We need to discuss Moremi's properties." Ma Susan shook her head.

"My son-in-law's body is still warm in the grave and you're already after his properties?" Ma Moremi ignored her and Lina shook her head. Those properties were ones people wanted? For her sister's sake she hoped Moremi had a will.

"I want the car." The younger sister said and Tsholofelo shook her head. Wow!

"We are sharing the house right? It has three bedrooms." The older sister said. They engaged in a debate over those things that Moremi owned and Ma Susan shook her head. Twenty minutes later, Susan emerged with her kids in tow as she told them to go to the car. Everyone frowned and the uncles who were outside raised their eyebrows. Susan was in a white dress and not in the customary black for mourning spouses.

"My son's body is not even cold and you want to leave?" Ma Moremi started and Lina saw the anger in Susan's eyes. Susan held her tongue. She liked

peace, she was leaving this place without raising her voice.

She walked back to the rooms and came with the children's suitcase dragging it to the car. They watched her as she passed and came with hers. By the time she reached the door, the uncles stopped.

"What's wrong ngwanaka? You're still in mourning."

"Not anymore I'm not. Ke a kopa ka botho, ke kopa go tsamaya."(Can i please leave.) They stepped out of the way, hoping there was going to be some sort of explanation for this sudden behaviour. Susan walked to her car and loaded everything. She put her kids in the back and she sighed holding back tears. Moremi did this to them. Why? She sighed and walked back to get her handbag that had the car keys. She was not spending a night here. When she headed to the bedroom, Lina followed her and closed the door.

"Su what's wrong?" She asked softly. Susan who has been trying to hold herself for the past 40 minutes broke down again and Lina walked closer

to hug her.

"H-he cheated on me. Lina he cheated on me." Lina rubbed Susan's back as she sobbed like a little child with inaudible words in between.

"Oh Su, he never deserved you. I am so sorry. He was just a selfish bastard."

"B-but I still love him but so angry. So angry, all I can picture is them having sex and the nerve to make a child." She cried more. Lina connected the dots. Aha!

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[06/02, 19:34] : REBORN

Lina rubbed Susan's back as she cried some more.

"It's okay." Susan moved back as she blinked her tears away and rubbed her cheeks in an attempt to stop crying.

"It's not. It will never be okay." Susan said. She sighed. She needed to leave and go home.

"I'm going home, I want to be alone and gather my thoughts."

"You said he has a child? Where is she?" Susan in her tears paused. How did Lina know it's a she? How?

"It's a boy. One that looks just like him apparently." Susan said and Lina quickly nodded. Nelly lied to her?

"Are you taking him?" Susan sighed.

"I have to think okay. I have to go. Thank you for showing up today and being there for me this whole week. I appreciate it." Lina hugged Susan again.

"Alright. Have a safe journey."

"I will." Susan walked out with her handbag and Lina bit her inner cheek. Finding Alora was proving to be a hard task, one she didn't think she will succeed in. If Nelly lied and gave a wrong description after she sent money, she was going to feel her wrath. She sat on the bed. She should just let it go right? No big deal, afterall it has been six months with no luck.

Susan passed by the sitting room and they looked at her. She breathed out looking at them too before she walked out. Afterall they were going to come take her things because her in-laws felt they deserve them more and she didn't deserve a thing even though she worked harder than Moremi and she contributed more in the house, hell she put that man through school but do they see it? No! All they are thinking about is his properties. She got inside the car and looked at her kids at the back. She breathed out and started the car. If Lina comes through with the job she will be safe. Everything will work out for her.

Meanwhile in the house, Ma Moremi clapped her hands.

"She killed my son. After the funeral she leaves when we are supposed to divide Moremi's properties?"

"What if he had a Will and he gave his wife everything?"

Tsholofelo asked. They were married in community of property if she remembered well.

"He didn't. He once told me he doesn't have much that deserves a Will."

"Still, you have no right to take Susan's stuff."

"Says someone who decided to take a stranger's child to take care of instead of your nieces and nephews. O selfish Tsholofelo." Tsholofelo chuckled.

"At least I work and don't whore myself around to men akere naka?" She said and her sister turned red in the face while Tsholofelo stood up.

"Excuse me." She walked out and the uncles just looked at them.

"It's not necessary for you to fight Susan on the properties, she has three kids to take care of." The first uncle said and Ma Moremi glared at him.

"I am his mother and how sure are we that those are his kids?" She asked and they shook their heads.

Two hours later, Susan was home. In the house she built with her husband. Now came the hard part, packing his clothes and everything. His box from work came two days earlier and she had left it in the sitting room. Lorato had been dismissed from work and the loneliness crept in. She wanted to get angry at him. To be so angry that she loathed his memory but she couldn't. She couldn't find it in her heart to hate him to that extent. She closed her eyes and leaned back on the sofa as tears rolled down her already puffy cheeks. She had to think about

everything and put it into perspective.

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[06/02, 19:35] : REBORN

17

Days passed and Susan woke up on the empty cold bed. Alone. Widowed. By a man who cheated on her. She shook her head. She got out of bed just as her phone started ringing. She picked up the phone and looked at the unknown number. She answered.

"Hello. Mrs Moremi speaking."

"Mrs Moremi hi, I'm calling in regards to your CV."

Susan sat down on the bed and listened carefully as the man praised her CV before he said the words that put a smile on her lips.

"I got the job?"

"Yes. I will call after lunch for the details and you can start on Monday."

"Thank you so much, you won't regret it."

"I hope so." The call cut and she placed a hand over her heart.

She immediately called Lina.

"Hello Susan, I'm a bit busy at w-"

"I got the job."

"He called? He asked for your number and- congratulations."

"Thank you. I need this. To take care of the kids and maybe work will be a much needed distraction."

"Did they come to try and get the house?"

"She called and threatened me but I'm married in community of property, they won't get the house

and the car is in my name. Moremi's insurance policy hasn't paid out yet but that's the only money I'm getting."

"I don't want to say I told you so but Su, you are getting peanuts." Susan breathed out.

"I knew he wasn't rich when we got married."

"You had better options."

"The heart wants what it wants."

"Does his family know of his bastard son?"

"That's not nice Lina, the child is innocent."

"He is a bastard son so ke reng? I don't want to sugar coat it." Susan swallowed. Knowing Alora was lighter than everyone she knew from both families and her own children might even feel insecure at some point in their lives when they grow up.

"Nothing."

"Good. Moremi ne a go tlwaela. Let that child stay with the mother. I have to go okay? Congratulations sis." Lina hung up and Susan finally got up to get

ready.

Tsholofelo looked at Alora who smiled at her.

"You're going to be a heartbreaker." She said and Alora's eyes lit up. She looked at everything Alora owned all packed up in the suitcases and that big suitcase with a code was among the bags as well.

She left Alora all alone in the sitting room and took the bags to her car. After all was packed up in the car, she came back for Alora.

"Hi Alora, I'm taking you to your step mommy's place. She is a very sweet woman. Your grandmother is not so sweet and won't take care of you. We'll tell her some other time about your real identity okay? Now you'll meet your siblings and I'm sure they'll love you."

She said as she held her hand walking slowly out of the house.

Lina called Nelly again. She wasn't even answering her phone. Okay she will let this Alora issue go. It was no big deal right. She leaned back. She used the landline to call her doctor.

"Dr hi."

"Hi Katalina, how may I help?" Lina sighed. Her efforts to get Alora were in vain and she killed Emily just to get out empty handed.

"I want to have a child." Her doctor sighed.

"I said it was impossible for you to carry your own child Lina, we talked about this extensively for that matter." Lina blinked back tears.

"I-I can't you run tests again?"

"We did that plenty of times."

Lina bit her lower lip.

"I can find a surrogate, is it okay?"

"If the other party does agree, surrogacy is fairly new and I am not sure that everyone would agree but it is a route that you can take. Very expensive on the basis that we have to give you fertility shots to be able to extract your eggs and sperm banks in Botswana? Unless you have a candidate you're considering to give you sperm to fertilize the egg." Lina leaned back and rubbed her eyes. She knew. It was so so expensive. Expensive than taking her friend's baby and raising her as her own.

"I'll think about it."

"Alright. Lina look, not everyone can have kids and it's okay. It's alright and nothing to be ashamed of."

"Yeah. Bye." She hung up and covered her face crying.

At Susan's place, Tsholofelo parked the car outside and she got Alora out of her car seat. Alora was so

beautiful. She kissed her cheek. She walked to the house since the gate was wide open. She knocked on the door a couple of times before Bokamoso opened the door.

"Aunty Tsholo!" The six year old said with glee and she smiled.

"Hi Bk. Mama o kae?"(where is mommy?) That exact moment Susan walked to the door and she sucked in a deep breath.

"Hi Tsholo. Come in." Tsholofelo walked in and put Alora down, instructing her to go play with the other kids in their room. Those kids were her siblings.

As soon as no kids were in sight, Susan looked into Tsholofelo's eyes.

"I want to know everything. Don't skip any detail." Tsholofelo nodded. She looked at her hands and started from when Moremi visited her house to tell her about Alora's existence.

Susan listened carefully, not interjecting unnecessarily. After Tsholofelo was done Susan clapped her hands once. She was not sure what

hurt, her husband cheating on her with a light skinned woman or the light skinned woman impregnating herself to show the evidence of cheating. Or the mere fact that her husband cheated and he went on with life as if he didn't do anything wrong. Susan pushed her hair back.

"I can't promise that I will love her because she is a constant reminder of my husband's cheating ways but she is a child so I'll see." Tsholofelo nodded. Shd was okay with that. It was just the first step.

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THIRTEEN YEARS LATER

[06/02, 19:35] : REBORN

Susan checked her watch as Rebantle posed for the camera. If someone told her she would be a mommy manager she would have never believed them. Not at all.

“Tjat’s a wrap.” The camera man said and Rebantle relaxed her body as the cameras stopped clicking and she couldn’t see the flashes in her eyes. She looked at her mother who gave her a strained smile. Her mother was tired of this, she could tell but she was the new hot thing in the market. A beautiful black teenager who had the qualities the fashion market was looking for. She wore her fluffy white gown that had her name embroidered at the back before she was handed a bottle of water.

“We are done now right? You have homework to get through.” Rebantle groaned.

“Mom, I am invited to this party tonight, I have to be there.” Susan touched her forehead.

“We agreed that on school days, no parties, you’re

barely 18 Reba. Honestly, school should be a priority.” Rebantle sighed. Her modeling gigs were paying for all that home schooling and all she had to do was show up for her IGCSE exams, no big deal but her mother made everything a big deal.

“Mom, not everyone is Alora.” Susan sighed.

“School is important. You won’t be a model forever Reba.” They moved from the green screen as they walked to her changing room. Susan closed the door and looked at her.

“We talked about this, a few years from now there will be another face or body they are after.”

Rebantle placed the water bottle down.

“Mom, relax. I got this under control.”

Susan nodded.

“I’m proud of you. Get dressed, I’ll be in the car.”

Susan walked out and Rebantle slowly removed the gown. She got rid of the clothes she was modeling and then looked at her body. She got too fat, she touched her thighs. Her body wasn’t supposed to be like this, she has been slacking at gym and it

showed. She sighed and opened her wardrobe to get her clothes. She wore those sweats and hoodies before she picked her phone and texted her model friends that she won't make it to the party. Her mother was such a bore sometimes but she loved her all the same.

Alora sat quietly in her bedroom as she read her favourite book, going over her annotations. Her bedroom door opened and she glared at the door.

“A simple knock would suffice to be honest. I get tired of repeating the same thing over and over again.”

“Calm down Ms Know It All.” She shot her brother another hot glare that had him chuckling and closing the door in fear. The door closed and she breathed in. Ah. Peace and quiet. She was waiting for Susan or mother, whichever one of the two she felt like today. She was going to go with mother

although they all knew her past. Her family knew she was an illegitimate child and her father's family, she wished those bloody women went to hell some day didn't stop to remind her that she is an illegitimate child that was unwanted by the father and even encouraged Susan to throw her out time to time. She hated them and could understand why Susan loathed them more.

She paused, she heard the car outside and the gate slide open. Her sister was back from her modelling shoot along with her mother. Carefully she closed her book and got up. She walked to her desk and picked up the letter from school, she walked to the window and saw them get out of the car. She moved back and walked out of the room. She had not seen Bokamoso the whole day and she had been gravely annoyed by Mooketsi. He was only a year older and he acted as if it was some kind of feat. She hated it.

When she got to the lounge, Bokamoso was there. She saw him hand their mother a letter and she saw the joy on Susan's face as she read it. Bokamoso

smiled shyly and Susan grinned.

“I can’t believe this. Wow!” Susan saw Alora and smiled.

“Rora, hi what did you get up to at school?”

“Same old, same old.”

Susan chuckled and nodded. Of course, it was the same for Alora. She was never fazed by anything really and she wondered if it was a habit Alora inherited from her late mother. Susan shook her head, she was past that.

“BK did you tell your siblings?” The three younger siblings looked at their older brother who rubbed the back of his neck and looked down. He was almost 20 and couldn’t speak up to save his own life.

“Uhm, I’m moving.” He said as a matter-of-fact. Alora held her quick tongue as Rebantle waited. She was patient with him and patience was not Aloraks strongest virtue.

“I got a scholarship.” He said slowly and Alora kept

her straight face, a smile threatening her steely resolve but she wasn't letting it.

"Okay, let me summarise what I read from the letter then." Susan said and they all listened.

"Basically, being the best tennis player his University has aka UB he has a sponsorship to continue his degree in any institution in America except of course Ivy League schools." Alora nodded, fair enough.

"Congratulations BK." Mooketsi said and the others followed. Alora carefully looked at Mooketsi who had a huge smile on his face. Too huge. She rarely smiled and apparently she was always angry so she'll quietly observe. There was chatter and she quickly crossed the room to get to Susan. She handed her the piece of paper and Susan looked at it. She read it and smiled.

"We have to pack."

"I'll do that. I don't want anyone touching anything in my room and ruining the order." Susan gave her a sympathetic look. When was it too early to try and

book a child into therapy?

“Anyway, rest assured I’ll come back in victory.” She said and Susan kissed her cheek and Alora resisted the urge to rub her cheek not in disgust though. She didn’t smile as she turned on her heel.

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Susan signed the letter and walked to Alora's room. She found Alora on her desk ticking off what seemed to be like a to-do list. She looked around the

room that no one shouldn't dare rearrange. It was scary that at five years old Alroa was fluent and by seven she cried her eyes out in panic when she found out something of hers had been turned. Even as she went through the grades, girl couldn't even study unless everything was placed in a certain order. She sighed as she looked at her fourteen year old.

"Rora I signed the letter."

"Thank you." She said. Grateful. Susan smiled.

"I know you're going to win." Alora's lips lifted in what was almost a smile.

"I have to." The Maths&Science fair was Alora's first one. She hated that they didn't want her to be on the team when she was in Form 1. Very sexist move on their part because she was a girl and they thought oh well, she is too young and she is a girl. Her intellect proved them otherwise along with her glares that everyone hated. She didn't want anyone getting close. She fully faced her mother.

"But do I have to go camp? The competition is held

in UB and we are a drive away from the school." She said and Susan chuckled.

"Maybe for team building and all." Alora paused before her eyes landed on her book. Susan walked closer.

"You're studying French?" She asked and Alora who had recently started a self study in French looked at her mother.

"It's interesting." Susan will never understand her high achieving daughter. How does one manage nine subjects and find time to read classic literature and learn a new language? Mooketsi who was in Form 3 at this very moment was barely holding on.

"I see. Let me not bore you okay?" She nodded and Susan walked out. Alora stood up and waited till their mother was a bit far before she walked out of her own room. She knocked on Mooketsi's bedroom door.

"Only one person knocks like they want to kill.."

"It's only natural I want to kill my brother, open the door Moks."

"Fine Ms I Know It All."

"I do know it all. Wa ntia." Mooketsi opened the door and Alora carefully walked inside the room. The bed was a mess and she held herself rigidly as she looked around. She fisted her hands on her sides to try not to touch his stuff and control his environment. She forced herself to look at him.

"Are you okay?"

"Doing better than ever." He said and Alora kept a straight look.

"You are not. Your smile was too wide when Bk shared his exciting news." She said and Mooketsi looked at those hazel eyes that were his 0sister's. He could tell when she wasn't really shooting bullets into his skull and when she was concerned.

"Everyone is an achiever in this house." Mooketsi said under his breath. His mother had never been called for awards or anything on his behalf. All she ever saw was average Cs on his report card. His older brother was some sort of tennis superstar, his older sister a high in demand model and younger

sister was such a nerd that she scooped all prizes at school.

"Everyone has their strong forte Mooketsi. I can't say I understand but I sympathise with you."
Mooketsi burst out laughing.

"You can sympathise Alora?"

"Don't antagonise me." He'll have to look that word up.

"As I said, I understand your point of view. Mother loves us all the same, she doesn't put anyone under pressure and apparently Cs hire A material students or whatever gibberish that silly author wrote."
Mooketsi laughed.

"You're not doing a good job at comforting me sister." Alora shrugged. It was not her fort. Rebantle did it better. Speaking of Rebantle the door burst open and Rebantle looked at Alora and Mooketsi.

"Don't tell me she convinced you to let her tutor you." Alora's eyes darted to Rebantle, her jealousy sprouting when she realised who Rebantle was with. The neighbour boy who was somewhat Reba's best

friend and had since took her sister's attention when he moved in and she stopped tagging along because Reba barely noticed her.

"Rora, we're going to get icecream want to join?" Mooketsi saw longing in Alora's eyes at her sister's proposition. Alora and Reba were close which was expected since they were the only girls and then Rebantle had a best friend when they moved here, the guy who was always around her and there for her, which excluded Alora.

"Of course." Alora said, her eyes still assessing her sister's best friend.

Susan scrolled through social media. Checking out Rebantle's official Twitter account to regulate the tweets along with Rebantle's Facebook account. Her youngest did not have social media unless they disobeyed her which was unlikely. Alora loathed cheating and she loved doing things by the book so

she was sure. She saw Rebantle's tweet about icecream with her best friend and sister. She smiled as she liked the tweet and passed. She went to Bokamoso's accounts and scrolled down. She paused and thoughtfully looked at his pictures. He was socially awkward so she had questions to ask him. Without making him feel awkward. Just as she got up, her phone rang and she looked at the unknown number. What if it was an agency or a clothing brand wanting Rebantle? She answered.

"Hello.."

"Susan hi." Her blood ran cold.

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She slowly sat down.

"Hi Susan, are you there?"

"What do you want?" Susan said as her free hand crept up to her neck.

"I'm your sister."

"Sisters don't hurt each other Katalina."

"Sisters forgive each other."

"Did you think we'd be fine? I still have scars on my back from your knife so don't think it's in the past. These kind of wounds last and they last. I will never forgive you Katalina."

"For over years? We are still blood sisters Susan, I said sorry."

"Time can heal but this won't heal. No."

"I love you, you're my sister."

"Then if that is your definition of love then blood runs cold hey sister." Susan said the word sister in a way that hurt Lina's heart.

"Please don't call again and don't try to go to my children's schools. When it comes to them, I will most definitely kill you sister." Susan said and hung up. Everyone really had a limit and she had reached hers when it came to Katalina. She had gradually ignored all the red flags turning them white. At first she cried herself to sleep wondering if she made the right decision to cut her off, she begged and Lina didn't want to listen, instead she hurt her so much. So damn much and she was glad the kids were too young to understand. She had to protect her peace and energy. She closed her eyes. She had to force deep breathes before she got up and headed to her son's bedroom.

She found Bokamoso on his laptop researching Universities abroad. She smiled and he lifted his head to look at his mother. He was such a handsome boy in all his six feet tallness. He looked like his father each and every day. A painful

reminder of the man she lost too early despite his flaws.

"Hey, I have a question."

"Okay." He said and looked at her.

"Are you still a virgin?" She asked and she watched him breath heavily.

"Not that you shouldn't be BK, just asking just so.."

"I still am." Her eyes didn't widen in surprise.

"I suspected." He chuckled uneasily.

"I can't talk to girls to save my life."

"Are you perhaps uhm..." she didn't know how to put it when he smiled. Man her oldest was so handsome when he smiled.

"If I was, I would be having a male friend and disguising him as my best friend. I'm not gay mother." He picked his pen and tapped it on the table surface.

"Okay. Not that it's wrong as well, I'll love you the same."

"I know."

"Was that a sub at Rebantle?" He tapped his pen louder.

"I don't buy that best friend act mother."

"Anyway, you're still a virgin. I don't know if I should be relieved or scared."

"I think relieved that the girls don't throw themselves at your son."

"Yes. That. Mme wa ba tshaba banyana?"(you're scared of girls?)

"Very. Living with Alora is just.." he chuckled and she smiled.

"She is like a shark and isn't scared to go after she wants, I admire that quality in her and yet she is closed off. I can't understand my sister."

"No one does."

"And I am glad no one crosses that little ball of fire." Susan laughed.

"O tla bona go nna pink a boduloga a bo a re 'I find it

a waste of my precious time to argue with people who simply won't understand me.' And she walks away ka puff'nyana or with her hair in her face." They laughed. Yep. That was Alora and they loved her anyway and she loved them too. In her weird way.

"Speaking of her hair, I have to help her undo it in preparation for her trip."

"Maths&Science fair?"

"Yes. We should go watch her."

"I think that will be okay. I have nothing to do since school is closed, just have to sort that switching Universities thing."

"Bathong you're going abroad? You have no idea how proud I am of you." She hugged her son and he hugged her back.

"Thanks. I was surprised by the offer as well."

Susan smiled. Her little nest was now going to be empty. Rebantle had her IGCSE exams in a few months and she was going to go to University. Then

she would be left with two children. It was going to get lonely once they leave as well. Why didn't she remarry? Or at least have another baby? It was too late now.

"Bye now. You're on dinner duty."

"Sure." He said and turned to his laptop as she walked out.

In the car on the way to icecream, Alora quietly observed her sister with Hades. Why was he even named after a greek god? She understood, he was evil.

"Rebante your sister has taken her claws out." He said and Reba chuckled as she looked at her sister.

"Hades, she is a child and what claws?"

"Figuratively speaking." He said as he parked his car in Riverwalk. Alora couldn't understand how that one boy when they moved back there could have all

of her sister's attention to the point that she could forget her or stop doing those activities with her. Alora used to go for icecream with her sister with her mother driving them around and Rebantle trying to baptise Alora into her style of clothing. The skinny jeans and hoodies with sweats. She breathed out. Hades ousted her in her sister's life. That made her sad but of course she was not going to tell Rebantle. Rebantle was sweet and she thought she was balancing it all out. Hades and Rebantle got out of the car. She undid her seatbelt and held her phone in her hand as she got out of the car. Hades locked the door and she followed them behind. She kept quiet. They got to the ice cream shop and Rebantle smiled at him as he chuckled.

"Your favourite vanilla swirl dipped in caramel?" He asked and she nodded before he looked at the short demon behind them.

"Which icecream Alora?" She sighed.

"Vanilla is okay." She sat on the chairs and looked at how Hades pushed Rebantle's braids back and she blushed. Rebantle moved closer and looked at

Hades.

"I-I have to tell you something." She said and Hades nodded. She was serious. His best friend. Did she know he loved her? Of course she did but it was not the way he wanted but he was going to take that. Rebantle stepped back and giggled before she looked at Alora.

"Are you okay baby sister?"

Alora looked grim and gave her a thumbs up before she made them a thumbs down.

"Alora careful, you don't want to claw your own eyes out."

Alora rolled her eyes.

"Not going to dignify you with a response."

"You just did." She crossed her legs.

Katalina looked at the ceiling. It was so lonely.

Wasn't Susan the one who was supposed to be forgiving? She forgave her dead husband for fathering Alora so why couldn't she be forgiven? She touched her flat stomach. No child in sight. This life was so lonely. Tears filled her eyes as she turned to her side and curled herself into a ball as she cried.

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Alora watched as she licked her ice cream, Hades laughing at something Rebantle said even though it

wasn't funny. She looked at her ice cream bathing her lower lip in frustration but not saying anything. Hades looked at Alora then back at Rebantle. Alora was awfully quiet, he knew he bickered back and forth with Alora. It has always been like that for over 5 years of knowing them and being Rebantle's best friend. Twenty minutes, Hades decided that they should leave. Alora followed them to the door as Rebantle pushed Hades to the side with the widest grin on her face and Alora released a sigh as she looked down. They got inside the car and she buckled up before she stared out the window with a quiet resolve.

Susan held the phone as she talked to her mother.

“Mother, I don't care. I will never forgive Katalina for what she has been doing. Just because she had money she felt it okay to do what she did?”

“Lina is young, she learns from her mistakes.”

Susan rolled her eyes.

“Nna? Never ke mo its hwarela nna.” Ma Susan sighed.

“It’s in the past.” Susan chuckled.

“All that embarrassment is in the past? My family’s dirty laundry is known by everyone, hell Alora was too young but she didn’t deserve the shame just because ke ganne ka ene. Katalina wasn’t the one married to Moremi so she has no right over Alora and since Alora was my husband’s child, legally I can be her custodian. Nna tota Katalina ga kake a bolella newspapers my business and those stunts she pulled trying to kidnap Alora? I am disgusted and will never forgive her for putting my family in jeopardy, ke sone a pallwa ke go nna le ngwana. O nnetse boloi.”(that’s why she can’t have a child, she is a witch)

Ma Susan sighed.

“That’s not nice.”

“I stopped trying to be nice for everyone because then people start doing as they please, I will never

forgive Katalina and she better move on with her life. I don't want to associate with her. At all. My life is peaceful without her and my toxic in-laws."

"Okay. Enough about Katalina. How are the kids?"

Susan sat on the bed with a smile.

"Doing so good. I hope what I tell you won't be relayed to Katalina."

"Ao ngwanaka..."

"I just don't want her to know anything about my life."

"I would never betray your trust like that, I'm an old woman and I have no time for gossips."

"I guess you're right. BK got a sponsorship to study abroad mma. My child will be with the Americans kwa! I am so happy, Reba is doing well with her modelling and I am glad I really listened to her when she wanted to model when she was a child, she is wanted left right centre and I haven't told her yet but there is a fashion show by this designer in Paris, he liked her walks and all on the net, he wanted her to

model for Paris fashion week. I'm still trying to see if it can work. Alora obviously is the house genius, her siblings call her a shark. How early is it to want to book someone into therapy? Alora has anger issues. They are so evident, no child can look so ready for war everyday and really scare people away."

"I don't know ngwanaka, in our times there was no such thing as therapy. Maybe she is just like that, we didn't know her mother so maybe she inherited her mother's traits and you are worrying over nothing."

"Probably hey. Maybe she will get better in time."

Susan went on to update her mother on her life while outside, Hade's car parked and Alora was the first to get out of the car leaving Rebantle and Hades inside.

They both watched her press the intercom and the gate slightly open. Rebantle leaned back and looked at Hades, she was really nervous about what she had to tell him but if she at least tells one person

who won't judge her it will be better.

"You said you had something to tell me."

"Well, I was just trying it out, last week."

Hades gave her a look. He was a year and a few months older than her but he was the best friend any girl could wish for.

"Trying what out?"

She looked at her bare nails then breathed out.

"I was at a party, with the other models last week. There wa-" she breathed out.

"There was a lot of stuff an-" he kept his eyes on her.

"I-I was curious. I'm not addicted or anything Hades, I swear. It was ju-" she licked her lips, licking her strawberry flavoured lip gloss as well as she looked at him. He was the one person who was never going to judge her at all.

"There was heroin, weed and cocaine. Well those are the drugs I identified, the others were kind of new to me." Hades' jaw ticked as he looked at her and Rebantle looked at his square set jaw and

sighed.

“It was a once off thing, I swear, I tried heroin. I don’t know where they got it but it was there.”

“You take drugs now Reba?”

“I don’t take drugs. I was experimenting and I don’t want you to judge me. If I was some kind of drug junkie I would not have told you akere?” She said and his eyes were dead set on her.

“It was an experiment. Same as people experimenting with alcohol and no one says anything. I’m okay. I’m alive and nothing happened.”

“Does your mother know?” He asked and she shook her head. Her mother would confiscate her stuff, of course she didn’t know.

“I told you this in confidence as my best friend and you have to keep it to yourself. You’re the only person who won’t judge me or anything and I would never try that again.” She said and breathed out. Minutes passed and with a heavy breath Hades nodded.

“Promise me.”

“I promise Hades, it will never happen. I swear on my dad’s grave.” He gave her his pinky and she smiled giving him hers.

“Pinky swear.”

They grinned and he messed up her hair before he kissed her hair and forehead.

“I don’t want you to risk with your life like that again.”

“I would never do that Hades.” She said and he smiled. She opened the door and got out of the car.

Inside the house, Alora carefully climbed the chair to reach the suitcase that was locked and on top of her wardrobe. Her mother said she didn’t know what was inside or the password. It looked so old and dusty. She recoiled at the dust that was on her hands and breathed in and out as it stained her white shirt that was carefully tucked in her black skirt. For a 14 year old she was happy with her style

of clothing, hopefully it would be evolve to be something more serious. She picked her clothes as if it was her armour and it made her feel in control of her life in a way. She held the suitcase against her chest and she wanted to get clean fast but she also wanted to open the suitcase. She carefully got down from the chair and she placed the suitcase on the floor. She clapped her hands to get rid of the dust and she rushed to the bathroom to get clean. She quickly locked the door and stripped of her shirt and washed her hands thoroughly with the soap before she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her hands pink from that excessive scrubbing. She picked the towel on the rack and she sighed leaning against the wall. Deep breaths to calm down. She was clean. It was just a little bit of dust, she took her words back when she looked at her shirt, okay a lot of dust. When she was okay, she got out of the bathroom with the towel wrapped over her upper body and holding her shirt as well. She didn't think she was ever going to wear that shirt ever again. She used it to wipe the suitcase so she can try to think of the code. Once she was assured it was

clean enough to be touched, she walked to her desk to find a piece of paper to be able to try and write down possible code combinations. First one that came to mind was her birthday, in all its numbers. Maybe it was jumbled up. She wrote all the possible ways her birthday could be written to make the code. She crouched in front of the suitcase and she tried all the combinations. They didn't open the suitcase. She looked at the last one that wasn't jotted off. She tried that one and she heard the click and her eyes widened as she opened the suitcase. Bingo! Time to find out what's as in this thing that has been in her room for years.

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[06/02, 19:35] : REBORN

Breathing in, she looked at the papers inside. Some on brown envelopes and some in colourful envelopes. Her dainty hands reached out to touch the big brown envelope that stood out. She looked at it, it was written her name but not where it was from. She opened it and her eyes nearly popped out of their sockets. A Will, no rather a copy of a Will. She quickly skimmed the contents of the Will with a pounding heart. She was suddenly half a million richer. Her mother? She did all this? For her and her step mother never opened this suitcase or had it destroyed? Okay good women existed even though she was evidence of her husband's cheating. It was common knowledge and it didn't matter whether she was worked up on the fact or not. It was a fact she couldn't change. She put the copy of the Will inside the envelope and picked up another colourful envelope. She opened it and her hands traced the handwriting.

"Dear Alora Moremi

Hi dear Lora, I'm sure by the time you read this you would be years older. I wrote this when you were just a few months old and I started to get sick out of nowhere. I just want you to know your mother loves you. I'm your mother and regardless of your conception you were always the only star in my sky, if you're smart like mommy you would have figured out that your name has two meanings." Alora shrugged. She knew and she preferred the Setswana meaning of the name. Of course she knew God existed and was there but in a way it sounded fictitious so she would rather believe in fate or the universe working to her advantage which at this moment it really was. She continued to read the letter and when she was done, she picked up pictures from the suitcase. Damn! She didn't say that out loud right, she hoped not.

She looked like her biological mother well except for a few features that Susan was able to say she got from her father. One she has few memories of but

could remember him vaguely. He was never really involved and instead dumped her at aunt Tsholo's place, May Her Precious Soul Rest In Peace. She put down everything. There was everything she needed, from the lawyer's contacts. She doubted the lawyer was still alive but she was still a minor and she couldn't get a thing till she was 18.

Basically she was almost a millionaire, almost. She closed the suitcase and straightened up. To see if the lawyer was still alive she needed to have Susan find out. She walked out of the room and bumped into Rebantle.

"You were awfully quiet, what's wrong?" Alora thoughtfully looked at her sister. Reba was too sweet and would really feel bad.

"Nothing." She passed her sister and Reba felt bad that Alora closed off on her. Was it something she did? Or she forgot an important date in Alora's life? She asked herself. She couldn't quite figure out what she did so she just headed to her bedroom to try and attempt her homework. If it fails, then Hades can help. She smiled.

Alora found Susan in the kitchen with BK and she walked straight to her.

"There is something you should know." Susan frowned and Bk stopped stirring the pots.

"Bk I didn't say you should stop. Please continue, I'm famished already."

"You have a towel around your shoulders and your arms are red."

"Oh." She put her arms behind her back and kept her stance.

"Alora let me see." Susan tried to take her hand but she stepped back.

"It's nothing. We have bigger problems."

"We? Count me out." Bk said and she glared before he chuckled and minded his own business.

"Just me and mother BK. I won't involve you in my elaborate scheme to destroy men you included." Susan chuckled.

"What is it?"

"I opened the suitcase." Susan audibly gasped and Alora felt a sense of accomplishment. She was smart, she knew that her IQ was higher than most humans and she prided herself with it.

"How?"

"Probability worked in my favour."

"How about fate?"

"Okay and that. Now there is something that needs an adult and you're the adult."

"You owe me Rora."

"I know." She almost smiled as she looked at Susan.

"Follow me and you'll see what we have on our hands."

"Sure little missy. Lead the way."

Susan got off the high chair and followed Alora.

"Mother?"

"Hmm?"

"Mooketsi needs reassurance." Susan frowned.

"I am not the world's best comforter but he thinks just because he doesn't have a talent or in his own words is 'average' he feels left out. Naturally I would have really assured him but feelings like that are not my strongest point."

"Why is that? Why can't you smile like the other kids?"

"I'm me and they are mediocre. Mother, no one truly deserves me."

"O rata dilo Alora."(You like things)

She chuckled and Susan smiled.

"You just chuckled."

"I know." They walked into her room and she looked at the open suitcase. Alora crouched to pick the Will.

"Read this and maybe contact the lawyer." Alora said and Susan quickly scanned the document, her jaw dropping at the assets that were in Alora's name and everything that was hers. Alora was a rich girl basically and she was acting as if this was nothing.

"You're rich." Alora kept a complacent face.

"It's been years and I doubt the house is in good condition without any maintenance, the trust fund obviously is there but the money might be depleted by fixing the properties. Meaning I'm not that rich."

"I'll have a lawyer look into this and get back to you. I'll involve you every step of the way."

"Thanks. It's okay now, you can leave my room."

"But are you sure you're okay?"

"Perfectly healthy and in a good condition to answer any trivia in my sleep."

"Wear a t-shirt and I'll do your hair."

"I am not risking you burning me with the relaxer again." Susan laughed and Alora's lips lifted in what could be a smile.

"I'll wash it and blow dry it before straightening it the way you like so you can style it in that boring way you like."

"It's not boring. It's safe. I'll be there." Susan stole a kiss and kissed Alora's cheek before she walked out

and Alora touched her cheek. She rubbed it with a ghost smile on her lips and walked to the bathroom to wash her hands.

An hour later, Alora was in between Susan's legs as she undid her cornrows and Mooketsi was making jokes as Rebantle snacked on something while there was laughter and chatter in the house.

"Alora behaves as if she is Shakespeare." Alora rolled her eyes.

"I'm in the room."

"We know Ms Know It All."

"Alora uses big words that require a dictionary all the time."

"I was spelling bee champion for two years in a row."

"Bathong wena Rora the man who married you o tla tshwaragana le bothata." Alora paused, trying to not think about the part her biological mother mentioned men or even marriage.

"Men? Me?"

"Do you love us?" Mooketsi asked and she lifted her eyes towards him in a bored manner before Susan made her look down.

"Of course, I love all of you."

"In a very weird way."

"Yes. But it's love regardless."

They all smiled and she looked at her feet as her hair was being pulled and stretched. She was so volatile but she did everything with unbridled passion.

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A FEW DAYS LATER

[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

23

At the University of Botswana, the Maths & Science Fair competitors from different institutions arrived and Alora held her bag as BK pulled two of her suitcases. They all knew why she carried a lot of stuff. The girl took hours to get ready and she was only fourteen for crying out loud. They were walking into the girls' dorms where she was going to be staying for the week they are here. She was fortunate enough to be the only girl in their school team so she wasn't sharing with anyone which came as a relief to her. She didn't like sharing her personal space with anyone. The minute she got inside the room, she rushed to the windows to open them and pull the curtains back.

"I'll clean this room after seeing you guys away. Thank you." She said to her brother who looked around.

"Tomorrow you're competing?"

"Yes."

"We'll be there." She gave him a quick hug then stepped back.

"Thank you. I'm fine now."

"Bye."

"Bye." Bk walked away and she closed the door then looked around the room. Time to clean before she could even set her stuff then she takes a shower before she explores around. It was not even lunchtime.

Susan watched the lawyer as he read the Will. The lawyer leaned back and looked at Susan.

"I drew up this Will." She nodded. She had tried to trace the law firm and asked around before she was directed to this gentleman.

"So you're saying Alora is in your custody?" He asked again. A bit sceptical about this woman bringing up a Will he drew up years ago.

"Yes and she asked me to help her. I honestly do not want any part of her inheritance if that's what you're scared of." She said and he looked at her lips as she spoke. That man was such a bastard for cheating on her, he couldn't say Emily wasn't beautiful, she was but this one here? She was the definition of an African goddess.

"Are you listening?" Susan snapped her fingers and the lawyer snapped out of it.

"Ah yes."

"You don't look like you were. Will you help Rora access her trust fund when she is 18 and all her properties? She is only 14 right now so will that be possible?"

"Yes. She sounds like a smart girl." Susan smiled.

"She is. Thank you so much for your help and I am glad we were able to contact you even if it's after a decade." He nodded and Susan pushed her chair

back. Her black relaxed hair tied into a ponytail, making her eyes pop and that forehead shine like the brightest diamond, face bare of any makeup and lips moisturised by some vaseline to keep them shiny and hydrated. Simple yet so beautiful.

"Thank you Mr Kokole.."

"You can call me Thabiso." He smiled and she smiled back.

"Well thank you Thabiso."

"I'll keep in touch."

She nodded and walked out, closing the door on her way out. Two minutes did not pass when there was a door knock.

"Come in." Susan walked in and looked at him.

"I forgot the copy of the Will." She said and he looked at it in his hands. He handed it to her, looking at her and she avoided his gaze.

"You didn't get my number." He said and she nodded slowly. She took out her phone and waited for him to say out his number.

"Let me get yours rather." Now the atmosphere was awkward. She gave him her number and quickly walked out while Thabiso rubbed his jaw

Alora was finally satisfied with her room. She tucked in her plaid shirt into her black pleated skirt and she wore her black ballerina pumps. She made sure her hair was parted in the middle just the way she usually did. She held her 'Guide to learning French' book which had a pencil in between on the page she was on. She would be able to have lunch with the others at the cafeteria. She just needed a bench and to sit on in perfect peace.

She walked out of the room then the block she was in. There was a lot of movement, the official welcoming ceremony was later tonight and the competitors were already excited. One of her teammates ran to her direction and she looked up at him. He stepped back a bit, this kid's looks could

kill.

"Did you settle in well?"

"Yes." He looked at the book she was holding. He had been doing math equations and reading Biology while she was studying French?

"Shouldn't you be studying chemical formulas? We are in competition and the French won't help with the quiz." Alora wanted to roll her eyes. She did so a few seconds later.

"You need the studying more than me." She said simply before she walked away. Not even minding that her teammates were a grade above hers. She walked for over 5 minutes till she found a quiet spot and she opened her textbook, picking her pencil and putting it behind her ear. Twenty minutes later, she had been lost in her self study and didn't notice being watched. Literally. Was this the moment when her life would irrevocably change or was fate just good at making things happen at the right time?

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[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

24

It took Alora minutes to get out of her own little world and come back to reality. She could sense another human being nearby and it didn't make her happy. She lifted her head and saw a boy, well taller than most boys she knew. His hair short and his hands in his black slacks. He didn't look bothered. She shifted in her seat and lifted her head high like she Norma did. His presence, whoever he was should not make her cower. She was Alora Moremi for crying out loud, nothing fazed her. The boy's light brown eyes moved to the book she was reading and his lips nearly lifted into a smile. He

removed his hands from his pocket as he looked at the girl. There hasn't been any female for the past few years at these competitions so it was a rarity to see a girl with brains. And looks too. He gave her that.

“Whoever you are, speak now or forever hold your peace.” Alora said annoyed.

“Êtes-vous un expert en langage français?” (Are you fluent in French?)

Alora paused as her mind grasped that sentence, she looked at the book and she hated to admit failure that she was just a beginner. She went pink, because she was angry with herself for lacking. She vowed to master the language in a few months instead of the intended year she had initially said she will master that language.

“non”(no) she replied back with ice in her voice and instead of the boy who was getting on her last nerves leaving, he smiled. A cocky smile.

“I see. I hope to see you around soon.” Alora rolled her eyes.

“In your dreams.” He paused and his gaze washed over her before he was looking at her eyes.

“Why would I?”

She shrugged.

“See you.” He walked out and she looked at her book. Her concentration gone. She closed her book and chewed on her bottom lip before she stopped and checked her pockets then remembered that she wasn’t wearing a blazer and her lipgloss was in the room. She better eat before she retreats for her own sanity. That boy’s calm unsettled the fire that was her and she hated being unsettled. She closed the book and stood up.

Austin walked away from the girl and he smiled, he had mastered the art of his own emotions, never letting people see anything except what he wanted them to see. He slid his hands in his pockets as he walked peacefully to where he was supposed to get food. He was here as if everything was normal. He couldn’t be controlled by his emotions, he knew

better. He paused thinking about his condition and whether he should take the Adderall but he swore off the drug since his sessions at 14, he wanted to succeed on his own merit and he didn't fucking need it to boost him. He was better than that. He arrived at the cafeteria and found his school mates who were his teammates by the tables with a chess board set out. His calculative gaze landed on the pieces and he analyzed the outcome of the game. They looked at him, his quiet dominance filling the room. He had to grow up at a tender age and his mother was more of a guardian than a mother. One who taught him complex math and business at the tender age of fucking 10 and which psychopath did that? Well Celine Mathews did and she had already bred a genius, one who knew his future already. It was planned out clearly and he was going with the carefully planned future, the blueprint clear.

“Austin, what do you think?” A smile graced his pink lips as he pulled back a chair and sat on it, he undid two of his shirt buttons.

“What's in it for me?” He asked. He never did

anything just for the fun, every action had to have a price or some sort of reward for him to waste his brain power. The guy with the glasses lifted his head to look at him and Austin brazenly winked before he looked at the chess pieces. The queen was in plain sight and the rook? Utterly useless looking at the pieces.

“It’s not fair to ask Austin, obviously you’re going to win because well he is Austin.”

“No one has surpassed him.” Just that moment Alora walked inside the cafeteria and raised a well trimmed eyebrow, she had her mother to thank for that.

“Is he a god?” The boys snickered and Austin watched her with feline curiosity.

“Little girl you’ll swallow your words.” The guy with glasses said and Austin kept his eyes on her.

“I challenge you to a game of chess.” Austin placed his hands on his chin.

“The stakes?” Alora breathed out. She might as well be breathing out fire. She never told him her name

and she trusted herself.

“My name.” Austin knew that it would be easy to get her name but she was interesting and so he agreed.

“Your name it is.” The group of boys looked at each other and some of Alora’s teammates as well as other students from other schools gathered around. They looked at her wearily. She was playing against Austin Mathews. Did she know that?

The chessboard was set and he turned his chair to sit properly.

“Ladies first.” He said. Alora hasn’t known him for a mere twenty minutes and his ego was infuriating. She wanted to pop it with a balloon. Austin read her, well her anger and how it turned her pink.

“No, it’s best if you start, after all it’s the most honourable thing to do for someone who is about to lose.”

Someone’s jaw dropped.

“She didn’t.” She turned her head with a glare and the person shut up. He gave a cocky grin that she

wanted to wipe off his face. One of the reasons she hated boys and would castrate them given a chance except her brothers of course.

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I am behind schedule. So let's get this marathon started. I'll update every two hours given that the insert has over 3k likes and 20 shares. So let's get started. Good afternoon family.

[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

25

At the cafeteria everyone's eyes were on them.

Alora let out a guttural moan. She was frustrated and he was prolonging the game. Austin swiftly moved his queen.

"Checkmate." Alora looked at the chessboard. There were no possible moves, she would have long won if he didn't prolong the game with some really useless moves. She had suspected it had been a tactic. She lifted her eyes to him and she saw his composed face. Someone basking in the joys of beating her fair and square in chess. She never lost at chess and she liked doing things right. She swallowed her pride and nodded. Accepting the defeat. She was already pink and Austin kept his cool eyes on her.

"Alora." She said and he nodded. Austin knew he just wanted her name and prolonged the game to look at her, her moves had been precise and accurate. He could tell she was smart, he liked intellect. To be able to have someone with the same thinking capacity as him.

"Alora Moremi." She said under her breath and he nodded.

"Pleasure to meet you Alora." Her pulse sped up but it didn't show on her features as she cocked her head to the side

"I can't say the same about you.."

"Austin." He said his name and Alora's shoe tapped the floor lightly. So it was thee Austin everyone used to talk about? She expected someone much more nerdy if she can say that. Not good looking boy with an ego big enough to inflate an air balloon and certainly not a boy with a grin that might as well be addictive. She wasn't going to tell him this of course. She pushed her chair back and stood up with pride as she walked out of the cafeteria. Austin kept his eyes on her, she was intriguing. He didn't know this was the start of them seeing each other at competitions and her turning out to be his rival in every sense.

Everyone clapped their hands looking at Austin. He nodded and they stopped. He stood up and walked out.

Meanwhile Alora quickened her pace to get to her

room. The fact that she lost was gnawing at the corners of her heart. She was angry at herself, she was going to do better. She had to.

At Susan's house, the intercom rang and she frowned.

"Guys are you expecting anyone?"

She shouted and she heard chorused No's from the kids. She pulled her cardigan and got out of the house with the remote. She pressed it and the gate slightly opened. She walked outside and she didn't hide her shock when she saw Lina. She didn't look like someone who was enjoying her money and life after nearly destroying hers.

Lina held back tears looking at her older sister. Life was so lonely on her side. No kids, nothing.

"Nkgonne I am so sorry for everything I have done."

Susan shook her head.

"Katalina no, you get away with everything and I will never forgive you. It took months, everyone bashing my kids. Kids are innocent and should never be punished for adult sins. It is not even their fault that you can't birth a child. It's not." Lina wiped her tears. Her infertility was thrown around carelessly now.

"Wa bona it hurts? I'm not the docile sister who let you get away with everything now, sometimes one needs to bury their old selves and come out as new people."

Lina sniffed.

"I am so sorry Susan. I was angry."

"You angered yourself Lina, I chose peace. I didn't want you who looked down on me and betrayed my trust, my in-laws who are irrelevant because ba ts wa kgakala ba bua ka nna and they even doubted my kids' legitimacy. And don't get me started on them calling out Rora when she is innocent." Lina bit her lower lip. Maybe confessing will make things better for her.

"I did something." She said and Susan held her

waist.

"I have nothing to say to you to be honest."

"You forgave Moremi for cheating.."

"You said you wanted to say something. Make it fast." Lina looked down. It was at that instant that the old woman's words at the funeral rung in her ear. That her heart was dark. She wanted to cry so bad. Just curl herself into a ball and cry her eyes out. Her life was no longer worth living.

"I-I killed Emily." She said. In more if a whisper. Susan stepped back.

"You what?" She half shouted and Lina flinched.

"I was young, I wanted Alroa so bad and it was after hearing the news that I can't have kids." Susan shook her head.

"You are so sick in the head. I wonder if you even have a heart." Susan walked inside her yard and closed the gate. How was Lina even human? She shook her head. Shocked. Alroa didn't need to know this, it might hurt her to know she was denied her

biological mother because of someone's selfishness.

Meanwhile in the bedroom, Rebantle took her phone and dialed one of her model friends. The phone rang and she faked a happy voice.

"Hi, long time. Uhm I wanted to ask about that stuff. At the party."

"Uh uh Reba, we only do that at parties." Rebantle sighed.

"Alright."

"Just at parties to let loose, otherwise it will turn into an addiction and it will ruin your modelling career."

"I understand you. It's fine. Thanks."

"We have a party next weekend, you are allowed to join."

"I'll have to run that with my manager, if she agrees then we are on."

"Alright. I got to go. Bye Reba."

"Bye." She hung up.

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[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

26

Katalina, distraught from her meeting with her sister sat on her couch. She looked at the wealth she had acquired over the years and it didn't bring her any joy nor pleasure. It didn't make her sleep warm at night, she hasn't smiled in years. No one wanted to be around her and everyone was just so happy with

the little they had. So so happy while she was miserable and rich. She laughed bitterly in the big spacious living room. She wasn't happy. Would she ever be happy? Was this her punishment for killing Emily? Her punishment for looking down on others? She quickly rubbed the tears that rolled down her cheeks. Even her sweet sister didn't want to forgive her, the longer she stayed, the longer she felt like she was going to suffer. Wouldn't it better to go away? They can have her wealth because in the end it never did make her happy in any way. She took her phone and dialled her mother. The phone rang and she forced a smile on her face as she answered.

"Hello mom." Ma Susan frowned. Katalina never called her mom.

"Are you okay?"

"Ee mma. I'm okay. What did you say you need the last time we talked?"

"I need to pay the herd boys ngwanaka."

"I'll send the money for that. Are you okay? Is old age treating you well?" She asked trying to inject

some happiness in her tone.

“I am. I can’t wait for you to be happy, have you found a man who will love you?”

“Mama, they don’t want me and I’m okay with it.”

“You don’t want kids?” Katalina closed her eyes, something painful lodging in her throat making it difficult for her to breath but she forced out a deep breath.

“You know how the saga went down. I’ll be okay. Some people are not meant for kids.”

“You’ll have kids one day. Trust in God ngwanaka.” She nodded and bit her lip blinking back tears as she forced a smile,

“Ee mma, I love you autwe mama? I’m sorry I turned out to be like this.”

“Everyone makes mistakes and your sister won’t be angry forever Lina.”

“I know. I know. But I am so sorry and if you manage to talk to Susan tell her that I love her as well and I am sorry for the unnecessary hurt I

caused her as well as the embarrassment, she didn't deserve that. My entitlement for everything was too much and I see that now."

"She will forgive you, give her time Lina."

"Ee mma. I have to go. Bye and I love you, stay happy always." She cut the call before her other could say anything. She tried calling Susan's number and it didn't go through. She probably blocked her other number. She put her phone down. She was not going to cause any commotion. She thoughtfully walked out of the living area and walked up the stairs to her bedroom. Leaving her cellphone behind. She walked inside the bedroom and headed to the bathroom where she opened her medicine cabinet. She looked at the assorted pills. She had pills that helped her sleep at night and tackle her insomnia and other pills for pain. Just a lot of pills. She took the pills and walked to her bedroom where she poured them on the bed. She sat down and bit her lower lip.

Ma Moremi looked at the kids who filled her house in Molepolole. The kids were like choice assorted biscuits, each having different fathers and some being teenagers. She was too old to be dealing with toddlers but there she was, with toddlers from her two daughters. Ever since Moremi died, Tsholofelo had been the one to help her and Susan had helped even though she despised her. Susan still helped when she was busy telling Alora how much of an outsider she was, her daughters had liked Alora because she was lighter and as thus told her she was beautiful than her other siblings. Susan stopped helping out four years ago when Tsholofelo died in her sleep. She then distanced herself and the kids from them and no amount of insults could make Susan feel guilty for cutting them off. She was afraid she would marry another man and replace her son and them had cut them off instead. Her oldest daughter walked inside the sitting room and she looked at the dirty sofa.

“Why didn’t they clean?”

“Bana ba lona ba bantsi.”(you have a lot of children.) she shrugged.

“Hee, did I tell you? Rebantle is a model.” The old woman looked at her eldest daughter.

“What are your children doing? Ba olela bo D le bo E ko skolong and I’m getting old.(they are failing at school)

“Not every child is smart. Susan is making money off your grandchild and we are here poor while she mixes with the high people mo Botswana? La mo tlogela. We also have a say in how our niece is raised, she cannot enrich herself ka ngwana.” The old woman sighed.

“She doesn’t want us involved in the child’s life.”

“Those are our brother’s kids mama, your grandchildren. You should have a say on how they are raised.” The old woman watched her eldest rant about how Susan was unfair to eat all that money alone. Those were her nieces and nephews. The old woman coughed and sighed.

At Susan's house, she comfortably laid down on the couch as BK walked in the lounge with Mooketsi in tow. Susan looked at them.

"You are sure your sister was okay BK?"

"She is. She was just being Alora. You know how she is." Mooketsi chuckled.

"Mooketsi you're on cooking duty, should we take her a home cooked meal tomorrow when we go watch them?" Susan asked.

"I think she will appreciate that. A lot." Bokamoso replied as he sat on the other couch and picked the remote.

"Then it's settled." Susan concluded and Mooketsi headed to the kitchen to get started on dinner. Susan's phone rang and she looked at the unknown number before she answered.

"Susan Moremi speaking hello."

“Susan hi, it’s Thabiso here.” Susan looked at Bokamoso and she got up, slipping her feet in her slippers and walked out.

“Hi. How may I help you? You are already done?”

She asked as she passed Rebantle’s room. She paused at the door and knocked once before she opened it. Rebantle looked up from her phone and grinned at her mother who smiled back and closed the door.

“My call is personal”

“Oh.” Su walked inside her room and closed the door as she spoke over the phone.

At University of Botswana, Alora tucked in her vest in her jeans and wore a white sweater over it, she tied her hair into a tight ponytail and applied lipgloss. She looked at the time. Obviously the opening ceremony had started but she wasn’t the

one to rush herself in doing anything. When it came to getting ready, her clothes were more like her armour even if her day wasn't going as planned. She picked her keys and walked out of the room, satisfied with how she looked. She closed the door and checked it it was locked. Now she can go to the ceremony.

At the sports arena, Austin looked around and he couldn't spot Alora anywhere. He was listening for the most part, the boys around him kept their heads low as they talked about how they thought it impossible for girls to beat them, they were too into their looks and did spend time reading. Austin wasn't sure if he wanted to prove that theory wrong, there was something in Alora. He couldn't pinpoint but he could see the fire within her, she was a ticking time bomb. In a good way or crazy way that might be irritable to people. Minutes later, she finally walked in and everyone's eyes landed on her. She had that same glare that she shot to everyone who looked at her. If possible she could burn them

but that had 99% chance of not happening. She sat down at an empty seat and faced the speaker. The speaker then had to mark everyone present. Names were called out and his was called out last.

“Robert Austin Mathews.”

“Present.” He replied smoothly.

Alora tilted her head. Robert huh? Interesting. Why did he go by the name Austin? She has one theory. He didn't like his first name. Her new found rival hated his first name. She lifted her eyes to find him looking at her and she shot him a look that screamed “Stop looking at me!!” He smiled at her and she rolled her eyes at him.

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[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

27

At Lina's house, she sat on the bed disoriented from the pills she had swallowed down with water. She was hoping they would work. She had nothing to live for at this point in time, her life was awfully miserable and everyone hated her. She got undercovers and closed her eyes, hopefully the pills will work in her sleep.

At Susan's house, Susan sat on the bed and looked at the ceiling. She has not been with a man in thirteen full years and a man of that calibre asked her out? It would be like a toddler learning to work,

she had dated briefly before meeting Moremi and he turned out to be the one she truly loved even though she doubted he loved her towards the end if he had the nerve to cheat on her. She sighed and stared at her phone. She promised Thabiso she will give him a response tomorrow. At her big age what does one wear to dates? Times have changed and she wasn't sure he would appreciate a walk for a first date. She sighed. She got up from bed and decided to head to Rebantle's room. She found Reba still up with a comic book on her face. She probably fell asleep while reading. She removed the book and Reba's eyes fluttered open. She tried to sit upright as she yawned and stretched her body.

"Mom."

"You can sleep." She rubbed her eyes and looked at her bedside clock. It was almost ten.

"I'm awake." Susan placed the comic book on Reba's bedside table next to the clock and smiled. She was so proud of Rebantle. So proud of the little girl she was raising. All her kids were her pride and joy.

"Rebante how do you feel about being on an international stage?" Susan asked. Rebante paused, her sleepy self trying to put together what her mother was saying.

"International? As in Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner international?" She asked and Susan nodded. Rebante's eyes widened.

"That would be a dream come true."

"If I told you that a designer wanted you to model his clothes, how would you feel?" She asked and Rebante grinned.

"Mama, bona I would give up all the money I have to model for an international designer." Susan chuckled.

"Well I guess I made the right decision, we're heading to Paris for Paris fashion week and you are going to be walking the runway with fresh new designs."

Rebante screamed and Susan covered her ears. Rebante looked at her mother and she screamed again in disbelief. Her screams had her brothers

bursting through her bedroom door.

"Are you okay?" She nodded, answering Mooketsi and Susan looked at her boys.

"Mom are you serious?" Susan nodded and Rebantle screamed again and her brothers covered their ears.

"What's going on?"

Rebantle cleared her throat.

"Paris fashion week." She said and her face beamed with pride.

"Shut the front door!" Mooketsi exclaimed and she nodded.

"Well Reba, I am proud of you. You are surrounded by a lot of temptations in the modelling industry, you haven't succumbed to drugs or anything sinister and I am so proud." Rebantle's smile almost faltered due to the guilt. She had tried but now she made up her mind. She was not going to try them again.

"Thank you BK."

He raised his two fingers in salute as he walked out. Mooketsi walked out too and the minute he walked out, his own smile dropped. What had he ever done to make his own mother proud of him? Nothing. He swallowed and was unaware of Bokamoso's gaze on him as he walked to his own room. Mooketsi closed the door to his bedroom and threw himself on the bed. Was he really that useless? His mother was always celebrating because of his sibling's achievements while he was just there. He closed his eyes. No one noticed him in this house, not really. It was better to fade back into the background.

In Rebantle's room, Susan hugged Rebantle.

"Thanks mom and I won't let you down. I promise." She said and Susan nodded.

"Goodnight pretty girl." Rebantle grinned and Susan let go of her before she walked out. As soon as the door closed, Reba screamed into her pillow. She picked it and placed it over her chest. She should tell Hades. He was not asleep, he was probably watching a Marvel movie or something. She picked

up her phone and called him. He answered in seconds.

"Hey pretty one."

She rolled her eyes and smiled.

"Guess what..."

"I am not good at guessing Reba.."

"Urg! I am going to Paris fashion week, isn't that exciting?"

She squealed and he chuckled. He could hear the excitement in her voice and he couldn't stop the fuzzy feeling building up in his chest.

"Very exciting. We should celebrate, don't you think?" He said and she nodded.

"Absolutely! I wanted to tell you this. What are you doing tomorrow?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"Let's go watch Rora compete in their National Maths & Science Fair."

"Of course."

"Bye and goodnight Hades. I love you okay?" Hades breathed out and nodded, knowing she wasn't seeing him.

"I love you too Rebantle. Sweet dreams love."
Rebantle smiled.

"Okay night and hang up first."

"No." He said softly and she placed the phone on her chest.

"Fine. I don't want to hang up." She said softly.

He licked his lips. Meanwhile Rebantle smiled as she closed her eyes. If she was to have a boyfriend, her standards were already high because her best friend treated her like a literal queen. Minutes later, Hades was still on the other end of the line. He heard her soft breathing and he called out her name softly. There was no answer. She was probably asleep. He finally hung up and he held the phone in his hand looking at her picture which was his lockscreen. She was so beautiful. So fucking beautiful. He threw the phone on the bed and he walked out of the bedroom. Hades Hudson, only

heir to Hudson Co. But life was so fucking lonely, his father absent and he had one secret. One that he hid so well from the public and his own best friend. Fuck, even his father. He headed to his father's indoor bar and he picked up the bottle of fine whiskey. Pouring it in the glass and swirling the cognac liquid. He was fine, just like the whiskey. If only Rebantle knew the girls he had turned down for her. Other than the fact he was an heir to a huge corporation, he was just as fine as the liquor. Sharp jawline, those full lips and his hair cut in a way that complimented his whole face. Oh he had a sharp tongue but Rebantle was never at the receiving end of it. He licked his lips before he drank the bitter liquid and refilled the glass.

Susan got undercovers and she ignored that bad feeling that crept up and made her shiver. Everything was going well with her children. What

could go wrong in her family? She asked herself till she convinced herself it was the nerves from Thabis o's impromptu date.

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[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

28

The following morning

Susan woke first in the morning but she couldn't shake off the feeling that bad was going to happen or was she just filling a perfectly good day with a lot

of unnecessary doom? Maybe. Anyways, she put a smile on her face, she was going to watch Alora compete and that was something to be really proud of and be happy about.

At the university, Alora took her time to get ready. She wasn't sure if her family was coming to watch but she was going to be okay either way. Right? She stopped applying her lotion midway. It was going to hurt if they don't come, they promised and she was a person who kept her promises and she hoped everyone did keep their. She let out a sigh. She continued applying her lotion, making sure to cover every nook and crook. She tuned her mind to think of the competition, the questions she was going to be asked was everything she knew by head. She was not getting anything wrong, she swore to herself. Nope. Unless those two idiots she had as teammates had the audacity to let her down. She

rolled her eyes. Boys! Particularly that tall one whose ego annoyed her to the core.

Meanwhile in the boys' dorms, Austin was itching to talk to his therapist. He smiled as he buttoned up his shirt before he fixed his tie then wore his blazer that was adorned by badges from all the subjects and most of the school clubs he was in. He brushed his soft hair before he sprayed his cologne.

Unfortunately he did not have a roommate and that was entirely fine with him. It allowed him his own privacy and he had spent the night reading Shakespeare's Hamlet, one of his classic favourites. There was a door knock just as he was about to go. He checked the time, he had an extra hour to kill before breakfast time. He opened the door and the guy with glasses pushed them back as a smile touched his lips. He opened the door wider and he walked in before Austin closed the door.

At Lina's house, the house helper walked inside the house like she usually did on Tuesdays. The house was eerily quiet and she assumed her boss had slept in since her car was in the garage and there was no strong scent of coffee filling the air. Lina was the coffee in the morning type. She better start on breakfast before she slaved away in the huge house, it had always fascinated her how a beautiful and independent woman like her boss didn't have kids nor date but then again some of her friends had always told her that men are scared of independent women who can do everything for themselves. She got busy with breakfast for almost an hour before she walked up the stairs to her boss's room. She knocked for a few seconds and there was no answer.

"Ma'am? Good Morning. I brought your breakfast." She said at the other side of the door. Still no response. She opened the door with one hand and walked inside. She placed the tray down and moved closer to the bed. She frowned when she saw white

foam on the pillow and all over Lina's mouth. Her heart skipped several beats as she looked at her boss.

"Ma'am?" She shook her body and there was no response. Her anxiety heightened as she shook her boss again. No response. With shaky hands she touched Katalina's neck to feel her pulse, something she had watched on TV shows. She didn't feel anything. She picked her boss's hand and let it go, it was limp as it fell to the soft covers. The maid swallowed. Her boss?

"Boss Katalina?" She croaked out with a low voice. Her feet moved back on their own accord and her thigh hit the table, making her turn back and run to the door. She ran out of the house with tears blinding her. She shouldn't even jump to conclusions. She literally ran down the stairs and reached the landline. Out of breath and with sweaty shaky palms. She closed her eyes for a few seconds before she opened them and looked at the keypad to punch down the numbers for the emergency line. She pressed the keys and placed

the receiver on her ear, her shaky breath audible and her body trembling slightly at the possibility of her boss not being alive and her being the one to find her in that state.

"Hello." A voice said at the end of the line and she closed her eyes.

"Hello, I-I have an emergency." She said.

At the University, everyone who had gathered to watch the Quiz session for the fair were waiting. Only five minutes were left for the session to start and Alora was nowhere to be seen. Her teammates looked at one another, they knew it had been a bad idea to have a girl on the team but she was smart. Bk and Mooketsi chatted in low voices as Susan tapped her fingers on her thighs. She hoped Rora was okay. Maybe that was why she had a bad feeling today. Probably. She breathed out and closed her eyes. She opened them a minute later

and she saw Alora walk inside the lecture theatre with her head held high. Like always her shoes were shiny, hair tied into a tight sleek bun, blazer adorned with badges. She sat down on one of the chairs and she looked at the people watching. She spotted her mother and Susan gave her thumbs up and Alora nodded, not breaking character. It was time to begin the first round of the quiz session. Alora's gaze moved to Austin who smiled slowly and she just gave him a glare before she turned her attention to the person who was coordinating.

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[06/02, 19:36] : REBORN

In the car, Rebantle looked at Hades and smiled.

"You do know we are late."

"I know. Alora doesn't have a bone of forgiveness in her body does she?"

Reba giggled.

"Alora is just-smart and always in her own world." She said softly as she touched his shoulder and he smiled before he focused on the road.

"Hades about Paris..." she started off and bit her lower lip.

"What about it, love?" He asked and she gave an uneasy smile.

"Paris Fashion Week is about to happen soon and you're about to go back to school soon." She bit her lower lip before she stared out the window. His other hand quickly moved to touch her thigh and squeeze it to ease her tension. She smiled and turned to him.

"Talk to me Rebantle." She leaned back on the car seat.

"I thought about this. Well for months and I thought I had time, I really thought I had time and then mom told me I'm going to Paris and in two weeks or so you're going back to America for school and I-" she paused as his hand moved up and down her thigh and she placed her hand on his.

"Will you do me this one favour?" He took a right turn and she stared right ahead.

"Anything for you." Rebantle smiled. Hades was one in a million.

"I-I want to break my virginity." Silence befell the car and she watched him take a deep breath as he kept one hand on the steering wheel.

"Yeah?" He asked, trying to keep the shaky voice at bay and act casual about it. Rebantle saw him as her best friend and that was what he was to her. What he was going to be to her.

"Yeah. Uhm but..." Rebantle looked at him. She watched Hades drive into the University with his

jaws locked in place and him fully concentrating on what he was doing. He parked the car minutes later and she leaned back as the engine stopped and he faced her. His eyes staring deep into her soul as if he could read her innermost thoughts. That made her smile, how he knew her in and out.

"But?" He asked.

"I want you to break it." That earned her a confused stare.

"Hades you're the only male I trust and my virginity is dear to me, we are friends and I'm sure you have fucked more girls and you are experienced so it won't be a problem." She said and he squinted his eyes and moved his hand from her thigh to cover his face. What? He loved her more than a friend and she wanted him to be her virginity breaker.

"Hades?" He looked at her defeated. He loved her. She couldn't see that.

"Think about it. Please." And when she said please could he ever refuse her? Like if she said 'please Hades, take me with you.' He would definitely ask

her when and he would book a flight with her. He swallowed. He wasn't even experienced.

"You don't have a girlfriend currently right?" She asked. Of course he didn't. She knew that.

Rebante was silently praying he agreed to her peculiar request. This was a huge favour she was asking of him and she didn't have any other candidates, she didn't want her virginity to be taken by someone whom she would regret for the rest of her life. She trusted Hades with her life.

"Okay." Her eyes widened. What?

"You have to be more clear than that." She said.

"Okay. You'll tell me when." She squealed and undid her seatbelt to hug him, breathing in his cologne. Hades breathed against her neck. His virgin self was going to have to work hard to make the experience great for her.

"Thank you so much. Thank you so so much. I love you Hades." She said and he licked his lips.

"I love you too Reba." She broke the hug and looked

at him. She squeezed his cheek.

"Why the sour look?" He chuckled and smiled.

"Better." She pecked his cheek and moved back.

"We better get going, we're late as it is. Alora is going to kill me." Hades undid his seatbelt and got out of the car while Reba got her bag and got out as well. She had his phone and hers in her bag along with his wallet. He locked the car and he walked over to her side.

"Lead the way."

In the lecture theatre, two other schools were competing and Alora was watching by the sidelines. She was going to see her family by lunchtime. They seemed to be enjoying it as well, she hadn't seen Rebantle but it was okay. She convinced herself. She turned to her side and Austin was sitting next to her. She scowled at him while he wore an easy

smile. Her eyes fled to his blazer that had more badges than hers and that enraged her. Not the lava boiling anger but it was a subtle one that had her respecting him. Just a bit. She maintained a glare and he watched her. Fascinated.

"Robert get the hell out of my face." There was no change in his facial expression as she called him Robert.

"It's Austin." She rolled her eyes.

"Robert you're being a destruction and I annihilate distractions do you know that?"

"I'm not the one glaring am I?" He countered and she groaned in frustration.

"Die!"

"At your hands? Gladly." He said and she was perplexed. Boys would have left her alone but he was here and wasn't moved by her words. She averted her gaze and she saw Reba walk in with Hades. She blinked and let out a soft sigh, Austin observed her and he looked at the same direction she was looking at. There was hurt in her eyes, did

seeing those two hurt her? The two people walked to where she was seated and he leaned back in silence.

Reba smiled as she hugged Alora.

"Rora, so sorry I'm late."

"It's his fault." She said vehemently. Austin watched in silence. Reba waved off Alora.

"How did it go?"

"Won. Obviously, eyes on the prize Rebantle." Hades eyes locked with Austin and the guy's quiet observant nature unsettled Hades as he excused himself and walked away to find seats for him and Reba. Austin watched how Alora visibly relaxed when the guy left and Alora talked with Rebantle. Minutes later, Reba hugged a stiff Rora before she walked away.

"Robert, stop staring."

"Or what Lora?" She turned to look at him, surprised before she shot him a heated glare.

"Please die."

"The world would be losing a genius, wouldn't want such a tragedy to befall planet earth."

"Oh please! Get off your high horse Robert."

"No." He said and she fisted her hands.

"Such an ego maniac."

"Glad you know that Lora." She wanted to claw his eyeballs out. He was such a nuisance.

The next two teams to compete were called out and he grinned. Showing his colgate white teeth.

"I'll show you how it's done Lora, watch and learn."

"I hope you trip on your way down the stairs Robert and no ones performs CPR on you."

"Except you, you mean?" She groaned and picked a pen to throw his way but the pencil lead will break and she didn't want to create a mess on a clean space.

"I will enjoy your slow death."

"J'en suis sûr, Lora." (I'm sure you will, Lora) He walked away and she let out a heavy sigh. Why

wasn't Hades sparring with her? What was wrong with him? Of course he was her nemis, he stole her sister's attention from her but she was used to sparring with him and them throwing jabs at each other. He was supposed to say something snorty or sharp edged when she put the blame on him for Rebantle being late to watch her compete.

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[06/02, 19:37] : REBORN

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At Lina's house, the maid watched as Katalina's body was put in a black body bag. Goosebumps

covered her skin and she placed a protective hand over her heart. So Katalina committed suicide? It was just surprising because she had everything one could wish for but she killed herself after achieving all of this? Was she depressed? The maid asked herself as she watched the police approach her to ask questions. She folded her arms and tried to put on a brave front, she was not close with her boss but death, any kind of death rattled her to the core. She sucked in a deep breath and looked at the police officer before she started to answer his questions.

At the University, Alora sat down after they won the round they were in. Tomorrow was time for the semi-finals. Austin's school also won and it irked her. She better beat them if they meet at the finals which was such a high possibility. She leaned back on the chair as her family found their way to her.

"Alora, that was awesome!" Mooketsi exclaimed and Alora nodded.

"Thank you."

"She is so smart." Bk said quietly and Alora looked at him with a smile tugging at her lips.

"Thank you guys. Thank you for showing up." She said with gratitude filling her normally angry voice.

"We would do anything for you. I like your ponytail." She touched her head and finally smiled.

"Thanks." she said and she heard the camera click.

"Got it!" She glared at Mooketsi.

"Look, you smiling is a rarity." He defended himself. He looked at the picture. His little sister was so beautiful and smart. Brains and beauty.

"I would be forcing you to delete that but I'll just let you be." Hades and Reba made their way to them.

"You little genius." Reba said and Alora rolled her eyes, resisting the urge to smile.

"Thank you so much for coming to watch."

"Sis, I wouldn't miss it for the world. Moremi sisters for life, remember?" Rebantle said and Alora's eyes lit up. Everyone there saw that before Rebantle hugged her.

"Tomorrow we'll be here for the semi-finals." She nodded as she hugged Rebantle back. Rebantle placed her bag on the table and looked at them.

"Excuse me guys." She said before she walked down.

"Rora we brought you a home cooked meal, will you come join us?" Susan asked and she nodded.

"In a few minutes." Her siblings and mother walked away and she was left with Hades who was awfully quiet. Hades breathed out and looked at Alora who was carefully observing him.

"No remark little demon?" Alora rolled her eyes.

"I loathe you waitse." He chuckled and looked forward.

"I'm sorry." He said and Alora paused. He was sorry? He slipped his hands in his pockets

"You hate me because you think I stole your sister away from you, I took all her attention and you hating me is better than you hurting over the fact that you have to share your sister with a stranger like me who has spent most of his days with your family and been part of your family for so long that they treat me like family." Alora licked her lips. She had just wanted her sister back.

"I'm sorry Alora." He said and looked at her.

"I found a best friend in your sister and I am sorry it felt like I was replacing you in her life." Alora breathed out and sighed.

"Even if you apologised, I still loathe you." Hades chuckled and rubbed her head. She moved her head and slapped his hand.

"You're still the enemy but apology accepted."

"And you're like the little sister I never had who hates everyone."

"Get besides me satan."

He laughed and looked at her.

"Truce?"

She looked at his hand.

"I know you love my sister more than a best friend would. Don't hurt her. Truce." She shook his hand before she let it go and faked a gag.

"Let's never speak of this day again. I hate making peace with you mortal human being."

Hades chuckled.

"I forgot that you're a little demon."

"Always here to torment." She said and he nodded. She stood up and brushed her skirt to make sure it was okay. She walked away leaving Hades standing there with Rebantle's bag. Alora made her way out of the lecture theatre and as she walked out she passed Austin who looked a bit weird as he walked out of the toilets. He was fixing his shirt collars and his tie wasn't in place, he was walking besides the boy who was in glasses. When his eyes spotted her, he flashed her that hot as hell grinned and walked right along. She continued walking till she was out of the building. She now had the huge task of

looking for her mother's car.

Meanwhile in the lecture theatre, Rebantle made her way to Hades. She touched his cheek.

"What's up? You've been gloomy today." Hades breathed out. This was his best friend. She thought of him like a brother, a brother she wanted to break her virginity. Was he crazy to think that they might happen? Be together? As more than best friends?

"Reba, I love you." She smiled and kissed his cheek.

"You know I love you too Hades. You're my best friend." He shook his head, his chest rising.

"Not like a best friend. I love you Rebantle. More than a best friend would." Rebantle paused. He bit his lip, nervous. He was going to need more whiskey to deal with the rejection that would come out of this. He didn't know where he got the courage, but he fell in love and he didn't know when but he did.

"Is it because of my request earlier?" He shook his

head.

"No. I love you. I fell in love with you, your bubbly personality, your softness. Every bit of your soul, the way you accommodated me in everything Rebante. I fell in love with you even your quietness where you think you're dumb but you ask me to help and you realise you're a smart girl. Reba I fell in love with the girl in you who wanted to model before you even took the leap of faith and started." Rebante moved back a bit. Too shocked by his confession.

"Rebante I love you and I don't know how you're going to take it, I know you want to break your virginity, I know that love but you're not even 18 yet." He moved forward and cupped her cheek.

"That's too early and I know you're going to be 18 in two months but I want you to wait for me. Can you do that Reba? Wait for me?"

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Reba looked at him, the sincerity in his eyes. She licked her lips. Hades sighed and smiled.

"You don't have to answer me now." He said and she shook her head.

"I'll wait." She said. She wasn't sure she loved him like a lover and she was not sure he even knew what love was but she was going to find out. Take a chance. He let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank you. Let's go." He said and she got her bag before she took his hand and they made their way out.

By the car, Susan excused herself as the kids chatted by the boot and Alora made her way to them. Her skin already a bit red from the winter sun. She smiled. She answered the phone.

"Susan Moremi speaking hello?"

"Mrs Moremi,hello. I'm calling from Princess Marina hospital." Susan nodded. Her heart skipped. That bad feeling she had since last night.

"Ee mma."

"I'm calling because of Ms Katalina Moses." Susan held her breath. Why would the hospital call her?

"We tried to reach Mrs Moses but I couldn't and your number was scribbled on a note since the next of kin's number that we got from the health system was unreachable."

"Okay. I'm listening."

"Ms Moses is late." The lady at the other end of the line. A sharp pain hit Susan's chest.

"Late?" she asked. Trying to keep her even.

"Yes. Pill overdose. You can come view the body before the end of the day so it can be moved to the mortuary. Thank you. Have a good day Mrs Moremi." The call died and Susan slowly placed her phone on her chest. Lina died? A pill overdose meant she killed herself. Her chest heaved and she bent down to touch her knees before they failed her. What about their mother? What if this raises her blood pressure and she dies on the spot? Why couldn't Lina own up to her own mistakes instead of taking the easy way out? Why? Why was suicide the answer? She licked her lips and felt the wetness on her cheeks. She breathed in and out and straightened up to rub her cheek. She wasn't going to ruin today with this. The kids were happy and that was all she wanted. For them to be happy. Her phone rang again and she closed her eyes before she looked at the caller ID and answered.

"Good afternoon Suzie." Thabiso said and she smiled sadly.

"Hi, if this is about today's date I won't be able to

make it." She said and she looked up the sky.

"Oh. Okay, thank you for letting me know." She could hear the sad note in his voice and she breathed out.

"It's not you or anything, I just received a call that my sister is late."

"My condolences, are you okay?" Tears filled her eyes. Was she okay? When was the last time she was asked such a question?

She shook her head.

"I haven't been okay for years." She blurted and she heard his sharp intake of breath before he responded.

She rubbed her eyes. She has to be okay. She has four kids and her old mother. She has to be okay and strong for them. She has to be there for her mother. And she hated to admit that as much as her late sister had her faults, she had good traits and the part of her that remembers their childhood and their bond grieved Lina.

"I'm not okay Thabiso. I'm not. I don't think I'll be good company." She said.

"Can I come check up on you?"

"You really don't have to. I'll be okay. I have to be."

"Give me your address Susan." She rubbed her eyes as she spelt out her address and he said goodbye after extending his condolences. Susan took a moment to breathe in and out before she took a few steps but stopped, her knees weak and her heart holding on for dear life. She breathed in and out again. She has to be fine, she has to be okay. Alora has just moved on to the semi-finals and she is happy and excited. She doesn't need this. She really doesn't. She kept her head high and kept on walking.

By the car, everyone chatted and BK was asking Hades questions about schools in America which he gladly answered. Mooketsi was riling Alora up which earned him some sarcastic answers which he laughed off, with a mental note to look up some words in the dictionary. Their mother walked back

with a fixed smile and Susan's attention was on Hades.

"Hades, how is your father doing?" She asked.

"He is okay. Pretty busy with work and stuff like that."

"Your mother?" Hades swallowed.

"I haven't seen her in over a year but I think she is okay where she is." His mother was a sore topic and Rebantle gave Hades a sympathetic look which he accepted and continued talking to Bokamoso.

"Rora, we didn't tell you did we?" Rebantle started and Alora's eyes quickly moved to Rebantle.

"I'm listening. I like being kept in the loop."

"I'm going to Paris fashion week." Alora's lips downturned in pleasure.

"Being an international model has always been your dream. Congratulations." She said and Rebantle grinned.

"Thank you."

"Fate." Alora said softly. Fate was always just there to make one's dreams which were not exactly theirs but some sort of a pre-destiny come true.

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[06/02, 19:37] : REBORN

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Later that day, after Susan dropped off the kids at home she headed to the hospital to really confirm if it is Lina. She parked her car by the hospital parking lot and she calmed herself down. She was seeing yet another dead body of someone who had been close to her heart. Was this a curse? She rubbed her

eyes before she got out of the car and walked towards the reception. She kept on telling herself she was okay, death happened but she wasn't used to it. She buried her husband, her favourite sister-in-law now her only blood sister. She greeted one of the nurses.

"Hi, I'm Mrs Moremi. Came to see Katalina Moses' body." The nurse pushed back her glasses and told Su to wait to go ask further. Susan rubbed her hands together and waited. She tapped her foot lightly on the ceramic tile as she waited. A nurse walked towards her and gave her a sympathetic look. She had seen that look before and she hated that she knew the ending. She knew it solidified that her sister was gone.

"Mrs Moremi follow me." She followed the nurse to the room and she walked inside. The same bed, body covered with a white sheet. She was going to find her eyes closed, like a little angel because Katalina was beautiful but she wasn't even sure if Lina was in heaven but she only hoped. She rubbed her cheek, wiping away the lone tear that rolled

down her cheek.

"Would you like me to leave you here?" The nurse asked and Susan nodded.

This was probably the last time she was going to talk to her sister alone. The door closed and she walked closer to the bed. She lifted the sheet and just as she predicted. There she was. Tears rolled down Susan's cheeks.

"I-If you had given me time I would have forgiven you. It was easier to forgive Moremi because he was dead." She said and she used both hands to wipe her cheeks.

"Lina you are my sister, I wasn't going to be angry forever. You were a bad person but family is family right sis? No one is a saint." Susan cried into her hands. She was going to see her again someday right?

She removed her hands and sniffed, wiping her tears as she pulled a chair to sit down.

"I didn't know you wanted to kill yourself." She rubbed her eyes.

"This is the last time I'll be next to your body physically. I'll be happy though, I hope suicide gave you peace sis." Susan said and coughed looking up.

"I'll miss the good days of our sisterhood. You're the only sister I had, Lina. I'll hold every memory close and I'll be happy okay? I'll make sure my mother is happy. Goodnight my Lina, may your soul find the peace it has been yearning for." Susan kissed her fingers and placed them on Lina's forehead. More tears rolled down her cheeks.

She placed her head on the bed and cried. Cried all her pain away by Katalina's corpse. Half an hour later, with red eyes she lifted her head and smiled tearfully. She got up and covered her body. Now the daunting task of telling her mother that she lost her daughter. Tears filled her eyes again. She opened the door just as the nurse was about to knock.

"I'll contact a mortuary to come get her tomorrow. Thank you." The nurse nodded.

"It gets better. My condolences." Susan nodded and walked away. She searched her bag for her

cellphone and she took it out. She called her mother just as she walked out of the hospital and the cool winter air hit her face, getting colder as it dried her tears. She bit her lip, waiting for her mother to pick up. Her mother answered after a few attempts of trying to reach her.

"Hello ngwanaka, how are you?" She asked with a happy voice and Susan couldn't bring herself to break her mother's spirits and trust. She couldn't.

"Hi mama." Her voice shook.

"Are you okay?" Susan shook her head.

"Mama, is it okay if you take the bus to Gaborone?" She asked and waited for an answer. She wasn't going to break such news to her mother over the phone.

"What's wrong? You don't sound good."

"I'll tell you when you come here." Susan said.

"Okay. Katalina told me to tell you that she is sorry." Tears rolled down Susan's cheeks.

"Ee mma. I forgive her."

"Glad to hear that. When I get there tomorrow you girls should make peace."

"Ee mma. Talk later mama." Susan said with tears in her eyes. She cut the call and wiped her eyes. She dragged her feet to the car, she needs to get home to the kids.

Thabiso parked his car by the gate, Susan lived in such a nice secure neighbourhood. He liked that. He took his phone in an attempt to dial her but a car parked next to his. He put his phone down. It was Susan inside the car. He got out of the car just as she placed her head on the steering wheel. He walked to the car and knocked on the window. She lifted her head and the streaks the tears left behind on her cheeks were visible as well as her swollen eyes. She unlocked the car and he opened the door. She sniffed and forced a smile.

"I'm totally fine Thabiso. Just fine." she said with a

voice that was on the verge of breaking. She was breaking. He took both her hands and helped her up on her feet. He pulled her close and she cried into his shirt.

"I'm tired. I am so so tired." She said and he rubbed her back.

"I-I want to take a break from the sad stuff. I-"

"It's okay Su."

She pulled back and rubbed her tears.

"I'm not good company." She said and licked her lips as she looked up. He held her face and rubbed her cheeks.

"I'm not looking for company, you need someone in your corner." She looked at him. This was not a first good impression. She was a mess and now had to deal with funeral arrangements. She licked her lips again as he rubbed her cheeks in a loving manner.

"I can't say it will be okay because life always throws obstacles our way but it does get better even if the pain never fully goes away." Susan

nodded. Fresh tears filling her eyes while they still locked eyes. He rubbed her cheeks with his thumb before he rubbed her lips and lowered his head. Susan closed her eyes as his lips touched hers and they kissed.

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[06/02, 19:37] : REBORN

33

Susan opened her eyes and moved back.

"Too early." She said softly and Thabiso nodded. He pulled her back into his arms and rubbed her back.

"You are not alone."

He said and she nodded. She was in his embrace for over ten minutes as he kept silent. When was the last time she had ever been in a man's arms? More than a decade and it felt comforting. She closed her eyes and inhaled his cologne. Moremi wore cologne because she asked him to, otherwise he said it was too expensive. She sighed. He was not here and she shouldn't feel guilty about being with another man. She deserved to move on. If it does not work out, she will try again.

She broke the hug but he kept his arms around her.

"Thank you."

He smiled.

"You're beautiful." He said and she looked down. She lifted her eyes seconds later.

"I forgot how this works. Honestly. How am I supposed to behave Thabiso?" She asked.

"Like yourself, don't worry about that. How are you feeling?"

“Being super mom is so exhausting. I have three more kids who are not legally adults, not like I would abandon my kids when they are legally adults. I manage my daughter and son and I live with a literal prodigy in the house and my son who is always in his room. Their father died when they were young and they haven’t had a father figure for more than a decade. Especially my two younger ones, they barely remember him.” She blinked back tears.

“I wasn’t dating because I didn’t want to complicate their lives, I also was so focused on working as well to make their lives really good. They deserved everything even if I had nothing.”

Thabiso’s hands moved to her shoulders.

“You’ve been shouldering the burden all alone Susan.”

“I had to. I was all they had. My in-laws didn’t care about them.” She said.

“My mother doesn’t live here and my late sister, well she had her own vendetta.” She said. She knew Thabiso has been Emily’s lawyer. She wasn’t about

to reveal that Lina killed Emily. Maybe he would think she had a hand in it when she didn't. She didn't know until she came to her place a few days ago.

"You have such a good heart." He said and kissed her tear streaked cheek. She smiled.

"Should I stay a little longer?" She nodded and he hugged her again. She sighed. How was she going to tell her mother tomorrow? The lights went on in the house, her kids were waiting for her. She moved back minutes later, she looked at him.

"I have to go. The kids are waiting for me."

"I'll call you later." He said and kissed her cheek before he walked to her car. She smiled and rubbed her eyes as she watched him. She watched him get inside the car then he rolled down the window.

"Get inside the yard, I'll drive off after you get in." She smiled and walked to her car and started it. She pressed the gate remote on her key before she reversed. She carefully drove into the yard and closed the gate but not before she saw his car drive

off. She parked her car and she sighed. The kids were going to see but she had to tell them eventually that their aunt was not alive anymore, regardless of the animosity she shared with Lina. Alora was going to be done in two or three days and there can be a quiet funeral with her work colleagues and their small family. Nothing too big and too long. The sooner she got this over and done with, the better.

The following day

Like clockwork, the Moremi family headed to Alora's semi-finals to watch her win as usual and they had to wait for her to compete on the last day, for the final and other activities at the Maths & Science fair took place. Like usual, Rebantle was with Hades and she watched carefully as Alora and Hades shared some very brutal words. She was used to

this. Rebantle thought. Her mind was on Paris. She had started her research on Paris. If she had to learn French or anything of that sort. She assumed she had to, for basic communication there. She looked at Alora.

“Rora?”

“Yes?” She said as she blew her hair away from her face, she wore her hair down this time and she looked beautiful, with no crease on her clothes.

“Teach me French.” She said. Alora had recently started self-learning French and Rebantle knew Alora was a fast learner whereas she didn’t have the dedication to school or for learning that way but she had to learn either way. If she could get just Bs and a few Cs for her finals she will be good because school was such a huge chore for her.

“Of course. I already know the basics so it won’t be hard to teach you. Need that for Paris?”

“I think so. It will be nice if I can communicate with the other models right?” She said and Alora nodded.

“After this, we’ll get started.”

“Thanks sis.” Alora saw Austin with the corner of her eye. They were going to meet at the finals and she hoped she was going to win. Okay she hated doubting her skills but she doubted them now. He was good and it was no secret. She sighed and cracked her knuckles as Rebantle talked with Hades.

That evening, the kids welcomed their grandmother with happy hearts and the old lady smiled. Susan did a marvellous job with the kids. She loved all her grandchildren.

“Where is Alora?”

“School competitions.” Mooketsi answered and the old lady nodded as they took her small bag.

She looked at Susan. She could tell something was bothering Susan and she had found missed calls from landline numbers. She was always wary of calling back strange numbers so she did call back.

Susan hugged her mother.

“Thank you for coming here. I appreciate it.”

“Something is bothering your souls ngwanaka.”
Susan didn’t want to cry yet. She forced a smile.

“Did you eat mama? Rebantle is on cook duty.”

“Nkuku do you want mac and cheese? That’s the only meal I have perfected.” She said as she walked to the kitchen.

“Anything is fine.”

“On it. Guys prepare to be amazed, Chef Reba is going to make you guys a dinner to die for.”
Everyone chuckled. BK excused himself as Mooketsi changed channels.

Susan led her mother to her room.

“You can freshen up mama.” She said. The old lady nodded and sat down on the soft mattress.

“I have to call Katalina. Her phone has not been going through or we should go to her house.” Susan just nodded and closed the door. She covered her mouth tearfully as she briskly walked to her

bedroom. She closed the door and slid down the door as she cried. Her mother is going to be so broken, what if her mother blames her? She covered her mouth as she cried. She had to tell her mother today.

Hours later, after the kids were asleep Susan walked to her mother's room and she sat on the bed.

"Mama I'm sorry I can't take you to Katalina's place." Susan said and she paused.

"It's okay, tomorrow is another day."

Susan shook her head.

"Mama you'll never see Lina again. I'm so sorry." She said as tears filled her eyes. The old woman was confused.

"What do you mean?" Ma Susan asked Susan.

"Lina is no more mama! She is no more!" She said and she looked at her mother through teary eyes.

The old woman clutched her heart, hoping Susan didn't mean what she was saying.

“Mama Lina committed suicide, she is no more.” Ma Susan’s eyes filled with tears and Susan moved closer to hug her mother.

“She is no more mama.” She said. For the first in years, she heard her mother cry, her heart breaking with every sob her mother released. This was going to raise her mother’s blood pressure.

“I am so sorry.” She said. It was never going to be okay for her mother.

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A WEEK LATER

[06/02, 19:37] : REBORN

The short ceremony ended as Katalina Moses was finally buried at her final, resting place. It had been a quiet and short ceremony. Only a few colleagues and the only family she had were present. Susan hid her puffy eyes behind her glasses and her kids had come just because Katalina had been her sister not that Katalina had been a loving aunt towards them. Ma Susan had wanted her child to be buried in her yard and Susan was preparing to drive back home before mid day. She had managed to convince her mother that she was going to leave with them. It was not wise to leave a mourning old woman all alone especially when she had high blood. Rebantle checked her watch. She had convinced her mother to go to the party and assured her that she was going to be safe with Hades as her escort. Her mother had agreed when she had said Hades was going to be there. Alora watched in boredom. She wanted to go home. Katalina was not her favourite person and what she

hated was how this hurt their mother and grandmother otherwise, she didn't care.

At the therapist's office, Austin looked straight into his therapist's eyes.

"Austin, you never told me how you felt about the divorce."

"Indifferent. Whether they were together or not, I was on my own James. It didn't make any difference whether they were together."

"You don't love them?" He chuckled.

"Love is fake James. I go with facts, logical things."

"But you stop talking about Alora." Austin smiled.

"You should know me by now James. Alora fascinated me and caught my attention. She is smart, looks like a volcano ready to explode."

"You care for her then?"

“James you do know I don’t care about anyone other than myself.” His therapist noted that down. He knew his client was a narcissist and he didn’t hide it, he had his own interests at heart.

“So let’s say you’re attracted to her.” He nodded.

“Correct. I am, not going to act on that.”

“Of course not, you’re with another person.”

“Yes. I love myself but I’m not that much of an-“ he paused. Their sessions were unfiltered and this 15 year old boy tested his patience more than any client has ever done and he was such a challenge. Everyday there was something new about him. He knew he had a pen IQ that doubles most human beings’ intelligence and his memory. How remembered almost everything was amazing. He had a flaw, one he swore he was going to work on without assistance.

“School work is okay?” Austin chuckled. Was that a trick question? Why wouldn’t it be okay?

“Concentration?”

“I don’t need Adderall. I made it clear, the day I want an Adderall prescription just say no. I am perfectly capable of functioning on my own.”

“You’re not invincible Austin, you’re human.

“Really?”

“We’ll never speak of the prescription then.”

“Good. About the girl who caught your attention.”

“Instead of fresh air, you can say she is an inferno.”
Attraction were things he could deal with on a logical level. The body had it’s own biology and how the chemicals worked hence leading to sex. He had never had to compete because he was the best at whatever he did and after meeting Alora, he really was into competing. Just to beat her and watch her face turn red like she did when his school won as usual. It was never even doubted but she tried. At second place.

“Do you think you’ll love anyone other than yourself?” James asked.

“No.” Austin deadpanned and his therapist noted

that down. He saw the way Austin spoke of Alora but he kept his observations to himself.

Austin straightened up. His weekly therapy sessions were usually an outlet to pick James' mind on topics and his other therapists had not lasted because he was too smart for them to the point of doing the job for them but James matched his questions and usually left him with a lot to think about.

The eerie silence that filled the car after the funeral was deafening. Susan had come with the Ipsum that had all of them inside. Rebantle put on her headphones as she listened to music while Alora paged her 50 page French novella. It was a start to learning how to understand the language and the fact that Austin. God she hated that ego maniac, knew French better than her and he ousted her school team in the finals irritated the hell out of her.

She breathed in and picked her highlighter out of her pencil case to highlight a few words. Mooketsi on the other hand played video games on his phone. He stole a glance at everyone in the car. Everyone was minding their own business and their grandmother was still grief stricken. She glanced over at Alora who was really into that book. Bokamoso was fast asleep. How did he fall asleep so fast? Next to him Rebantle leaned back with her headphone on and closed her eyes. He went back to playing his video game. The sooner they arrive the better for everyone.

When his father had died, he had been too young to understand but now, his aunt was gone and it took a toll on his mother and grandmother. He sighed.

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[06/02, 19:37] : REBORN

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Ma Moremi looked around her home stead. Susan didn't even bother with them, she hated that it took such adverse poverty to make her regret how she treated Susan and her children, including Alora. The children barely ate anything and all her daughters knew were men and popping more babies. She wouldn't know where to find Susan now and surely her son must be turning in his grave. She shook her head. Funny thing was that she had never cared for Susan even when her son was very much alive, she had wished her son would marry a beautiful woman from the village. One who would relate to her not a working woman who knew what she wanted and made her son change. She closed her eyes. Tired. She wouldn't know the first thing to do so she can apologise to Susan. She felt like her days were near,

she would finally meet her son and her daughter.

At Susan's house, she made sure her mother was in her room. Ma Susan silently got under covers and Susan sighed. She closed the door and took her phone as she dialed Thabiso.

"Hey." She said the minute he answered the phone.

"Are you good? How did the funeral go?" He asked and she opened her bedroom door, taking off her high heels as she walked to the door.

"It was brief. I don't think my mother will ever move on from this." She said sighing.

"It's painful to lose a child, no matter what age you lose the child. The pain stays with you." He said with a sad note and Susan nodded. She couldn't imagine losing any of her four children.

"All I can hope for is that it gets better for her."

“We can only hope.” Susan leaned back on the bed as she told Thabiso her thoughts. It was like a breath of fresh air to have someone listen to her and not feel overwhelmed with her feelings. She loved her children, no doubt but she couldn’t talk to them anyhow. Her mother didn’t need additional stress.

“You do know, you’ll need to have someone look at the contract. Just so they don’t exploit Rebantle.”

“I know. Can you recommend someone? Maybe next week or so, will you meet Alora and show her the house. Explain everything to her, she is young but she understands a lot of things.”

“So you told me.” He said and she laughed softly. They hadn’t gone to their first date yet but they clicked. Why had she never been out after her husband died.

Meanwhile in the other bedroom, Rebantle sat on the bed and sent Hades a text. They were leaving at 6pm and he promised to bring her back home

before midnight. She hoped he enjoyed the party and she had promised herself. No drugs. That had been the last and first time. She had her future to think of. She smiled as he responded her text. They texted back and forth as she grinned.

This was the peacefulness that reigned in Susan's household. She had done a marvelous job at raising her four kids but the only question was will the kids be responsible adults in future? Will they disappoint her in their adult life? With all their uniqueness and ad,orable talents would they people that were looked into in society or would they develop habits that would destroy the good work their mother had done? We are yet to find out.

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EIGHT YEARS LATER

[06/02, 19:37] : REBORN

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EIGHT YEARS LATER

Alora quickly walked out of class as soon as the lecture was done. She pulled down her beret as her boot heels clicked along the pavement. Her bag that had more of her books was on her shoulder. Her phone ringing made her stop halfway to take out the phone. She better answer it before she gets inside the library. She looked at the caller Id and sighed.

“Hello Reba, how are you?”

“Breathing. Are you busy?”

“I have to go into the library, is it okay if I call later?”

“Alora you are going to work yourself to death.”

Alora sighed as she looked at her boots, trying to

see if the leather was okay.

“I have assignments and I took on more programmes for this final semester.” She said as a matter of fact, she had to get above 90s in all her courses or else this would have been for nothing. All those awards she collected over the years would have been for nothing. She got into one of the best Universities worldwide and she damn as well deserved to graduate with the highest grades.

“Okay.” Reba’s voice went soft. Rebantle was retreating. Alora mentally slapped herself.

“I promise I’ll call. I never break my promises.” Alora said. In a voice softer than the one she usually uses.

“I started attending my tutorials today.”

“That’s a great achievement. I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah! Let me not keep you. You’ll call?”

“I never break my promises Reba. Bye.” She hung up and she put her phone back in her bag. Alora walked to the library, she should have gotten coffee for that energy boost but she’ll survive. She said as

she walked to the Princeton University Library.

Rebante bit her lip as she looked at the small apartment that she stayed at with Hades. She pulled her oversized sweater to her now gangly body. It has been three years since she stopped modelling but it still felt like yesterday when she had to fully take on the dark side of modelling she never knew existed. Tears filled her eyes and she wiped them. She was making progress. She and Hades were making progress. Even if the progress was maybe a week long before they reverted to their old habits or fuelled each other's habits that they were secretly fighting in their shared apartment. She sighed and got up from the couch and walked to the kitchen to get a black plastic to clear the bottles and the syringes on the table. She threw them inside. It was day 2 of her being clean, she should maintain that. Her phone started ringing

on the sofa and she let go of the plastic to answer.

“Hello?”

“Hi Reba, are you free to pick up Emory from school?” Her mother asked.

Reba breathed in and out.

“Please. Her father and I will be home late from work.”

“Okay. I’ll try.”

“Are you okay?”

“Ee mma. J ust had to attend a lesson.”

“I’m proud of you for giving your education a chance.”

She nodded as she brought her hand to her face.

“It’s turning out to be okay.”

“You’re never too old to go to school. You and Hades should visit I am still not comfortable that you decided to move out to co-habit.” Rebantle sighed.

“Mama I’m an adult. You don’t have to micromanage me anymore.” Susan huffed.

“I wasn’t micromanaging you Rebantle. I was doing what’s best for you.” Her mother said and Rebantle nodded slowly.

“Okay. I’ll pick Emory up.”

“Thank you. Will it be okay with you if you can wait till I come back home or mraagwe Emory. You can spend the night and drive back home in the morning.”

“Ee mma. I’ll be by her school in an hour.”

“Thank you and I love you.”

“I love you too mama.” The call cut and she placed the phone down. She breathed into her sleeves and she continued to pick up everything. Now she had to deal with her youngest sibling who was too inquisitive. She sighed. The door opened and in walked Hades. She folded her arms and looked at his tall frame. He was still as handsome as the day they met when they were not even teenagers. Her best friend for over a decade, you could get drunk

without the whiskey. That was how intoxicating he was.

“H-how was it?” She asked as she moved closer. His arms wrapped around hers. His alcohol tinted breath hit her in the face and tears filled her eyes.

“Hades, you promised.” She said softly and he rubbed her cheek.

“I’m so sorry. I was so stressed.”

“Hades I’m two days clean and you promised..” her voice cracked and he held her.

“I’m sorry my pretty girl.”

“We need to do better Hades. Please.” He looked up. He had such a stressful day, he had to have something a bit strong to take away the stress.

“Ee mma.” The funny thing was that they reached lows were they were enabling each other and there were days where they made pledges to be each other’s keepers. They had kept their addictions private and their closest did not know anything and they thought they could beat them all alone. Just

the both of them in their small apartment.

“I have to pick up Emory from school. I’ll call later, we’re still watching Marvel together. I’ll video call.” She said softly. She was so precious. He kissed her lips softly and she kissed him back, her arms wrapping around his neck.

“I’ll never quit you though. I can’t quit you.” She smiled.

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[06/02, 19:38] : REBORN

Reba moved back. They might be fucked up so bad, letting their addctions take control but they loved each other. She wasn't sure who needed the other the most but she couldn't imagine herself without him. She slid her hands in his pockets to take his car keys.

"I'll call. I promise." she walked out and he pulled her back.

"Your phone is on the sofa."

"Oh!" She walked to the sofa to pick her phone before she walked out of the door.

"Reba, are you sure you should be driving?"

She nodded.

"I'm clean Hades. I can still drive."

He sighed and leaned back. He nodded. She unlocked his car and got into it. She closed her eyes. It had hurt when the modelling industry spit her out and it wasn't because of the drugs, no one knew about that except Hades and she had done a great job of hiding it.

"You are no longer what we're looking for." They had said. They found the next big thing and discarded her like that. She tried brand modeling but she was either too short for them or too skinny. She had cried her eyes out. It had been so bad because she could remember her first week in Paris, they had said she was fat and needed to shed the kilos. That birthed a massive eating disorder. Tears filled her eyes, it was Reba the model. The one who was the centre of attention. She had travelled the world but she was sure she now many of the washed up models that everyone forgot. She sighed. She looked at the door and Hades was still standing there. He smiled at her and she smiled back. She loved him. She started the car and reversed out of the parking spot.

At the primary school, Reba called her mother to tell her she was by the gate to pick Emory up.

"Thank you so much Reba."

"Ee mma. She is coming." Reba said as she got out of the car so her sister can see her. Emory's face lit up as she saw her older sister.

"Hiiii Reba!" The seven year old squealed as she hugged her older sister. Reba rubbed her back.

"Hey Em. How are you doing my little power puff girl?"

Emory grinned.

"We are going to watch it together right?" She asked with a grin.

"Yes." Reba led Emory to the car. It was clean and there was nothing incriminating inside the car.

"Reba?"

"Hhhmmm?"

"Why don't you visit?" Reba sighed.

"I'm always busy my little girl." Emory nodded and sat in the middle where the seatbelt was easier to put on.

"Is it because I'm a baby?"

Reba chuckled as she started the car.

"Not at all. We are all so busy, my baby. Bk is always working and he has a wife now, I'm busy with school and Alora is busy with school that's why you see her twice a year. Mooketsi works in Francistown and it's usually so difficult for him to get off days. We all love you the same." She said and Emory nodded.

"Mommy and daddy will be late today so sister Rebantle is in charge." Emory grinned, she was the lighter version of Susan.

"You love that right? Let's go." She reversed out of her parking spot and joined the road. She kept telling herself to keep her grip on the steering wheel, she was still a good driver.

Alora finally closed her books. Now she had to go

back to her dorm and work her behind off yet again. It was a vicious cycle. She picked her phone and she logged into her Facebook account.

'Austin Matthews. Taking the Corporate World by Storm' the link for an online article. She was tempted to read it but she put her phone down. The last time she had crossed paths with him was when she was 18, after her A levels and was busy with interviews at different schools. She closed her eyes as her mind took her back to the flashback years ago.

She walked through the hallway as she made her way to the Dean's office. Her interview at Stanford was to begin in four hours and she had time to take a tour of the University and await her admission. As fate would have it, she met Austin.

"We meet again." She had observed him over the years, his changing character and how he behaved around different people. To her he seemed phony and fake.

"Alora. I-" he was cut off by the Dean.

"Alora welcome. Austin will be your guide for today to show you around the University."

"Of course. Thank you." The man walked away and she was left with this ego maniac.

"I beat your school last year."

He shrugged.

"That's because I was not there Alora." He said smoothly as he fixed his blazer. She hated how confidence fit him like a second skin and how he wasn't fearful of anything.

"I still hate you."

"Are we still going to be rivals in the same school Alora?" He asked as he started walking, all six foot five of him and she couldn't reach his height even in her heels which she wore as an armour. That girls can do anything even in heels. She knew he was the son of a woman whose work ethic she admired. That woman was a literal powerhouse and turned Matthews Incorporated into a multi-million business.

Just as they walked in silence, Alora recognized one of the Minister's daughter make her way to them holding iced coffee in her hand.

"Austin, I've been looking for you. I've been assigned to you so you can show me around."

"How is your father by the way Chedu?" He asked and Alora had to stop herself from rolling her eyes back.

"Is this-Alora? Oh!" Chedu said dismissively as all her attention befell Austin. She softened her voice as she told him about her father's grave health. Austin's eyes fled to Alora as she folded her arms.

"Are we going to see the school?" She said and Chedu rolled her eyes.

"We get it you're not used to things like this Alora."

Alora thought better than to fight with this airhead who was here only because of her father's connections and not because she earned the spot. Chedu moved closer to Alora and she spilt the coffee on Alora's white shirt sleeves.

"My mistake, now the tour can continue." She said in a spiteful manner and Alora was torn between losing her temper or getting the coffee stain off. She chose the latter and quickly ran to find a bathroom where she can try her damndest to remove the stain. She found one and got inside, her mind already in utter chaos at the stain on her shirt. She had an interview and-

She used a paper towel in the bathroom and wet it before she put it over the stain. Should she remove her shirt and wash the sleeve and dry it with the air dryer? She asked herself as she started unbuttoning the shirt. The door opened and she glared at the tall figure that walked in. He was calm and she wondered if anything ever rattled his quiet demeanor.

"It's not going to come off." He said.

"I fucking know Robert." She blew off some of her steam. She had chosen this outfit perfectly and some airhead ruined it.

"And what was that? How is your father by the

way?" she repeated in that irritating voice of Chedu's.

"I was making conversation." She had stopped unbuttoning her shirt and she picked another paper towel.

"You behave differently around different people. Maybe you're being fake with me Robert." He kept his knowing eyes on her as he removed his blazer.

"I don't need your help Robert."

"I know Alora,." He walked closer and she sighed. She buttoned her shirt and tucked it tightly.

"You're still narcissistic."

"I know." He helped her wear his blazer and she turned to him.

"Pull back the sleeves." His blazer engulfed her frame. He did and she didn't say thank you as she walked out. Alora had to say she did get a place in Stanford University but she declined it and went to Princeton instead.

She shook her head, pushing the memory back as she stood up. She walked out of the library and the minute she was out, regardless of the time difference she called her sister and she fought to hide her smile when she heard Emory at the end of the line.

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[06/02, 19:38] : REBORN

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Hades picked up his leather jacket immediately after the phone call with Reba. It was hard to quit something that was in your system and he guessed

that as much as he had warned Rebantle against drugs, she still did them. He rubbed his face, she did the drugs and she hid it so well that he found out a year ago about the drugs when he had asked her to move in with him. He had needed somewhat a steadying hand so he can ease up on the alcohol. Reba had been reluctant to move in with him after she had preached independence to her mother the minute the modelling agencies had dropped her like a hot potato years prior to their cohabitation.

Wanting the next hot thing, much more thicker models and Rebantle no longer fit their criteria. She had been broken. So broken and he didn't know how to comfort her because modelling was all she knew. Rebantle breathed and lived for modelling. He locked his lips, now contemplating his decision.

Their romantic relationship was so complicated and he didn't want to delve into the complexities of their relationship. He should be helping her fight this, he really should. She was two days clean and he should be clean too. With her. He leaned back against the wall, phone in his pocket. The voices in his head, the ones that could only be silenced by

some strong alcohol got louder. They got really loud and he groaned as he touched his head. Hades straightened up and sighed. This was the last time. The very last time he is doing this. He got out of the house and locked it before he reached for his phone to call for a cab to take him to a bar, any open bar in the city.

At Susan's house, Susan watched as Rebantle put Emory to sleep. She folded her arms.

"Reba you're still too young to settle. I don't even condone you're cohabitation with Hades. Yes he is a good boy but I don't condone it. He may be a distraction to your education." Reba sighed. Her mother wouldn't understand.

"I'm okay. Let me go sleep." She said as she held her sleeves with her fingers and flashed a smile heading to her bedroom. Their step father wasn't a bad man or anything but it had been weird to have

one, as old as they were. They never really got used to him but he tried so hard. Rebantle mused. She opened her bedroom door and got in before she locked it. She removed the oversized hoodie and walked to the mirror as she looked at her slender arms in the long sleeve vest. She closed her eyes, modelling had been turned out to be her worst nightmare. The things she never got over and would be embedded in her memory forever. She walked to the bed and sighed. Hades was probably sleeping now and she better not disturb him. Day two and she already wanted a fix to numb the thoughts and memories. Her mind took her to Paris fashion week. Her first international modelling gig and how it left a bitter memory. The first of many.

Eight years ago at Paris, now newly of age Reba had been so excited. The city and the lights consumed her and she had been smiling all the way to her hotel room with her mother. Her sizes were taken and she couldn't stop telling Hades about how successful the show was going to be, the after party

that had all the models and how she was going to mingle with the who's and who's of the modelling industry. It was all a fairytale for a locally born and bred young African model with the skin colour that fascinated everyone. Even on the runway as she strutted, the crowd had been pleased with her. How she was effortless and otherworldly. A Nubian Queen, she had been called. That had her smiling backstage throughout the changes in her wardrobe. One thing, that should have been a red flag was how one of the managers at the back kept complimenting her frame and how exquisite she would look if she tried other types of modelling. Her young mind had not caught on to the sexual innuendos that were assumed and she had smiled and laughed with them, she had brushed off the way her body was touched all in the name of praising it and her African figure. She had missed that as well smiled pushing him back. She had missed how she had been photographed nude while changing because somehow they were too slick to be seen. Big mistake.

Rebamedi wiped her tears. The last was what haunted her day in and day out. She had hid the blackmail, the racist slurs thrown at her, the manipulation from her mother, the sexual assaults and all the bad things no one cared to warn her about. Her mother had worked so hard to make her the young lady she was and she wasn't going to ruin that. She rubbed her arms and breathed out before she got under covers. If she sleeps now, the urges will hopefully rest for the day. She closed her eyes in an attempt to allow sleep to whisk her away.

Susan wore her nightdress before she got in bed with her husband Thabiso. She settled comfortably in bed and he pulled her closer.

“You look bothered.”

“I-I'm not just that I'm still not okay with Reba living

with Hades.”

“She shouldn’t even live with him, they are not married. So you allow these kids to get away with everything.”

“I can’t always monitor them, they are adults and allowed to make their own decisions even if those decisions hurt them.” Thabiso sighed.

“You’re their mother. You know best.” Susan nodded. They were a week away from Katalina’s death anniversary. Her mother hasn’t been the same since and it was by some miracle that her mother was still alive.

“I don’t know how mama is going to handle this year’s death anniversary. It always leaves her so weak.” Thabiso kissed her forehead.

“She has learned to live with the pain.” Susan sighed.

“Lina was her youngest, it hurts no matter what age.” Thabiso nodded yet again.

“But she was not a good sister or so you’re said.”

Susan paused. She never really told anyone the full extent of her sister's evilness has she? She sat upright.

"This is just pillow talk and it won't be used against me akere?"

"Why would I use it against you?" She shrugged.

"Let me tell you all about my sister. I'll start from the top. I know it's bad to talk I'll of the dead but it's not I'll if it's the truth is it?"

"No it's not."

Susan brought her hands together and looked at her husband before she started speaking. She knew he was Emily's lawyer and he had helped Alora with her inheritance. Inheritance that Alora kept saying she had plans for but she has never touched a dime.

"Lina and I grew up fine I guess. I was the older sister, the one she looked up to. I was older by three years which is nothing really looking at it now. I studied journalism and she studied something to do with business. Things were okay, I was used to the fact that she got a better job and she looked down

on people because of their wealth status. Lina was a hard worker Thabiso but in all her hard work she never lasted in relationships.”

“Successful women don’t. I see that with the lawyers at my firm. The female ones.”

“I don’t think it’s that, they have this hyper independence that they don’t need anyone and it kills them but okay moving on with the story, she achieved everything she ever wanted and more while I chose to fall in love with a man I put through school with my own money regardless of the fact that his family hated me.”

Thabiso’s eyes widened. When women love, they love hard. She put a man through school and he cheated on her. Wow!

“I was that in love. We built our family and he got a good job and all. Lina basked in her success and wouldn’t stop reminding me how I married poor and that I could do better.”

Thabiso listened as Susan went on.

“Fast forward, my husband died and I found out that

the child my sister in law had been staying with had been his from a side chick. The gist of it was that she impregnated herself from the sperm in the condom but the fact that he still cheated gutted me you know.”

Thabiso never spoke of his clients but he knew Emily was one of the successful ones that had multiple one night stands and he asked himself what led her to the decision of choosing Moremi to be her child’s father. Was it because he had kids and was married and she deemed him a better candidate?

“Turns out my sister knew and when it came to light, I saw my sister’s brutality. She wanted to fight me tooth and nail for Alora. She even got me fired from the job she found for me on some she knew a better candidate.”

“Wow!”

“It gets worse, it gets really worse. She apologised to me and like a fool I forgave her. We were okay and stupidly I told her a lot of stuff and over two

years she got closer to my kids. They loved her. She was aunty Lina who got them everything they wanted.” Thabiso rubbed her arm.

“Guess what she did, she used that information against me, she went to the media and I was the laughing stock. She told them everything.” Thabiso remembered when Emily’s name had been in the media after her death and he read the story.

“As if that was not enough, she kidnapped Alora and Mooketsi since they went to school together and they were close in age. She kidnapped my children and she threatened to kill me to get Alora.” Susan said and wiped her tears.

“She poisoned my kids, she wanted to kill me. She said we didn’t have to fight I just had to give her Alora and she would let Mooketsi go. Why would I love the child of a side chick and not try to get rid of her? She had someone almost kill me and I pleaded to her, I have literally scars from the knife I was threatened with.”

“The one’s on your wrists?” Susan nodded.

“It would seem like I killed myself and I later involved the police and managed to get my kids. I would have never done that to her, she was my only sister. Even if she was infertile she was not going to die without a child. Surrogacy would have been okay. I would have been her surrogate if she asked.”
Thabiso shook his head.

“Let me get this straight, she kidnapped the children.”

“Correct.”

“You didn’t want to fight her so you just tried to talk to her?”

“Yes. And she sent someone to try and kill me even after I begged her to let the kids go.”

“Didn’t the police put her in custody?”

“I dropped the charges and got a protection order. I didn’t want to be in the media again.”

“But you still hate her.”

“Not as much since she is dead. I loved her. She was my sister.”

Thabiso shook his head. He was confused at how good this woman was when she almost died and she let her sister roam free like that.

“I’m surprised. You should have let her go to jail.”

“Maybe I wanted her to get redemption and maybe I wanted her to have her kids adopted or via a surrogate and feel how painful it is to have your life threatened and someone casually kidnap your kids even though you trusted them.”

“You wanted revenge?”

“A part of me did but I let it go because she was infertile and I figured her heart was too dark to even love an infant. But I did forgive her till she was dead.”

“That sounds like a movie.”

Susan chuckled.

“It sure does but it’s in the past, she is gone so...”

Thabiso pulled her to him.

“I’m sorry you went through all of that.”

“I’m sorry I allowed myself to go through all of that.”

Susan sighed. She had skipped one detail.

“There is something I skipped.”

“Oh?”

“A few days before she killed herself, Lina confessed something to me with the hope that I would forgive her.”

“I’m listening.”

“She confessed to killing Emily so she could get Alora. I don’t know how she killed Emily but she confessed to it.” Thabiso let go of Susan.

“She killed her?” Susan swallowed.

“Yeah!”

“Wow! If she had been alive she could have been convicted. Murderer is serious. Your sister was a psychopath.”

“I see it now. She wanted what she couldn’t have and did everything in her power to get what she wanted.”

Thabiso nodded and shook his head. Susan yawned.

She was getting rather sleepy.

“Goodnight.”

“Night.” He kissed her cheek and she turned on her side to sleep. Thabiso sat there, wide awake. He was processing all he had been told in this short hour.

At the club, Hades ordered his third glass of whiskey when someone sat next to him. He turned to look at the person and even in his drunk state, he could vividly remember him. Recognition hit Austin and he leaned back. Alora had been in his thoughts of late and this guy might just be the key. He remembered him from the time he saw Alora with her sister and he had been there.

Hades drank his whiskey quietly as Austin ordered his drink. He was just here, passing by before he went home even though he preferred to drink in the

comfort of his own home.

Hades could feel the gaze on him and he turned to face him.

“Are you judging me?” Austin turned his head.

“Merely observing...”

“Hades.”

He knew who he was as well. Who didn't know Hudson Inc's sole heir? Even though he hadn't assumed position of CEO like he was currently occupying at Mathews Co. Well interim CEO that is.

“I'm just observing Hades.”

“Doesn't look like it.” Hades retorted. This guy had an aura of superiority and it irked him in the wrong way.

“Well it's creepy.”

“Depends on how you define 'creepy'” Austin said. The word 'creepy' being one he would never use in his vast vocabulary.

“Condescending.”

“Much better.” Austin mused. His face not giving anything away.

Hades shook his head and downed his glass before he ordered another. Hades usually drank till he passed out. This was the last day he was drinking anyway.

“Isn’t that enough?”

“And who are you to tell me what’s enough?” Austin wasn’t offended. Good point. He usually didn’t care but he had a feeling that he could get Alora’s number. He did things that benefitted him and the end result here was getting Alora’s number. He watched Hades in silence as his own whiskey arrived.

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[06/02, 19:38] : REBORN

39

At the club, Hades placed his head on the table top as the alcohol went to his head. It was all fuzzy and he found himself laughing as Austin observed. His hazel browns full of calm and wisdom beyond his 23 years. From the last hour he has observed Hades, he had a few points to note. Hades looked at Austin and laughed.

“Have you ever hated your father?” Hades asks. His words slurring but Austin could understand. He shook his head. He never had the time of day to hate his parents. His mother taught him he only had himself to rely on and not even her. He was pretty much on his own and he cared about only himself. Right now if he wasn't looking for Alora's contacts he wouldn't be here, listening and watching Hades drink himself to death.

“Well it is fucking hell. Do you hate your mother as

well?” He sled again as he tried to lift his head but it was so heavy for him to lift. He ignored the black dots in his vision as he waited for Austin to answer. Or he left? He laughed. Obviously he left. He closed his eyes as he cursed under his breath. He should call the cab and get home before Reba arrives in the morning. He tried to stand but he swayed and sat right back on the chair. This pain was going to be evermore. Hades held back tears and laughed again, his father would call him a fucking weakling for even shedding a tear, he would tell him to man up and try not to act like a sissy. He laughed in pain and tried to lift his head.

“I look so des-retarded right now.” Austin checked the time. He might pass out in less than ten minutes because he was too inebriated to be able to survive more than that. Hades laughed before he let the tears roll in a public club.

“Reba fucking believes I can be sober.” He slurred as he fought to lift his head.

“I pray I die of alcohol one of these days.” He said before he blacked out. The bar man looked at

Hades. They are used to him drinking himself to death once in a while. Everyone minded their own business and ever said anything. He usually woke up in the morning.

The bartender walked to where Hades was passed out.

“He will be fine. He will wake up in the morning.” Austin finished his second glass of whiskey, he was not a heavy drinker and he was more than coherent.

“I’ll take him home.” He said and the bartender raised an eyebrow, their biggest customer never had anyone take him home. He was usually alone and he woke up in an empty bar when the cleaning staff came.

“You know him?” Austin looked at Hades.

“A friend’s friend.” Austin was a few inches taller than Hades as he stood up to his full height and his energy filling the room. He looked at Hades before he took out his wallet and paid the bartender. He slightly bent his knees to pick Hades up, he was heavy since he was unconscious but he was

determined to take him to his car. He held his heavy weight as he placed Hades hand behind his shoulder and he walked out of the club with the confidence of a motherfucking god. He reached the car lot in ten minutes and he wished he had called his driver instead of driving himself. He made his way to his car with a passed out Hades. He slumped Hades against the boot as he unlocked the door. He opened the door and he put him inside before he closed the door and walked to the driver's seat. He leaned back and looked at the man at his backseat. He had low regard for people who wilfully threw their lives away. He reminded himself of the end goal and he picked his bag on the passenger seat. He took out his laptop and switched it on, he might as well make some final touches on the document Celine wanted him to submit. He knew his mother was testing him and he could lead the company with his eyes closed but he still didn't have the final say as interim CEO. He started typing away in the car.

Rebante hit her head against the cupboard with her eyes closed. She slowly moved backwards and turned to the kitchen door. Susan who was tying her gown, walked out of her room on her way to the kitchen for a glass of water. She heard movement as she switched on the lights. She saw Rebante as she reached the kitchen and she frowned.

“Rebante?” She asked and she looked at her. She had her eyes closed.

“Rebante? O dirisiwa ke baloi?”(are you being used by witches?) she asked and Rebante didn't respond as she tried to keep on walking. Susan shook Rebante.

“Wake up! Wake up!” She shouted in Rebante's ear and it took more than ten minutes for Rebante to get out of her sleepy stupor. Her eyes widened as she looked around the kitchen and her mother holding her so tightly it hurt. She stood there, like a shocked chicken, her skinny frame more evident

with the hoodie nowhere to be seen. Her surroundings confused her, she was so confused and her eyes bore the same confusion. Her mother let her go and looked at Reba shocked.

“Is it the witches?” Her mother asked. Rebantle held her chest. She did it again. She closed her eyes holding back tears. She was sleep walking again and she touched her head. She could feel a bruise forming. She hit something. On sober days, Hades would make sure she was safe and wasn’t hitting anything in her sleep. Her sleep walking had scared him at first but he learned to deal with it and when she was not in bed, he would go find her. Of course she didn’t remember what happened on her episodes but he told her and she had to take his word for it.

“Rebantle are you okay?” She nodded her head.

“It’s nothing.”

“Maybe we should see a pastor..” she shook her head.

“I’m okay.” She said quickly and she hugged herself.

Now feeling cold and she tried to force a smile as she moved a few feet away from her mother.

“I-I have to go.” She walked away, ignoring her weak legs and Susan watched her walk away till the door of Rebantle’s bedroom closed. She will quiz her on this issue in the morning.

Alora sat cross legged in her dorm room as she went over her life plan for the next five years. She paused as she circled the one thing she had crossed out. Kids. She can’t do that. She sighed. She hated men and she would rather they hate her back and think she was just this crazy smartass bitch who always threatened to crush their balls than anything else. She paused as she sunk deeper into her thoughts. No one liked her and the distance was okay, she was impossible. She chuckled alone. Hell, she was a demon on earth and she didn’t know how to be anything else than hot tempered and

focused on her own goals. She sighed and moved on to the next one. Lora Cosmetics. She grinned alone. That had been her dream and she was prepared to go broke to make her dream come true. Women need makeup to feel powerful, to wear it as an armour. A very incorruptible one for that matter. Hence she chose courses that veered towards the beauty industry as her electives because being an honours student, she could choose more than two courses that had nothing to do with her degree. Once she gets home, she was definitely going to exhaust her trust fund on her business idea and get it off the ground. After years of studying the beauty industry, well no one knew she wanted to venture into that. They never asked. She sighed. She made it her task to know what her siblings were up to because she loved them in her own way but none of them ever asked her. Maybe she was just an extension to an already existing family. She sighed and closed her book. She could feel the frustration pending up and she walked to her closet and got inside. She closed the door and sat down inside in the dark closet. She breathed in and out with her

head between her knees. She could do this. She was Alora Moremi four crying out loud, she scared the shit hell out of people with ehr wit, smarts and confidence. People were intimidated by a smart girl who knew she had no limits and she was one, she reassured herself.

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[06/02, 19:38] : REBORN

40

The following morning

Hades woke up with one hell of a headache. He felt like he had been hit by a truck as he held the back of his head. He closed his eyes quickly and put his head back on the soft pillow he woke up from. He tried to regain his bearings and like always, he wasn't dead. He kept his eyes closed for a few minutes before he heard the door opening. He held onto the sheets and opened his eyes. He looked up as a meticulously dressed Austin looked at him.

He held back his sharp tongue as Austin kept his knowing eyes on him.

“Get cleaned up, I have to be at the office and I'm running late.”

“Wh-why did you bring me here?” Hades asked and Austin looked at Hades.

“Get cleaned up first.” He said and he walked out. Hades held his head. He needed some strong painkillers to get rid of this headache and the massive hangover he had.

He got out of bed and he headed to the bathroom, he had questions and he didn't know if Austin's

kindness should shock him or make him weary of the guy.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Austin was on his second cup of coffee of the day as he talked to his therapist.

“How far with your sudden interest?” Austin sipped his black coffee before he answered.

“I’ll be seeing you later after lunch, I’ll tell you how it went because as always everything works out like I have planned.” James who has been his therapist for years agreed. His client was a special case, someone who challenged his profession and Austin could be a therapist if he wanted but he was too self-serving to help people unless it benefitted him in a way. He always played his cards right and he had been at the receiving end of Austin’s descriptions of Alora. Someone who had been interesting to him since he was fifteen. He would say it was a crush but Austin quickly shut him down and watered it down. He said Alora was an ‘enigma’ she had a fervent fire burning within her and he liked igniting it whenever they met at school competitions and he beat her every time.

“I can’t wait.”

“I know. My life has always been of interest to you James.”

“You have been my client for almost a decade, there is nothing I don’t know about you Austin.”

“I see. I have to go.” Austin said and he hung up as Hades made his way to him. He looked at the coffee maker then back at Hades.

“Have some coffee, sober up before we leave.”

Hades looked at Austin in question.

“Are you perhaps in love with me?” He asked and Austin’s lips quirked up.

“Why should you ask that?”

“Men don’t do that for each other.” Hades said. The only family that made him feel like family was Rebantle’s family and they didn’t even mind having him at their family events ever since he became best friends with Rebantle.

“Well, I do want something in return.” Hades paused. He knew it.

“I knew it.”

“I want Alora’s number.” He said and Hades scoffed. Alora? That little demon? He wanted that little demon’s number?

“She is a little tyrant, you sure you want her number?”

“Hundred percent sure.”

Hades lifted his hands. Well he was about to find out that Alora wasn’t the sparkles and ponies type of girl and she was more of ‘I’m going to feed his dck to the wolves because he angered me’ that little girl had her own issues. Hell she hated men and even though they made peace, she was still so tiring. She was only nice to her siblings and other them she was nothing short of being mean. Not that he was any different but...

“It’s your own fault you’ll be at the receiving end of her temper.” Austin hid his smile as he sipped his coffee. Alora has always been interesting. She had been his rival for years. So many years and he didn’t remember a day when they were in the same

room and she didn't pass on a remark that had fascinated him.

"I guess I have to find out then." He said. Hades sat down and looked at him. He really did this to get Alora's number.

"I have to ask you, are you sure about this?" Hades asked, making it sound like it was a life sentence to even ask Alora out.

"You want to ask her out?" He asked.

"Yes."

"All the best." Hades said and tapped Austin's shoulder. Hades yawned and he rubbed his eyes before he slid his hands in his pockets to find his phone. He found it and he saw missed calls from Rebantle. He'll call her back. He went to his contacts list and Austin picked up his phone.

Hades spelt out Alora's number and he did that the second time to be sure he didn't miss any digits.

"Is that really it?" He asked again.

"Yes." Hade nodded before he looked around the

house and the guy who was a few inches taller than him.

“I have to get going. I’ll catch a cab.” Hades said and he walked out of the kitchen, stopping every ten seconds to balance himself. He could still feel the aftermath of the alcohol. Hades looked at the number. He’ll see how it goes.

At Hades and Rebantle’s shared house, Hades arrived first and he continued to clean up. He made sure to throw the blast plastic bag in the bin outside before he sat down on the couch. He took out his phone and tried calling Rebantle but it took him to voicemail. He sighed and laid down on the couch.

Rebantle ate slowly, noticing how her mother

looked at her. Her step father long went to work hours ago, he also took Emory to school as well.

“Rebante are you okay?” Susan asked and Reba sighed.

“I’m fine, it’s just stress and fatigue.”

“Are you sure?” She nodded. She didn’t need to worry ehr ,other about her addiction. She can fight it, she will fight it and she will be okay without worrying anyone including Alora. Alora needed to focus on school and nothing else. That was her final semester and she needed to focus on school as well. Getting a degree was important but she felt so dumb sometimes in class. She didn’t want to cry. Susan frowned.

“Reba?”

Reba forced a smile.

“Am I dumb?” Her mother shook her head.

“No. You’re all smart. All of you are gifted in your own ways Reba.” Reba nodded and she looked at her plate. She stirred her plate of porridge, she

preferred something easier to swallow. She brought a spoonful to her mouth.

“I think I have a lesson later today.” She said softly and Susan nodded.

“You should see a doctor if you don’t think that was witchcraft.” She said.

“Ee mma.”

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[06/02, 19:38] : REBORN

41

Alora’s forehead creased as she looked at the

unknown number calling her cellphone. Not everyone had her number so she wondered who the hell was calling. She sat down on a nearby bench. As always she was composed with her heels on and a knee length skirt and shirt along with a scarf that was styled to suit the fashion. She had impeccable taste, she had to admit to herself and yes. She did judge people based on their outfit, tardiness was not something to be tolerated. The phone stopped ringing. Maybe it was a wrong number, if not the caller was going to call again. As if the universe was listening her phone rang again and she finally answered.

“Alora Moremi speaking, hello.” She said with her hostile voice.

“Still a little spitfire?” The voice drawled at the other end of the line. She recognised that voice. It was much more deeper but she knew it. She groaned and squinted her eyes.

“Please die Robert.”

“Glad to hear that I was missed.”

“Die! Die! You egomaniac.” She said and she swore she could see him smirk, the one that he usually did when he was about to chuckle but settled on a smirk instead.

“Isn’t chanting a little immature for you someone of your intellect?” He said and Alora could count the number of time Robert had indirectly called her stupid.

“I despise you.”

“Do you?”

He asked.

“Where did you get my number?” She asked and avoided his question.

“You didn’t answer me Alora.”

“I do. I despise you with my body and soul.” He chuckled.

“Is that your own rendition of Pride and Prejudice Alora?” She rolled her eyes. He was smart. He was her academic rival for as long as she could remember.

“What do you want?”

Austin didn't want to ask if she was free but he had to before he cleared his schedule.

“Are you free this weekend.”

“No.” She said simply.

“Really?”

“What is it to you?” She asked suspiciously.

Austin had never been the one to beat around the bush, he was direct with what he wanted and he didn't waver.

“I want to take you out.” He said simply. Alora was too stunned to speak. She closed her eyes and pushed down her teenage fantasies. Austin was her rival. He wanted to take her out?

“As in?”

“A date Alora.” He was direct and she looked down at her heels, a subtle blush covering her cheeks. Her? The girl everyone hated.

Austin waited. He knew she was going to give him a

hard time, that was their dynamic. They bantered on everything and that was what made Alora fucking interesting. He wanted someone to challenge him and make him use his brain and she was a smartass as well.

“I’m doing you this one favour Robert. This is a favour.” He chuckled. She was agreeing and she didn’t want to directly say it.

“Okay Alora.”

“Remember, this is a favour...”He smirked.

“Are you sure? I don’t usually go for girls with a lower IQ than mine and you’re an exception.” He said smugly and Alora flared at the end of the line.

“I should have cut your throat out and seventeen.

va te faire foutre Robert!” (Fuck you Robert!)She said and his eyes filled with humour as she cut the call. That was a yes. He had a date with a girl continents away. He leaned back on his office chair. He had to see his therapist in thirty minutes. His world had been mundane, all black and white till he saw at UB. Focused on learning French. Then

everything started to have colour. Well more than colour, it was in technicolour. Has she went to Stanford they would have been teammates more than rivals but at the time, she had elicited things he wasn't ready to face and he dropped it.

Alora closed her books and sighed. She should probably call him and cancel. She thought to herself minutes later when she was in the library. She was in her last semester and she was so close to graduating with the highest honours. He could serve as a distraction. Or she should let it be and he could find out she wasn't the kind of girl he wanted. She pushed her back forth. Since when has she ever been worried about the kind of girl men wanted. She didn't need a man. She nervously opened her book again and then closed it before she opened it again then closed it again.

“Breath Alora. Breath.” She closed her eyes. Did she

call Reba today? Or Mooketsi or Bokamoso. She cursed under her breath. She was nervous. Why did she agree? She breathed in and out again. This was Austin Mathews. She knew him for almost a decade and he has been her academic rival ever since, what could possibly go wrong?

She was panicking over nothing. She assured herself. She should probably continue studying.

At Rebantle and Hades shared apartment, Rebantle finally parked the car outside. Her mother had wanted her to stay longer so that's as why she was here, few hours later. She got out of the car and she walked to the door. She knocked on the door and there was no answer. She opened it and it was locked. She used the key attached to the car keys to unlock the door and she entered. She found Hades sprawled on the couch fast asleep. There were no bottles and the syringes were gone. They were

going to be clean. She smiled. She had wished her was sober, when he had been nineteen and she went with him to the party. He had kissed her but he was so drunk and that was how she found out about his addiction. Over the years it got worse and somehow he managed to hide it from his father and the world except for her. She headed to the bedroom and she threw herself on the bed. She closed her eyes, she had barely slept and all sleepwalking did was to make her sleep deprived. She hated that. Hated that she ever modelled because she would have not turned to drugs to cope.

At James' office, Austin clasped his hands.

“So you're going all the way to America for your first date with Alora?” He asked. He wanted to get this just right.

“Yes.”

“Like more than two flights for a date with her?”

“Yes James.” James smiled.

“You like her...” James pointed out. Austin Mathews had a crush on Alora for almost a whole decade and he denied it. Disguising it as interest. He knew better.

“She is riveting.”

“Doesn’t change the fact that you like her. No man can travel to the other side of the globe just for a first date.” James pointed it out and Austin shrugged. James had a point but he had an opportunity to ask Alora out and he took it. Simple as that.

“So I assume your plans are underway.” He said and Austin nodded. He had to prepare for a first date with her, Alora was fashionable and what if she disapproves of his clothes when they meet again. As adults this time?

“I need to go.” Austin stood up. He fixed his jacket and walked to the door.

“I’ll talk to you on our next appointment.” He said and he walked out. A smile touched his lips, he remembered being stuck with her in the elevator when she was sixteen and the whole time she wanted to murder him while she also hyperventilating in there, she reluctantly accepted his words of calmness and his touch but it ended too soon when the elevator was fixed an hour later and she moved away from him. Threatening to kill him as always. He walked out of the office and made his way to the parking lot. He was going to push work to clear his schedule so he could be on the first flight out of here by Thursday if not Wednesday. He should call later tonight right? He knew the difference in time zones and he would be awake working. He’ll call.

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A FEW DAYS LATER

[06/02, 19:38] : REBORN

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Alora held the phone in her other hand as she used her other one to move the hangers looking at her clothes.

“Wait Rora, let me get this straight..you’re going out on a date?”

“Yes Reba!”

“Are you nervous?”

Alora chuckled nervously. Nervous? Of course. Austin was a man and she hated men yet here she was giving him a chance.

“Look at you all grown up. I am so proud of you.”

Reba said softly and Alora paused.

“It’s not like I’m going to date him or anything.”

“Even if you don’t but you never know with these things Alora. Austin might be your first kiss.” Alora scrunched her nose.

“No! No! I don’t know why he is being nice, he is my rival.”

“I read somewhere that there is thin line between hate and love.”

Alora sighed.

“I’ll cope.”

“You remember your promise to me?” Alora sighed and nodded.

“I do but you know I’m not comfortable with stuff like that.” Alora said. She couldn’t stomach allowing a man to have sex with her, she was used to being perfect at everything and she was so scared she would flop in the bedroom, she wouldn’t be sexy and dominant like she seemed to the outside world. She shut herself off any form of intimacy, it scared the hell out of her.

“I know. Someday you’ll be comfortable. It might be a year from now or two but one day it will happen. Do tell me. I want to know.” Alora chuckled.

“I will. Let me go. I need to pick an outfit and take a shower.”

“Bye sis. I love you.”

“Me too. Bye.” Alora hung up and sighed. She touched her hair. She should have done braids now she has to straighten it now before her date. He said he was picking her up. She looked around her room. It was clean. No messy clothes. She continued to rummage through her closet to find an outfit that would give her an extra confidence booster because she would die if Austin noticed she was nervous.

Rebante settled by Hades’ side and yawned. He was fast asleep and she was just awake to talk to

Alora about her date. She smiled. She was stronger than what she thought. A few days clean and she was okay, minus the withdrawal symptoms that Hades helped with. She looked at him and kissed his cheek, he was helping her get over her addiction and distracted her mind with stuff like school, movies, helping her find new hobbies and sex. She kissed his cheek again. She sighed and leaned against the headboard. She didn't really help him with his and that wiped away the smile on her face, she was bad at this. He told her not to worry and she was his first priority but besides telling him to get sober she did nothing. That stirred her conscience. She closed her eyes and sighed. She will do something. She moved closer and spooned him even though he was taller than her. Hades stirred in his sleep and turned. Now Rebantle was no longer holding him. He pulled her to him and kissed her hair.

“Sleep.”

“Aren't you asleep?”

“I am.” She kissed his lips softly and she felt him

smile.

“Love you have school tomorrow.”

“Okay. Goodnight. I love you.” She said and he kissed her back.

“I love you too my love.” She smiled and finally closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

Alora held her phone in her hand after her shower and she sent Austin a text.

Alora:Stand me up, I don't want to meet you.

She waited for him to respond and she placed her phone down. It beeped and she quickly picked it up.

Austin:That would be me being a coward and I never take the easy way out. You know that.

He texted back and she bit her lower lip. Strange how they knew each other because of various encounters.

Alora:Don't be fake with me tonight then Austin.

Austin:I'll be myself then.

She read the last text and she nodded. She looked at the clothes she had set on her bed. She was satisfied with the outfit. She got dressed and when she was done, she sat down and started straightening her hair before she did her makeup. Light and quick. She slid her feet into her black heels and she stood at her full height, remembering he was taller than her even in heels. She groaned. If he dares make any egotistical comments she was going to leave him alone in the restaurant. She paused. Where was he taking her? He never told her where he was taking her for their first date. First date..she repeated over and over again in her mind. Her mind was starting to go into overdrive and she didn't want that. She breathed in and out. Her phone started ringing and she answered.

“Alora speaking.”

“Ready Alora?” Her heart pounded and she was

distracted by a door knock. She walked to the door with the phone against her ear.

“I’m always ready Robert.” She said as she opened the door. She dropped her phone as she was met with all six feet five of him standing in front of her door with one hand in his pocket and his phone in the other. He cut her call before she could see how she was saved.

“Good evening Lora,” he said smoothly. Too smooth and Alora’s mind was blank. For the first time in years. What was happening to her?

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[06/02, 19:39] : REBORN

Austin thoughtfully looked at her, she was more beautiful than the last time he saw her. He could still see she had that fiery attitude that had captured his attention the first time he saw her. Alora glared at him and his lips lifted. Now that was Alora. Ready to always kill him, did she know that her steel gaze turned him on and had turned every male in her vicinity on without her even trying?

“I’m doing you a favour.” She said and he chuckled.

“Okay Lora.” Instead of asking to be let in inside the small dorm room, he stepped inside and unbuttoned his jacket and Alora crossed her arms.

“That’s rude of you Robert.” She said, keeping her heated gaze on him and he assumed she thought she was scaring him away with that look. He walked closer and she took a few steps back and he stopped.

“Before we go, se retourner Lora.”(face the other way.)

She rolled her eyes and didn't move an inch.

"I'm not going to turn around for you like I'm a little doll Robert, forget it."

He grinned and she wanted to wipe the grin off his face. Why the hell was he grinning?

"s'il te plaît."(please) He said and she huffed before she gave him her back and he walked closer. She heard his footsteps as he walked closer and she folded her arms. She didn't have the need to push him away, she didn't like having men be in close proximity to her.

Austin inhaled her heady perfume and he committed it to memory. His mind that could remember everything, he committed her scent to memory as he lightly brushed her hair to the side and he saw her shiver. She didn't say anything.

"If I'm making you uncomfortable please tell me." He said. His breath hitting her neck and Alora swallowed.

"Okay." She said. He slid his hand into the inner pocket of his blazer. He removed the box that had a

necklace. He bought this for her for their first date. He removed the star shaped diamond pendant. She felt the coldness of the chain as he snapped it close. Her fingers moved to touch the pendant and she looked at it. It was beautiful. Austin carefully put her hair back in place. She never received diamonds before as a gift. She turned to face him and he grinned.

“We can go now Lora.” He said and she looked up at him.

“Thank you.”

He smiled and nodded. She turned to get her bag from her table before she walked to where he was standing. He walked to the door and she followed him. He opened it for her and she stepped outside before he did. She walked to the door again and her eyes scanned her room. To make sure everything was in place and she did not mistakenly leave her hair straightener on. When she was satisfied with her check she opened her bag to take out her keys and lock the door. She turned to face him. Was he going to take her hand? She shook her head. That

was stupid. Very stupid but was he? She reprimanded the part of her that wanted him to take her hand if he wanted to. He gave her his arm and she hooked her arm on his.

“This means nothing.” She hissed and he laughed.

“Does it Alora?”

“Yes.”

“Are those the lies that lull you to sleep?” She rolled her eyes as they walked further and further away from her room.

“It’s the truth and it’s a one time thing Robert. I loathe you.”

“Sure you do darling.” Her heart raced. He called her darling and it was such a basic word but it made her skin flush. Austin noticed her reaction and he kept quiet, he was sure she wouldn’t appreciate him pointing out her reaction to him when it was something she thought she felt alone. They walked down the stairs and he licked his lips. They walked in silence till they walked out of the dorms. She looked around and then at him.

“Where are you taking me?”

“It’s supposed to be a surprise.”

“I hate surprises Robert.” She hated being unprepared. Had he told her, maybe this outfit was the wrong one for this date. Her other hand moved to touch her neck and Robert walked besides her with the confidence of a god. Of course she wasn’t going to tell him. She wasn’t going to inflate his ego more. After a few minutes of walking, they stopped by a limo and she looked at him. She knew he was rich and she didn’t have money lying around for things like that. He let go of her arm and he opened the door for her.

“After you Alora.” She got inside and he stopped by the door.

“You’re bewitching Alora.” He said before he closed the door. Alora leaned back. Translation; he was beautiful. She could accept that. He opened the other side and got inside. There was some space between them as he got inside. The car drove off and there was only a minute of silence before they

started bantering and throwing subs at one other. Alora found that she liked that and hated that he liked being right on everything and God if she could throw in a punch to just reduce his ego.

“You want to punch me.” Austin said as a matter of fact.

“Of course I want to. I despise you.”

He laughed.

“Yet you’re going on a date with me.” He said. So far she hadn’t commented on his dressing so so far so good. She had impeccable fashion sense and imagine on your first date being told you look horrible.

“Your good looks saved you.” He grinned and she groaned. God! She didn’t mean to compliment his smart ass. Fuck!

“I’m an Adonis? Well it is a known fact darling but thank you for noticing.”

“Oh shut up Robert!” He laughed and she rolled her eyes trying to stop her lips from curving into a smile.

Such an ego maniac. She placed her hands on her lap as she looked out the dark tinted windows before she faced him. He was looking at her but she couldn't read his face.

“Where did you get my number?” She asked.

“Hades.”

Trust Hades to hand her number to Austin. Probably warned him off her.

“I'm a little demon Robert. I'll terrorise your life.” He chuckled before he looked her dead in the eye.

“If you're a little demon then I'm the devil darling.” He said and that knocked the breath out of Alora's windpipe. Why did he have to sound sexy saying that? She was already having conflicting emotions with this man and she didn't know what was happening to her.

“Which Austin Matthews am I talking to right now?” She said and she didn't move her gaze away from him.

“Austin Mathews, your date for tonight.”

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[06/02, 19:39] : REBORN

44

The limo stopped and the driver got out of the car to go open Austin’s side of the door. He stepped out and he briskly walked to Alora’s side and opened the door. Alora glared at his arm and she finally placed her small hand on his and he lightly squeezed it as she got out of the car. He closed the car door and they faced the entrance. She looked at him then back at the entrance.

“This is our first stop of the evening.” Here eyes widened. First? He brought her to the fucking art museum and it was their first stop for the evening? What and he planned out? She looked at her clothes.

“You should have told me, I would have worn something appropriate like jeans.” He raised an eyebrow. He couldn’t picture her in jeans.

“I do wear jeans. Sometimes. Rarely.” She ended.

“Let’s go darling.” He smiled at her and she looked down smiling as they walked hand in hand up the stairs.

“Would you rather we start with the paintings gallery or the sculptures?” He asked and she squinted her eyes.

“All the galleries but the paintings first. Do they have the Van Gogh paintings?” She asked. She was interested because the only gallery she had been in was the one in Princeton and this one was outside her school so she better make it count and look at all the art pieces.

“We are about to find out darling.” He grinned as

they made it inside and her breath was taken away. It was beautiful and they hadn't gone any further than the reception where they were greeted and of course told the ground rules. A minute later they were guided by the staff to the different galleries. Alora had let loose and was so focused that she didn't notice how their fingers intertwined as they were told the history of the first painting. It was interesting. She appreciated art as a form of expression, she was interested in a beauty line so art was her thing so it was breathtaking to have an art expert explaining. Austin's gaze moved to their hands as Alora was caught up in what was being said and he smiled before he joined in the conversation as well. He watched her roll his eyes at his show off behaviour of knowing everything before they moved to another piece of art. Two hours later, the two walked out and Alora had shown interest in certain art pieces though she knew she could never buy them. Besides it was a museum and obviously the art pieces were there for show and not for sale. They walked down the stairs to the limo as the light wind blew her hair back and

it got in her mouth, she hated fall in the States.
Austin pushed her hair back and she blinked.

“Uh-thanks.” She said and he nodded. He opened the door for her and she got inside before he walked to his side. Alora picked her bag and placed it on her lap. She took out her phone to check her phone before she put it back the minute Austin got inside the car.

“Thank you.” She said. Her tone less hostile than usual and he leaned back. He was keeping his distance unless she indicated otherwise.

“Welcome darling.” She nodded and leaned back as the car started moving. The back of the limo was silent before she started talking and they fell into easy conversation about their favourite literature books. Austin committed to memory her favourite books and the little things she mentioned.

“After graduation then what?” He asked her.

“Go back home obviously. How did you meet Hades?” She changed the topic.

“At a bar.” He said and Alora paused before she

accepted that as an answer. Everyone drank here and there.

“So after graduation?” He asked again.

“I’m not telling you, I might mess be hexing my own plans.” She said and shepherd chuckled.

“You believe in things like that?” He was a very practical man and things like religion or fate or destiny were things he didn’t believe in. Everyone has the power to make things go their way if they work smart and go about it the right way. No one’s future is in some unseen entity’s hands. It sounded quite dumb.

“Yes. Fate exists and there are a lot of unexplainable things that can only be explained by fate or the universe being in your side.” He nodded. He’ll let her be.

“You don’t?”

“No.”

“Typical of you.” He chuckled. Alora opened her mouth to try and ask a question but she closed her

mouth.

“Speak.” Austin demanded and she folded her arms. She wasn’t going to be controlled by Austin.

“Die Robert.” She said and he smiled.

“Okay darling.” She looked down to hide her smile before she fixed her hair. She hasn’t smiled like this in a while and it was so foreign. Silence then enveloped the limo and she closed her eyes. This was just a date. She said over and over again. The car stopped and she opened her eyes.

“Second stop?”

“Yes darling.” She closed her eyes and opened them seconds later. Darling was so basic but damn him for making it sound some fancy word. Like the gentleman he claimed to be today, he got out and walked to the other side of the car to open the car door for her. She took his hand and he held it gently as she got out of the car. He closed the door for her before standing behind her. He removed his blazer and he placed it on her shoulders. She held back a retort before she turned to look at him. He kept his

hands to himself.

“Thank you.” She said again and he took her hand, placed a light kiss on the back of her hand before he walked inside the restaurant with her. He was going to make this weekend count even though he knew they bumped heads a lot. In a lot of topics but he will make it count.

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[06/02, 19:39] : REBORN

45

Alora contemplated hugging him as he stood by her

doorway. He brought her back home after their date. She pulled his blazer close and it took her back to when he borrowed her his blazer because of the coffee stain. He didn't know she had his blazer in her closet and she even dry cleaned it.

"I genuinely enjoyed today's date." She said and he smiled. He didn't force her to touch him nor did he force contact and that was respectful. She thought to herself.

"But it was still a favour Robert." She said and he chuckled.

"Ee mma." Her lips parted and she closed them quickly as his eyes moved to her lips then back to her eyes. She was alluring and she knew that. She didn't smile and she nodded. He said bye and closed the door but she opened it.

"Your blazer Robert."

"Keep it as a souvenir darling." She blinked and she closed the door on his face. He chuckled.

"My lesson end at 12 mid day tomorrow. Do what you must with the information Robert." She said

from the other side of the door.

He smiled. She was telling him she was giving him a second chance? She was the only person who called him Robert and he wouldn't have it any other way. He slid his hands in his pocket as he walked down the stairs and Alora leaned against the door. She half screamed into the blazer sleeves. She better study to get her mind off Robert, this was her final semester and she was so close to her dream. She thought of removing the blazer but decided against it as she slid off her heels and carried them to her wardrobe. She put them in their place and took out her sleepers. She better wash off the makeup and get out of this dress, his blazer smelled like him. Sandalwood, aftershave and a hint of musk and his big ego. She rolled her eyes with a smile. She promised Reba that she would tell her how the date went and she was probably asleep.

The following day after Hades dropped Reba off at school, he drove to his father's office where he worked in a small cubicle. He showed up on some days, his father always got angry at him for any minor thing and it started when he was younger. His phone rang and he looked at the unknown number before he answered.

"Hades hello."

"Hello Hades." His mother's vile voice dripped at the other end of the line and he drove off the road to talk to her. He closed his eyes, did his parents know the emotional trauma and damage they caused him?

"What do you want?"

"Is that how you speak to the mother who birthed you?" He scoffed.

"You have never been a mother to me.."

"Well.." she shrugged.

"Hades, I need money and you're going to be it for me." His mother said.

"I'm not going to be used by you."

“Well you have no choice. I have incriminating information.”

“What kind of information?” He said as he stared out the window, watching cars moving by.

“Well a little birdie told me that your girlfriend is his biggest customer. Imagine the world knowing that their modelling sweetheart is a junkie and her boyfriend is well like his father, an alcoholic...” she said and Hades’ grip tightened around the steering wheel.

“Well that would destroy her credibility and now no brand would want to be associated with her, and you? Your bad publicity will ruin your father’s company, he has been all about good publicity hasn’t he? Even though he cheated on me after I gave him everything. I made him my temple, my mural and sky and he never gave me anything in return. He cheated on me and fathered bastards out there and divorced me and left me with nothing and you? You are going to get me money from your father since you’re his heir even if it’s only in paper.” She said and Hades swallowed.

“I’m your son, you can’t destroy me.” He said. Weren’t parents supposed to love their children? Rebantle’s parents loved her with no ulterior motives. They might not be rich but she had been happy minus the modelling career that destroyed her.

“I birthed you to make him happy and you are going to get me what I want. You have a month to do that before I sell this story to the tabloids. You know that your girlfriend is such a big deal to the world, she had been a modelling sensation and even went as far as France and America, you wouldn’t want to push her further into the dark end by revealing her best kept secret would you?” Handles looked down.

“No.” He dragged out that word and his mother laughed.

“I knew you would cooperate. In a month I want my money.” The line went dead and he punched the steering wheel with sharp jaw and tears in his eyes. He blinked them back, remembering how his father wouldn’t allow him to cry because he said that wasn’t how his heir would behave. He said his heir

wouldn't be a sissy and would verbally inflict pain on him to see if he would cry. Was it such a wonder he was such a twisted and jarred individual? Fuck!

Reba looked at her phone ring just as she walked out of her lecture. She answered her sister.

“Hello Rora, how was your date?”

“Okay.”

“Just okay?” Reba then quipped and Alora sighed as she closed her books.

“Well it was more than okay, it was beyond my expectations.” Alora held her diamond necklace with her free hand and she laughed at how she styled his large blazer into her outfit of the day whilst it still smelt of him. If he could see her wearing it now it would make his ego much bigger. That narcissist.

“Kana Robert said he got my number from Hades.”

“Who’s Robert?” Reba asked and Alora mentally slapped herself.

“Austin. Austin. He got my number from Hades. Are they friends now?” Alora asked. She should have asked Austin though.

“I don’t know. I’ll ask Hades. Did you two hug and kiss?” Alora gagged.

“What’s that? No! Remember Reba, I hate him and I was doing him a favour. He got me a diamond pendant.”

Reba’s eyes widened.

“He definitely likes you.”

“I like diamonds even though I can’t afford them myself but I like diamonds.”

“I know you do. I think he knows you more than you know yourself.”

“How can my academic rival know me?”

“A thin line between love and hate Rora. You know that.” Alora breathed out.

“I don’t know if I can do the whole intimacy thing.”

“Let loose. I’m not saying give up your virginity right away but baby steps sis, all your life you’ve been anti-men and into your teen years you’ve progressed into ways of murdering men and cutting their dicks off because they piss off.”

“They do piss me off. An-“ she paused and closed her eyes.

“I’m used to being this super woman, who can do anything and I am scared I will fail in the bedroom and my character make amen think I’m this ultra dominatrix in the bedroom who can do all sort of stuff when I can’t even fathom a hug.” She said and Reba sighed.

“For now don’t think about that, I swear when it happens it will happen. With the right person.” Alloa looked at the blazer sleeves.

“Reba I can’t even entertain the thought of losing my virginity. It’s not easy to have someone take something precious to me and have the ability to use that to their advantage. Men are such

disgusting creatures and as much as I hate that hideous man you call your boyfriend, he is kind of you and mom and mom even likes him. I mean who likes Hades Hudson for crying out loud?" She said and Reba laughed.

"You two bicker back and forth and the mere fact that you both have tempers. That's your way of getting along and I get it." Reba said and Alora nodded. She couldn't imagine being nice to Hades Hudson. She would be mad to be nice to him.

"But my point is men treat a woman's virginity as if it's some prize to be won, an accolade of some sort that they add to their display cabinets and I don't want that."

"Calm down. Not all men are like that." Alora rolled her eyes.

"Rora take it one step at a time, a date was a first and the fact that you agreed doesn't mean you hate Austin to that extent. I think you agreed because he is smart like you." Alora chuckled.

"He makes me feel dumb." She said.

“And you are not. You two are super nerds. I think.”

“Reba stop it.”

“You are. I’ll call you the super nerds from now on. It suits you guys.”

“Who said I’ll date him?”

“I’m saying how long till you guys date..My super nerds. Your ship name should be uh”

“What’s ship name?” Alora asked.

“Aha! I feel smarter than you, it’s from the word relationship and ship name is for the two people who are in a a relationship and you combine their names to come up with a single name. I’m trying to think of one and I feel like you’re judging me from the end of the line.”

“I am.”

“I love you too. Uhm Lostin? Lo from Alora and Stin from Austin? or the A* nerds because your names start with an A? I’ll come up with something cute.”

“Bye Reba.”

“Bye bye. Can you help me with economics?” She asked.

“Of course. Video call and I’ll help out. Bye.”

“Byyyyye!” Reba hung up and Alora shook her head with a little smile.

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[06/02, 19:39] : REBORN

46

That afternoon at Alora’s dorm room, a door knock sounded. She turned her neck to look at the door.

“Who is it?”

No reply.

“I’m not opening the fucking door if you don’t tell me your name.”

“No need to be vulgar.”

“Robert please die. The world would be a better place without you.”

“The world needs someone with an IQ to lead it.”

She got off her chair and walked to the door to open it. Her eyes moved to his hands and she frowned.

“What are those?”

“I’m giving you a shot at redemption.”

“This is tempting.” She said and he smiled. She moved from the door so he could step in. He got in with his backpack on his back and plastics in his hands. Why did she think he looked like some sort of handsome high school boy in those jeans and t-shirt? She glared at him and rolled her eyes while internally thinking he was gorgeous and she was furious that she couldn’t say it to his face because sometime in the future he was going to use it

against her. She closed the door and locked it and Austin heard the door click.

“Are you planning to keep me captive her Lora?”

“Of course. You willingly walked into my room.” His lips lifted and he blew her a kiss. She gave him the middle finger. She walked to her desk and quickly closed her books before she faced him. He placed his backpack on her bed and he took out two glasses from his bag and wine. The plastics were on the floor and she wasn't worrying, the floor was squeaky clean. She made sure of it every day.

“Drinking in the afternoon?” She asked and he chuckled.

“A few glasses won't hurt.” She hopped she won't get too drunk. She held her hips as she watched him take out a chessboard, crossword puzzles and a book. She moved closer to see the title but he quickly put it back.

“What's the book title?”

“We'll read it later.” We? As in both of them? She sighed and he extended his hand. She reluctantly

took it, not wanting him to know she was secretly enjoying it.

They sat down on her rug and she could see that he didn't fit in. The room was too small for his frame.

“Let's start with chess.”

“What are the stakes?” she asked. He grinned.

“I knew you would ask.”

“I don't like that grin of yours, wipe it off your face Robert!” It widened and she rolled her eyes.

“If I win, I get to ask you to be my girlfriend.” She raised an eyebrow.

“That's all.” He nodded.

“Well if you lose, I won't talk to you for a day which will be fairly easy.”

“We'll see...”

They each started setting up their chess pieces and when they had set the game up they looked at each other. Alora cracked her knuckles.

“I can taste the victory, let's do this.”

“I smell someone’s defeat.”

“Oh please!”

“Start.”

“Ladies first.” She rolled her eyes and moved her pawn. She looked at him waiting to see his next move and this took her back to when he defeated her. In front of everyone for that matter. It was so embarrassing. He looked up at her with a smile and she didn’t know how he could exude such confidence. She was confident in her own way but his presence filled the room and it stayed there even after leaving. Their game was over in twenty minutes after he defeated her. She folded her arms as he smiled.

“Well...”

“Get to the point already.” She said. She knew her answer already.

“Someone is a little impatient. Well moving on-“

“What moving on? The rules Robert, you won and now you have to do what you have to do.”

“We didn’t state when so there is that loophole. Eager to be my girlfriend Alora?”

“I would rather choke before I agree.”

“Is that so?”

“What do we do next?”

“What do you want to do?”

“The book...”She said.

He finally took it out and he showed it to her. Her face dropped and she looked up at him.

“Y-you were listening?” He noticed all the minor details about her for as long as he has known her and he drank up every little detail she fed him last night and over their phone conversations these past few days. He didn’t need to respond because it was obvious he listened. She cleared her throat and sat up right.

“So we’re reading it?” She said trying to be serious and blinking.

“Change of plans, just listen and I’ll read it to you.”

She allowed herself to smile as she looked at him. Teeth and all. Austin sucked in a breath, serious and bitchy Alora was dangerous but her smiling like that was lethal.

“You will?” She asked, allowing excitement to seep into her voice. Her favourite novel being read out loud for her?

“I most definitely will my dreamer.” She paused and blinked. What did he say? She opened her mouth to speak but he was already opening the book.

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë.

“Are you comfortable?” She nodded and crossed her legs before she placed her hands on her thighs. He stretched his long limbs and she kept her eyes on him before they slowly traveled his body. She noticed the way he was holding the book and she didn’t know him holding a book could be sexy. To her anyway, intelligence was sexy in it’s way and as much as she averted from romantic love, every once in a while she had allowed herself to think of an intelligent partner who could match her in every way. Funny thing was that-she shook her head. No.

That was her best kept secret. Austin was intently focused on her, in the few seconds that had passed, she had allowed herself to overthink about this small task he had assigned himself. He wanted to read her, her favourite book and she had retreated into her head.

“Lora?”

“I’m listening. You can begin.”

“I have just returned from a visit to my landlord – the solitary neighbour that I shall be troubled with” Austin’s smooth voice read out and Alora listened with. Heart and soul also listening to the words Austin read from her favourite book.

In between the book reading, they had a glass of wine and she gave him all her attention with her saying the same lines with him as he read the book. She knew it by heart because she could not even remember how many times she reread the book and it seemed to get good each and every time.

“He’s more myself than I am. Whatever our souls

are made of, his and mine are the same.” They both said at the same time and she smiled. A genuine grateful smile and he paused before he turned his lips.

“Will you be my girlfriend Alora?” He asked and she nodded.

“Yes.” She said and he placed the book down before he got upon his feet. He took her hand and helped her up. She was much more shorter without the heels and he had the advantage of height.

“I’m doing you a-“

“a favour.” He completed and she nodded with a small smile. She closed her eyes trying not to get overwhelmed. A girlfriend? How does she behave? Will he expect her to do stuff for him? She let go of his hand as she thought about everything. She looked around the room and the chess pieces were all over the floor. She bent down to fix them so they can be in order. Austin’s sharp gaze followed her. How she started thinking and all of a sudden she was trying to put everything in order. Alora was in

her head trying to plan how this would work while clearing the rug. She felt hands on her waist and she stiffened. She had never been touched like that and that sent more panic along her system. Austin slowly moved her from the task she had assigned herself and looked at her. His all knowing gaze on her had her moving back.

“Alora..”

“Maybe, maybe I shouldn’t have agreed.” She said and paused.

“Why do you say that?”

“I feel out of my zone and it feel wrong. These...” she pointed out to his stuff and him.

“Is new, my brain doesn’t know how to react to such because it is out of my depth. Dates are things I’ve never done.” She saw his lips lift.

“I’m your first date and boyfriend?”

“This room is too small for your ego, shut up!” He moved closer. She was slowly coming back, out of her head.he moved closer and closer to her.

“I am honoured I’m your first-“

“Don’t gloat Robert. I still hate you remember?”

He shook his head and his hands settled on her waist, she froze up again and he looked at her.

“tu n’as rien à craindre quand tu es avec moi.” (You have nothing to fear when you’re with me)

She visibly relaxed and he placed her head on his chest.

“Tu promets?” (You promise?)

“Yes.” He rarely promised but in instances he did, he never broke them.

“I’m an obsessive compulsive.” She half whispered as he placed his other hand on her head. She stiffened again before she relaxed.

“I’m not used to being touched.” He could see that. He also heard what she whispered as well.

“I won’t push you.”

“Thank you.” She muttered before she moved her head from his chest.

“Okay, now that is over. What next?” She asked.

“Crosswords.”

“The stakes. I’m not playing for free.” She said as she detached from him. It was going to take time to get used to the intimacy and she was glad he wasn’t pushing anything.

“Of course you won’t.” She rolled her eyes at him as he smiled looking at her.

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A MONTH LATER

[06/02, 19:39] : REBORN

At Princeton University Library, Alora watched Austin make his way to her with books in hand and coffee. She rolled her eyes, she told him not to come to America because she was busy and had assignments and assessments to prepare for. They locked eyes and he grinned and she gave him a murderous glare that had him grinning wider. He sat next to her and she moved her chair more to the left, putting distance between them.

"You're impossible." She said. He handed her the coffee and she took it.

"Don't you have work or something?"

He handed her a textbook and she opened it. His name was etched on the corner of the first page. It was his personal copy. Her fingers lingered on his full name before she looked up at him.

"I never said I needed a tutor." She pointed out.

"I know you don't need me Lora." He retorted.

"Let me see your notes." He opened his notebook

and took out the pencil to place it behind his ear as she handed him her notebook. His fingers skimmed the pages as he read the notes, faster than she could and she crossed her legs. She didn't know him reading her notes, his fingers on her handwriting could be so hot and he was able to comprehend her handwriting. She paged his textbook. He just saved her time, she didn't have to go look for the recommended textbook in the library. She saw his tabs and highlighted words and side notes. He looked up at her.

"Done trying to see if it's the one?" She rolled her eyes as he removed his pencil from behind his ear and fully faced her.

"Let's get started."

"Am I getting the boyfriend or tutor?" She asked. She couldn't believe he was helping her, what a horrible way to spend his time because he flew all the way from Botswana to here when she told him not to. She knew she was busy because after this she had an essay to type at her room because the professor decided to move the submission date

closer. An inconvenience. She thought to herself.

"The tutor. Coffee is good?" She nodded as he moved his chair closer and she found the chapter she was supposed to be studying while he handed her her notebook.

"This shouldn't give you any ideas Robert, I'm equally capable of mastering any topic on my own." He chuckled.

"Okay." She moved her eyes to her notebook as she picked her pencil from the pencil case. The texts she had sent were so embarrassing and the fact that she sent them in succession made her want to burn herself alive but he didn't mention it.

"We'll try to cover the topic in two hours." He said

Two hours later, she looked back up at him as she noted down what he just said and she looked at the textbook as well.

"Good?" She nodded. Her eyes moved to the empty coffee cup and she looked back at him. She won't tell him to his face that he was smarter than her, he graduated a year ago and he breezed through the

topic as if he learned the information last night. Telling him would make her choke on his ego and he had such a big one. He exuded confidence at it's most primal level and everything he did was calculated and well thought through. She shook her head as she looked at the books on the table. She didn't exactly 'love' year four economics but she always did exceptionally well, he explained it better than her professor ever could.

He pulled her chair closer and she had to stop herself from yelping so instead she glared at him.

"We're in a library Robert. I'll kill you!" She said.

"How?"

Her heated gaze didn't move him as she folded her arms.

"Obviously a sharp knife to cut out your c*ck. Maybe then you would behave." He grinned.

"You want my c*ck baby?" She lifted her hand to hit his chest. Was that all he heard? He smoothly caught her wrist in a semi hard grip. She glared at him.

"Those sexual innuendos won't work on me Robert." She said and he laughed. His eyes showing humour which was more emotion than he usually showed.

"I know Lora." He looked at her wrist engulfed by his hand. He let her wrist go and picked her hand to interlace it with his. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her hand. She removed her hand from his grip. She knew he was physically stronger than her so she knew he let her hand go so she could remove her hand. She cleared her throat.

"Thanks for the coffee. I didn't want your tutoring but thank you."

"So ungrateful, hand me the textbook."

"I'm still going to use it." He smirked.

"I'll return it even though it's not legally and rightfully yours."

"I never asked you to bring it anyway." She said as she picked it up from the desk and held it against her chest. She breathed out.

"Now that we got the textbook issue out of the way,

can I study in peace?" She said and he had to suppress a smile. She was so stubborn. He pulled her chair even more closer and this time she actually yelped and he had a hard time suppressing his laughter as she turned pink from embarrassment. People turned for a few seconds before minding their own business.

"The library is a place of silence and I am going to fucking wipe your existence off the face of this damned planet Robert if you don't stop with this nonsensical behaviour." She seethed. He just placed a hand on her cheek before his fingers lifted her chin.

"You live for exaggerations." She paused. She was but figuratively speaking, she was already burying him six feet under.

He lowered his head as their eyes locked, her fire filled ones and his calm gaze sweeping over her facial features. Her lips parted as if to answer a silent question and he took that chance to allow his lips to touch hers for the first time. Alora tensed and closed her mouth. Panicking at what she was doing,

how was she supposed to go about it? Her eyes widened at the possibilities of what might go wrong and she moved her head away. Austin held the back of her head and pecked her lips, easing the tension and pressure she was trying to put herself under. Their first kiss, as simple as it was, was shared in the library. He rubbed her chin and lifted it.

"What did I say last time?" He asked gently and he watched her roll her eyes at him. He smiled.

"You know what you said." She replied and he had to chuckle. He pressed his lips onto hers, not forcing her to open her mouth for him. Alora closed her eyes, she was sloppy and she 'sucked'. She was using Rebantle's vocabulary now. Teenagers could kiss and she couldn't bring herself to do that. What if she bit his tongue or produced enough saliva to fill his mouth? That would be disgusting. What if his other lovers were better than her? She felt like a complete failure and she hated failing so bad. Austin had removed his lips from hers and he pushed her hair back.

"Lora, don't think about it. Get out of your head." He

whispered and she opened her eyes.

"Don't put too much thought into that. Am I your first?" He asked and she moved back.

"Okay, that's enough." He chuckled. He was right. He brought her right back close to him.

"As your personal tutor and boyfriend, allow me to show you how it's done my fiery dreamer." It sounded so condescending but he was actually serious. He wanted to teach her how to kiss in the library. She looked around and he stood up from his chair. He took her hand.

"I'm not-" she didn't even complete her sentence. She was on her feet in seconds and he was already dragging her to God knows where. She should poke his eyes out.

"I need to poke your eyes out."

"Your hyperboles do nothing to me Alora."

"You should be scared of me. I'll kill you in your sleep." He actually stopped walking and winked.

"You want me in your bed? I want you in mine too."

She groaned.

"Fuck you for misinterpreting me."

"Fuck you? I would do it in a heartbeat baby." He saw her skin turn into a feverish pink. She was easily angered, see why he was fucking fascinated with her? She didn't even need to be solved. She was the most complex physics problem he has ever come across. He grinned. He saw an quiet aisle and he walked along it before he stopped and let her hand go. She folded her arms. If her eyes could shoot bullets they would have shot straight to his skull. He moved his hands to her waist as she kept herself rigid.

"So step one is to part your lips." He said and she looked the other way.

"Lora don't think about it." He said. Alora licked her lips. What if she parted them wrong? This was so silly and childish. Austin used his other hand to make her face him.

"Don't start." She said.

"With what?" He asked with a smile playing on his

lips. Alora looked at his height and his fucking confidence. A mere kiss had her shaking in her heels and he was oozing with sexual tension and aura just by moving. Not fair. She jutted her chin and without warning he placed his lips on her, it took her by surprise and in a matter of seconds his tongue was in her mouth and she felt his hand hold her steady in place, not moving from her waist. Her arms dropped and she tentatively placed an unsure hand on his chest, feeling his muscles before she sunk into her head again and broke the kiss. She stepped back and pushed her hair back. Austin extended his arm to her so she could take it.

"I can't do this." She said. She hated failure and she cringed at how her voice had dropped an octave.

He hadn't dropped his hand and she reluctantly took it. He used that as an opportunity to pull her closer. They were surrounded by stacks and stacks of books and the fresh smell of books as she sucked in a deep breath.

"Chess later?" He was taking her mind off what just happened.

"I have an essay to submit." She said.

"I'll bring you food."

"I hate you." She said softly. He kissed the top of her head as she relaxed in his arms.

"I know."

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Alora broke the embrace and he rubbed her chin. She sucked in a deep breath before she looked at her feet then back at him.

“Let’s try again.”

“Alora.” She shook her head. A kiss wasn’t going to make her feel stupid. She wasn’t going to be defeated by a simple kiss. She refused to accept that. Austin shook his head and just rubbed her chin. He saw her shoulders slump and a sigh escape her lips.

“Was it that bad?” She asked.

“It wasn’t.” And it wasn’t that good either but she tried. He gave her that, she tried something out of her comfort zone. He pecked her lips.

“Were your previous girlfriends better?” She asked and he looked into her eyes.

“Alora don’t do that.” He said and she stepped back from him.

“I just want to know.” She liked competing and he didn’t want her to compete with people in his past. They were not her and would never be her, not in this lifetime. He moved closer as drew her back into his arms.

“You don’t need to be perfect in everything. This was your first kiss and because it was with you, it was special to me okay?” He believed that himself and wanted her to believe that. Alora sighed and nodded.

“Don’t think about it Lora, we still have over a thousand kisses to go.” She laughed and he heard her laughter for the first time. It was beautiful.

“Who would want to kiss you a thousand times over?”

“You would.” She faked a gag.

He chuckled and kissed her forehead then her nose and cheek before the corner of her lips followed.

“You still have work to get through.” He said and she nodded.

“You said you’re bringing food.”

“Yes. You are pulling an all nighter?”

“No.” He kissed her nose and she wrinkled it. He smiled. She thinks too much and over analysed everything. Believe it or not he was trying his best

not to let her obsessive behaviour flare up when he was around. He left a month ago knowing he got the girl and he was here, a month later slowly but surely heading somewhere with her. He would never force her to do anything she was uncomfortable with. Alora looked at her hands before she placed them on his chest. He just watched her as she closed her eyes then drop her hands then place them back on his chest again. He held her wrists.

“Alora.”

“I’m okay.”

“You’re not. Breathe.”

“You’re not my lungs.” She snapped then started breathing in and out.

“That’s a good girl.” He praised and she closed her eyes, her heart picking at a weird rhythm at the praise. He kissed her forehead.

“Now we should go, get your books and you relax even if it’s for an hour before you get started on your assignment.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“I know Lora. I want you to be relaxed before you over exert yourself.”

“I’m used to this.”

“Well you could get used to me being around then.”

He let go of her waist and took her hand as they walked back to where they left their stuff.

He lowered his head to whisper in her ear.

“Want to know a secret?”

“What?”

“You could have gotten more practice if you had gone to Stanford.”

“Why do you say that?” She asked. They both knew the answer to the question but he answered anyway.

“Because I was there and I would teach you everything you needed to know.” They got to their seats and she started packing her stuff in the same order she knew, making sure it was in place in her bag. Austin held his books and when she had ensured that nothing was missing, they walked out

of the library side by side. He took the bag from her and she wanted to protest before she thought better of it. They allowed silence and the soft melodies of the enviro they were in surround them as Austin's calm eyes observed his girlfriend. His very peculiar girlfriend. Alora touched her lips and pushed her hair back before she remembered that she was messing with the style and she needed to comb it out to style it again. She faced Austin who was watching her with sudden interest. Why was he still here? She thought that a month was enough to make him see she was not the conventional woman, she panicked over a kiss. Something so simple and she new he didn't say it but he has probably been with better girls who knew what they were doing. All she did was debate with him and challenge him instead of listening to what he said and in that other department? She was cold and didn't know how to even behave. Austin realised that he didn't like seeing Alora question her abilities. She was confident over everything she does and she never displayed weakness. She was now questioning herself over something like a kiss and it was

shaking her confidence. He walked besides her till they reached her dorm room and she opened the door to let him inside. She took her bag from him so she could place it on her study desk along with the books he was holding. She excused herself from the bedroom and left him standing there.

Alora made her way to the bathrooms where she washed her hands like always before she splashed water on her face and washed her hands one more time. She dried her hands and used her hands to fan her face before exiting the bathrooms. She found him sitting at the corner of her bed and she folded her arms. His height wouldn't fit the length of the bed, he would need to curve his body but even that would be enough. She shook her head, why was she imagining him on her bed?

“I ordered takeout, sit down and relax.”

“I'm fine. I said this before we left the library.” She said as she sat down next to him. This was so awkward. Austin, a man confident in everything he did just pulled her closer and his whole frame engulfed her. She has been so close to him than

she has ever been with people in a long time.

“You’re tense.”

“Glad you noticed.”

“I would rather you threaten to kill me.”

“Oh, I really do.”

“After you’re done with school this semester what next?” He was interested in knowing. She wanted her idea to work.

“If I tell you I’ll hex it, I told you that.”

“There is no such thing as hexes or bad luck.”

She breathed out.

“I want to start my own beauty brand.” He nodded.

“I have been working on it for years, I just have to get this degree then implement the idea.”

“Tell me more.” He said as he kicked his shoes off and forced her to remove her heels and sit cross legged next to him on the bed.

“So that’s it. I don’t need your approval first of all,

second of all I was just telling you as my boyfriend and third of all don't steal my idea." She said all in one breath.

"You're a force to be reckoned with. Can't wait to see your brand in stores." He whispered against her ear and her breath hitched.

"It doesn't sound stupid?" She closed her eyes. She said that aloud?

"Not at all." He kissed her cheek and she touched her cheek. This was going to take time to get used to. He touched her head and she let him, allowed him to pull her head to his so he could plant his lips on hers, softly and gently as she closed her eyes and parted her lips. She mimicked his actions without second thought and her hands found his neck on their own accord, pulling him into her as they kissed. Deeply with all the time in the world, his hands stopping respectably at her waist as he pulled her in, her body crashing into his and actually melting into his and Alora only broke the kiss hearing a foreign sound escape her throat. She retreated back into her head. Was that her? She

flushed and Austin rubbed her lips as he smiled. He is not going to push anything.

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At Hades and Reba's shared house, Hades covered Rebantle with a blanket as she closed her eyes well at least tried to. She was so cold, her teeth chattered against each other. As much as Hades had his own withdrawal symptoms to tend to, she came first because she mattered to him. A month had elapsed and his mother hadn't called.

Maybe she saw that it was useless because he would not ask his father for money. There were no trending news so he was okay.

“Reba I’m here okay?”

“Cold...” she whispered. That was a heavy blanket he covered her with. He kissed her cheek.

“You’ll get warm.” He said and she closed her eyes. She was freezing to the bone. Today it was worse than other days to be honest. Hades even skipped work and she skipped school so that he can make sure she was okay, her needs came first before his. He still had that guilt he secretly carried, that he let Rebantle use drugs just because he couldn’t stop drinking. He decided to get under the heavy blanket with her.

“I’m here. I’m here.” He held her in his arms and didn’t let her go. They had a long way to go.

Alora glared at Austin for a good minute. He shrugged it off and she rolled her eyes as she closed her laptop.

“Okay, first architect to ever exist and you are not allowed to take longer than three seconds.” she asked and he answered immediately.

“Imhotep.”

“Father of architects?”

“Louis Sullivan.” He answered smoothly as she fully faced him.

“Crossword then?” She asked. She didn’t want to think about today’s events.

“Today’s topic is everything business.” She shrugged. That was their forte, him being his mother’s interim CEO and she was still a student. A student with dreams bigger than her current bank account. She got off her chair and bent down to the box that had crosswords. That second date of his, they came up with their own method of playing crosswords, they set their own theme using the boxes on the already printed crossword puzzle.

Played by their own rules and respected the stakes they put up. She hated cheating and he loved winning to feed his conceitedness. She looked at the rug then settled down as he got off his phone. She placed the crossword page in the middle while she held a pencil and he raised an eyebrow.

“Sit here.”

“No. I am not going to be controlled by you and I don’t want you near me.”

“It makes the game easier.”

“Robert please do the world a favour and die. The world would be a better place without you.” She said and his calm gaze was just on her.

“You know that won’t happen. You go first.”

She looked at the seven letter word.

“Finance” she said as she lowered her body to write that down. She straightened up and looked up at him. He took the pen from her hand and extended his hand to fill in the blanks that followed. She cautiously looked at him as she read the words and

too her own back to fill in the crossword. The silence wasn't weird in any way or manner, it was silence they understood and used so that they can be able to think.

By the end of the crossword, Alora had won.

"I won." She said and he smiled.

"I let you win." She rolled her eyes as she got up on her feet.

"No you didn't." His phone rang and he got up as well. She watched him answer his phone as he walked closer to her. His free hand landed on her shoulder and he used his thumb to rub the side of her neck. He watched her reactions and she was frozen into place.

"Okay. I'm on my way." He cut the call and looked down at her.

"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" She moved back and she placed her hand on the spot he had touched.

"I'll be back in ten." He walked out and she sighed.

What was happening to her? This was not her. She said but what was her? She closed her eyes and leaned back, only her sister loved her spiteful self, Reba was the one person who truly loved her with all her flaws and she still shone her brightness all around. Reba loved Hades fucking Hudson and who in their right mind would love Hades? Reba was precious. she didn't want to believe that Austin could stay long enough. Maybe this was a chase, an almost decade long chase where he could finally say I got to bed the smart spiteful girl who was my academic rival. No. She wasn't giving up her power like that. She wasn't sleeping with him. Not now or ever. She made up her mind as she turned on her heel and started cleaning her room while he was out.

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Austin came back to find everything cleared up as he held the takeout. He was going to have to live with her obsessiveness and he already had ways to not allow it to flare up when he was around her.

Alora looked at him as he raised the paper bags and she glared.

"After this you're leaving?" She asked? He raised an eyebrow.

"Darling, you can't get rid of me that easily."

"It's my room, I do have the right to kick you out."

"But do you want to kick me out? That's the question." She kept quiet as he sat on the rug and she appreciated that, the food crumbs won't land on her bed and that won't send her into a cleaning frenzy.

"I have a therapist." He said as he took out a box of nuggets. Alora frowned. He was opening up to her?

"A therapist?" She asked again. She found it hard to believe that the man whom she has know since her teenage years and was superior on every way was seeing someone.

"Why?" She asked.

He leaned against the bed and tilted his head in a sexy way.

"Try to figure it out."

She rolled your eyes.

"I hate guessing Robert, spill it out."

"You're a horrible confidante Lora."

"Whatever! Say it."

She said as he opened another boc and handed it to her. She held it in her hands and her eyes were fixated on him. Her wandering eyes travelled from his face to his chest then back to his face again as she waited for him to speak.

"At first it was about my condition but then I pick his mind about topics and things, he is the only therapist who challenges me and makes me think even though he doesn't necessarily agree with whatever I say." Austin watched Alora process it, she didn't even know that James knew more about her than he let on. His therapist knew a lot of things and he did say a lot of things to him. James always told him he was human and he can't always control everything. Austin preferred to think otherwise, he was a fucking genius and he made people do things for him without noticing. A manipulator would be the most suitable word because he manipulated people for his own benefit. There was a bout of silence and Alora opened the box to take out the burger. She looled at him

"What condition?"

"I was supposed to be on Adderall." He said simply. It took her seconds to figure it out and her eyes widened in surprise.

"If you find out that I'm taking Adderall you have every right to leave me, I would never take that in

my life." She put that into memory.

"But why?"

"I don't need help to focus, I can achieve everything on my own without any stimulant Lora." She shrugged.

"Still..."

"I survived without it and look at my achievements, all pure genius and me."

She rolled her eyes.

"This is an ego free room Robert."

"It's the truth, I've never needed help to achieve the goals I set for myself. I did it all on my own. Looking at it, I did you a favour Lora."

She glared at him, her eyes fiery and her stare holding.

"I'm so close to kicking you out of my room Robert." She said and he laughed.

"You managed to date a man's whose IQ doubles yours." Her glare grew more heated and if she knew

how hard he was underneath those jeans she would stop glaring at him like that.

"Your IQ is higher than mine by only one fucking percent Robert!"

"So you agree that I'm smarter than you?" He said with a smirk and she rolled her eyes.

"Shut up!" He moved from his initial position and sat behind her. She tried to move but he put his hand around his waist.

"Robert, let me go."

"Why?" Shd breathed out. He was getting close. Too close to her defences. No one would travel to the ends of the world for a spiteful bitch like her without a goal. She didn't believe that he would spend so much money just to get to know her, she was not losing her virginity. She had her mind made up.

"Alora I'm very practical about a lot of things darling but I don't know how long it will take for you to will yourself to me but I'll wait."

"I won't will myself to any man." His lips brushed

her neck ever so lightly.

"I know you don't. Outside the bedroom you don't. That's a given."

"You don't know me inside the bedroom." He laughed against her ear and he finally kissed her neck. She moved her head forward. She was not supposed to enjoy this.

"You see babe, if you were as dominant in the bedroom as you are outside it you wouldn't be a virgin at 22 would you babe? You would have taken all you wanted from men and left them because everyday you threaten their d*cks." She didn't want his analysis of her. Mainly because he was right and she didn't want to fuel his ego by agreeing that his observations were spot on. She couldn't see herself as the woman with the high heels on in the bedroom, taking the lead. It made her anxious and feverish. She didn't even know what she wanted in there because it was something she wasn't going to explore anytime soon.

"But you're still a virgin, are you scared that you

won't be as dominant in the bedroom as you are outside it?" He voiced out her fear and she kept quiet. Austin chuckled lowly and kissed her cheek.

"Get away from me!" He laughed.

"No." She didn't lean against him and instead remained rigid. He didn't seem to mind her not being the soft kind hearted woman men went for and that cemented her belief that he wanted sex. His eight year long chase would be done.

"And you want to leave after the sex? Your decade long chase done. Having bed your rival and reaching the finish line." She said as a matter of fact and Austin just kissed her neck.

"You might not believe me now Alora but you're more than a chase to me, you and I are endgame. You are not the finish line, we are just starting our life together." He said and tilted her head upwards to kiss her, she responded but not how he wanted. He broke the kiss and smiled.

"I don't want you temporarily Lora." He kissed her cheek and she just nodded.

"Let's eat." She said and he didn't let go of her waist, instead his grip tightened and she groaned.

"I despise you." She glared up at him. He lowered his head instead to kiss her pink lips and he watched her close her eyes as he did so.

Meanwhile at Botswana, Mooketsi was in his house scrolling through social media when he paused on an online article shared by The Voice Newspaper. The article had been shared by many and he decided to read it because it seemed like it was trending.

Upon reading the contents of the article, his heart dropped and he quickly went to his contacts to call his mother. He hoped they were lying because Rebantle would never do anything of that sort. They all knew their sister, she wasn't that type.

"Hello?" Susan answered with a sleepy voice.

"Hello, did I wake you up?"

Susan yawned.

"Yes. Is my daughter in law okay?" She asked.

"Yes. She is asleep. Is Rebantle with you?"

"No, she hasn't visited in a month but I talk to her over the phone. She is okay. What is it?" Susan murmured.

"Nothing. I have to go. Bye." He hung up. He didn't want to worry his mother this time of the night. He dialled his little sister's number and it wasn't going through.

"Answer the phone Reba." He said frustrated. It wasn't true. It all had to be a big lie. He heard footsteps and assumed that was his wife. She pulled her silk gown and yawned.

"Come to bed, it's late." He smiled.

"I'll be there in a minute." She shook her head.

"You said that an hour ago." She walked closer and took his phone away from him.

"Work will have to wait till morning. Come sleep." He forced a smile as she took his hand and led him to the bedroom. He will deal with this tomorrow.

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The following morning, Hades was woken up by his phone ringing. He turned to look at Rebantle who was sleeping peacefully after hours of him just holding her as she shivered. He kissed her forehead before he got up and followed the ringtone to get to his phone. He picked it up and answered his father.

"Hello."

"You are hell bent on embarrassing me Hades aren't you? After everything I do for you, you decide to embarrass me?"

Hades was perplexed by his father's sudden rage. His father went on and on about how Hades was nothing but a disappointment with nothing to show in his mid twenties. Hades swallowed and blinked, he was never safe from his father's sharp tongue for as long as he could remember.

"Now I have a board meeting to try and assure the shareholders. You created this mess and now I have to fix it for you." His father hung up abruptly and Hades looked at the phone, still lost at what his father was saying and where he got the information. His phone rang again and he looked at his father call again. He answered again.

"Hello."

"Be by my office by lunchtime so we can find a way forward with your addiction." His father hung up. His addiction? That was well covered up and the

only person who knew of his addiction was
Rebante a-

"Fuck!" His absent mother. She knew of both of their
addictions and-

Wait! Wait! He went to Facebook and there it was,
he was trending along with Rebante. Pictures were
leaked and he went to the internet where he found
articles on Reba, Rebante was a big deal because
she had been an international model and he was a
big deal being his father's only heir. He ran his hand
over his face as he read the articles that were spun
and twisted by different media houses.

**'INTERNATIONAL FORMER TEEN MODEL
REBANTE MOREMI A DRUG JUNKIE ALONG WITH
THE HEIR TO HUDSON INC.'**

It was all bolded and his heart stopped as it showed
pictures of him staggering out of a club and some
of him passed out. There were also pictures of
Reba buying from her supplier. He tried to breath

but it was so hard, he would rather have his image tarnished but not Rebantle's image. She was so sweet and she deserved none of the hate that she was about to receive. He wanted to shield her from that but he was furious he couldn't even shield her from his mother's spite to expose them because he didn't get money from his father for her. He walked to the bedroom and Rebantle yawned as she removed her head from under the blankets.

"Hey." She said softly as she smiled at him, her slender arms stretching before she pushed the blanket down and she looked at him as if he was someone better. As if he wasn't an addict.

"Hey pretty girl. How's my favourite girl doing?" He asked and she grinned before she covered her face with her hand.

"I'm fresh as a daisy." She said softly. He walked closer and helped her out of bed. He hugged her. She hugged him back. He moved his head back to look at her face. His large hands framed his face and she leaned into his touch.

"I love you, I would never quit you for anything okay Reba?"

"I know. I love you and thank you." She said softly and she stood on her tip toes to shyly kiss his cheek before she looked at him. He saw more than a drug addict and loved her regardless. She might as well say she was addicted to him then drugs came after, her addiction never altered his perception of her and he was holding her hand through their sobriety pledge. She smiled and kissed his lips. She wrapped her hands around his waist and placed her head on his chest.

Hades breathed out and kissed her head.

"I don't know if I'll live long enough but I love you." Reba shook her head.

"Hades, we will be okay. I swear. We will be okay. It might not be now but soon. We won't let the addictions win my love. Want to watch a Marvel film with me then we will watch another one?" she asked sweetly. He wanted to shield her from the media and every harsh word that was going to be

said about her. He knew the world was sexist, if it was a man who was a drug addict they would sing a different tune but since it was a woman, they were going to throw stones her way. He kissed her head.

"Whatever you want." Reba looked up at him with a cute smile and he pushed her hair back.

"You are my lover and friend. Everything I need. My number one." He smiled softly and she took his hand leading him to the bathroom so they could take a shower.

At Susan's house, Susan read the articles as her jaw dropped. Her daughter? A junkie? Her phone has been ringing off the hook as the fashion house Reba has worked with before tried to get confirmation if it is true or not because she represented their brands at some point. She looked at her husband as she shook her head.

"Reba can't be doing drugs. That's impossible. My child is completely fine."

"They say from a very close source."

"I don't care. Reba can't be doing drugs. I would have known if she was doing drugs." Susan said out of breath. She dialled Rebantle's phone and tried to call. It wasn't going through. She left a voice message.

"Rebantle answer the phone!" Susan said. She pushed her weave back.

"I know my daughter, she had a good life and an excellent career. Why would she take drugs?" She asked. Her career had been the highlight of Reba's life and she grew up great regardless of their father being dead. She didn't take drugs. She was happy.

"You'll ask her." Susan shook her head. She was going to where Reba was staying, she was going to squash these allegations. Hades was an alcoholic? She shook her head. Those kids were normal and okay. The media was lying.

"I'm going to Reba's house." Susan said with a

made up mind.

At Mooketsi's house, he tried calling Rebantle but her phone wasn't going through. He called his big brother Bokamoso to see if he was getting through to Rebantle. His sister? Drugs? Impossible. He didn't even want to call Alora, it was probably 4am in America and he would be disrupting his younger sister's sleep schedule. He looked at his wife and chuckled. Hia family was in for a big surprise. He married a woman and he didn't tell them, for all they knew he was in Francistown working and probably had a girlfriend. He shook his head, the main focus was Rebantle. His older sister, the fashion model. The one who had gotten fame and recognition at a young age. His big brother Bokamoso answered.

"You saw the article?"

"Reba isn't even answering her phone." Bokamoso

said.

"We're all worried about her." He replied. Where did they fail her if she is taking drugs?

"What if she was influenced by Hades?" Moks asked and Bokamoso kept silent. Thinking about it.

"Reba wouldn't take drugs just on her own, Reba is smart and the problem is she was spending too much time with Hades."

"You might have a point there. Let me drive up to mom's house." Bokamoso said and Mooketsi nodded as he hung up. He should probably fly back home. Would it be an appropriate time to introduce his wife as well?

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[06/02, 19:40] : REBORN

52

At Hades and Reba's shared house, they sat in front of the television eating popcorn as Reba lightly giggled.

"I love how Black widow has evolved over the years in Marvel, they stopped sexualizing her so much and they are now focusing on her strength and capabilities." He kissed her forehead.

"Look at you." She grinned as she kissed his lips before snuggling into his chest. It was their own little world, they were so used to being there for each other without including other people and Reba preferred it that way. A minute later, there was a door knock and Reba looked at Hades.

"Are you expecting guests?" She whispered and he shook his head. He got up from the couch and headed to the door. She used the fleece blanket to

cover her face as Hades opened the door. Hades didn't have a chance to say a word when Susan stormed inside the house and she looked around.

"Where is my daughter?" She asked, anger brewing in her eyes and her voice too high. Rebantle who was underneath the blanket kept quiet as her heart raced. What was going on? She didn't respond well to anger and she closed her eyes.

"Hades ngwanake o kae?"(where is my child?) Reba's step-father walked inside the house and looked around. Hades didn't say anything as he walked to the couch and removed the fleece.

"Hey, your parents are looking for you?"

"Why are they angry?" She asked with a low voice as her big eyes looked at Hades for comfort. What did she do? Hades breathed out and before he could say anything, Susan was by the couch holding her waist with anger.

"Rebantle is it true?" Rebantle's looked like a deer caught in headlights. Not knowing what the hell was going on.

"Hee? Is it true that you're taking drugs?" She asked and Reba's eyes widened before they filled with tears. How did they know? Besides she stopped.

"I'm sorry." Susan shook her head.

"What are you sorry for? Are you taking drugs or not?" She asked as she raised her voice and that scared Reba. Hades rubbed his jaw.

"Please don't raise your voice at her." Susan gave Hades the most hateful look ever.

"Don't talk to me about how to treat my daughter, she is my child and it's all your fault that she is taking drugs." Hades rubbed Reba's hand.

"You Reba, you're leaving with me."

"What?"

"I will not allow you to be influenced by this boy. You are not even married and you ruined your reputation by taking drugs." Susan grabbed Reba's hand to pull her from the couch and Reba looked at Hades for help. He was the only friend she needed. He understood her and she couldn't fathom

being ripped away from him.

"I-I don't want to go." She said with a soft voice and Susan wasn't having it.

"You have no choice. O kgagogile setse o tsaya di drugs, wena Reba?" (You're a mess, you're already taking drugs.) With that Susan pulled Rebantle out of the house.

"You are to never see that boy again."

"What?"

"He is a bad influence over your life, look at you now. 25 years old and still a varsity student, yoh ruined your own life. A re ye."(let's go)

"My clo-"

"You'll buy new ones." Thabiso looked at Hades one more time before he walked out to join his wife.

Hades covered his face with his hands. They didn't have to treat Reba like that but he would take the blame everyday for Reba starting drugs even though he knew he had nothing to do with it, it all started with her modelling career and everything

that happened when she went international. He could blame himself for enabling her, well they were both addicts. The other craved alcohol and the other drugs. He sighed.

At Alora's dorm, she finally woke up and she picked up her phone. She found a message from her boyfriend and she smiled. She texted him back and put her phone back. Time to get started with her morning routine before she even touches her phone again. An hour later, she picked up her phone and like always, scrolled through the news to keep up to date with what was happening. Her morning calm was destroyed by the countless of articles she saw on her sister and Hades. She read most of them as she walked to her desk to sit down. Alora opened her laptop as she dialed Rebantle's phone which didn't go through. She opened a google tab as she searched drug addiction and what can be done to

help. She sighed and dialed Hades. His phone rang for a good minute before he answered.

"If you are going to insult me, save it." He said and she rolled her eyes.

"You're such an asshole, where is my sister?"

"Your mother took her." Aloraxs shoulders slumped.

"Is it true?"

"Yeah!" She leaned back.

"Why didn't you guys tell me?" She said. She loved her sister to death, Reba loved Hades to death. That meant she tolerated Hades to death and vice versa.

"We were working on it. It wasn't supposed to be in the media." Hades said. Surprisingly Alora didn't even blame him for a thing.

"You've been both fighting addictions and I don't know how you two thought you could win this alone." Alora said.

"I'll call back." She hung up and dialed her step-mother's number. It rang unanswered and Alora's eyes quickly read what was on the laptop screen.

She dialled Susan again and she finally answered.

"Hello, can I speak to Reba?"

"Alora can you believe it that that boy influ-"

"Ke kopa go bua le Rebantle."(can I please speak to Rebantle.) Susan handed Reba her phone. Reba sniffed as she saw Alora's name flash on the screen.

"Hey Reba, are you okay?" Reba shook her head.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry..." Reba apologised over and over again.

"If you apologise one more time, I'll personally punch you. Are you okay? Did they force you to come with them" Alora asked and Reba wiped her tears.

"Hades did nothing wrong." Alora looked at her computer screen as her heart clenched.

"Reba, as soon as I'm done with my last paper I'm flying back home. I know you love Hades, I'm heartbroken that you didn't tell me of your struggles." Reba chuckled and Alora smiled. Less

tears. Good job Lora!

"You? Heartbroken?" Reba sniffed and Alora sighed.

"Yes. But whatever you need and want, call me. I'll call everyday doesn't matter the time zone. I'll send Austin there."

"Austin?" Alora rolled her eyes.

"Don't start. He is the one who will be closer and he is calm. Too calm to be throwing tantrums like your mother and other siblings."

"Uhu!"

"I love you okay? I will be with you every step of the way and listen to whatever. You know I always listen to whatever you tell me. I love you for infinity."

"I love you too."

"Rest okay? Please don't let them force their will onto you."

"They won't understand." Alora sighed.

"I'll talk to them. Will it be hard to open up to them regardless of whether you're taking drugs or not.."

"Yes." Alora sighed yet again as she googled ways to get someone to open up to you about their problems.

"Okay. I love you Reba. Three more months then I'll be done with school and I'll be there. In the meantime Austin will be my mouth piece that side. I love you okay?"

"I love you." Reba said softly and Alora blinked tears. Fuck! She was crying. She hung up and blinked a couple of times so that the tears would not fall.

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[06/02, 19:40] : REBORN

At Susan's house, Reba just quietly walked to her bedroom but it seemed like her mother had other plans.

"Where do you think you're going? We still have to get answers." Reba rubbed her eyes.

"I'm tired." Susan held her hip.

"Tired? When you were watching tv with Hades? Ae, sit down and answer us. We had to find out through the media that you take drugs..drugs Reba. Drugs are dangerous and you take them? Ke tshogile." Reba didn't know how to deal with people who were angry and all that could come out if her mouth were apologies, like the time she mistakenly ripped a dress she was supposed to model. She had said sorry so many times to the point of crying. Just like in this instance she was apologising over and over again as she cried. Susan paused.

"You brought this to yourself and now we have to find a way out of it. When you listened to bad

advice." Thabiso looked at Susan. She was going about it the wrong way and was making matters worse.

"Su, calm down and let her rest. She was probably avoiding such a reaction. Reba you can go rest."

Reba said sorry one more time before she retreated and Susan turned to look at Thabiso.

"I had that under control, Rebantle is my daughter, not ours." Thabiso stared at her with a blank expression and Susan realised what she just said.

"Thabiso I-

"Fine. She is your daughter, I was trying to be helpful." He walked away without waiting for any further explanation from her and Susan's guilt had her wanting to go after him to apologise. It was just a slip of the tongue and she didn't mean that.

In the bedroom, Rebantle held her knees as she cried. She didn't want to relive those awful memories, it was bad enough she had found a rather inconvenient escape from the memories but now they ripped her away from Hades and she

didn't know how she was going to survive. He knew what to say and if Alora was here, she would be with her in her weird way. Home didn't offer her the comfort she badly wanted and she didn't want to relapse again or be forced to talk. She rocked back and forth and hummed the song they used to sing together in the kitchen when she woke up from a nightmare or in the morning after her sleepwalking episodes. She started singing the song as she closed her eyes.

"I wanna be alone, alone with you.

Does that make sense?

I want to steal your soul and hide you in my
treasure chest

I don't know what to do

To do with your kiss on my neck

I don't know what feels true but this feels right so
stay a sec.

Yeah you feel right so stay a sec." She sang softly

as tears rolled down her eyes, would they allow her to see Hades again.

Alora looked at the notes she already made. Her heart raced as she thought that she wasn't doing enough as a sister, what if she failed her older sister? She already felt like a failure. She looked around her room. Everything was arranged and she didn't know what to do with her pent up emotions that were fueled by her sister's addiction. She walked to her wardrobe and sat inside as she brought her knees to her face. She wanted to scream so bad. She wanted to scream and hope that her screams made Reba feel better. She rubbed her chest and her eyes adjusted to the darkness in the closet. She sat there in the closet, she didn't know for how long. She only got out when she heard a door knock and she tried to regain her composure. Everything should be fine. She assured herself. She opened the door and she

looked at Robert whose presence suffocated her. His chest looked like a good place to cry but she wasn't that person. She released a shaky breath and tried to maintain her glare but failed.

"Lora." Came out his voice as he lunged towards her and held her. She didn't fight him off like she usually did and she didn't have something to say back. She was so off and she was continents away. So many miles away from her sister.

Austin held her in his arms as he closed the door and he pushed her hair back down. He could sense something was wrong the moment she opened the door without any snide comment or remark. Their usual banter wasn't even there.

He rubbed her back and he wasn't sure if she will open up to him but even if she doesn't, he was here either way. She moved away from him and looked at her hands.

"I have to wash my hands, they have dust." She said with a voice higher than her usual voice. It was like she was panicking. Alora quickly opened the door

and walked out as Austin followed her quick paces to the bathroom. It was the girls' bathroom but he just walked in following her. He watched her open the hot water faucet and let the liquid soap fill her hand as she lathered it frantically up to her elbows and scrub off the dust that he didn't see. She filled her hand again with soap.

"Clean, I need to get clean!!" She said with a breaking voice as her hands went pink and when she was about to fill her hand with soap again he held her wrists. She tried to fight him off, trying to pull away from his strong grip.

"I-I just washed my hands and yo-"

"Alora look at me." He forced her to face him and look into his eyes.

"Baby you're safe with me. I promise." He said softly. Her OCD was flaring and something triggered it, she was using it to get her mind off something. She weakened in his hold and he held her hands much gently as he pulled her to him. He placed her head on his chest, not caring that her wet hands were

wetting his shirt.

"Do you want to talk?" He asked. Silence.

He didn't let go of her hands in case she scrubbed herself to the point of bleeding. Alora breathed softly as scenarios played in her head. She closed her eyes and fisted her hands. He didn't let go of her hands and she was half grateful for that, she was probably going to scrub herself till she bled. She tried to relax in his hold and he walked out with her, not even moving her head. She blinked back the tears. She was not the crying type.

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[06/02, 19:41] : REBORN

In Alora's room, Austin pushed her hair back as she laid her head on his lap. She hadn't said anything and he thought he heard a sniff from her. The silence allowed Alora to think about Reba's situation. Was she that ignorant of her sister that she never noticed anything wrong for years? Tears filled her eyes and she forcedly blinked them away. She was okay. She tried to move her head but his large hand kept her head on his lap. She cleared her throat.

"I'll castrate you." She said and he chuckled.

"I'm starting to think you're obsessed with my d*ck Alora." She rolled her eyes, talking to him offering her a much needed distraction from her racing thoughts.

"Get over yourself."

"Never." He said. He didn't force her to talk about it and the issue weighed heavily in the air. Their banter couldn't even mask it and she breathed out

as his hand moved to her cheek and this one time she allowed herself to touch his hand and keep it there. Right on her cheek. Austin moved his thumb and she just held his hand. He still didn't ask her about what led to her temporary breakdown.

"I feel like a failure." She said softly without moving his hand.

"I'm always the smartest person in the room and I failed to notice? I should have done better, I failed her because h-" she paused and closed her eyes. He didn't say anything and she was grateful for his silence, she knew he was listening though.

"I hope she forgives me for not paying attention. I feel like such a failure and I am miles away from home Austin." She said. Austin just rubbed her cheek as she held his hand without moving her head.

"How did it fly over my head that my sister is taking drugs? Am I so self absorbed that I didn't notice?" She closed her eyes again and moved her head closer.

"People hide their problems well. Your sister hid her own well." Alora finally moved her head from his lap and she looked at his face. He was a work of art but she'll never tell him to his face. His ego didn't need more encouragement.

"Like you hide your true emotions?" She said pointedly, if she hit the nail on the head he didn't show it and he raised an eyebrow.

"We're not talking about me."

"We might as well talk about you."

"Are you good?" He asked her and she placed her hands on her thighs. Austin's eyes moved from her thighs to her chest before his eyes settled on her face.

"I'm okay." She said. She has always been okay. The one sibling no one had to worry about because she held herself with standards so high, they couldn't even meet those standards.

Austin moved closer and she moved back. He laughed and she shook her head.

"I hate you."

"I know." She smiled and her smile left him breathless.

"It's beautiful."

"What is?"

"Your real smile Lora." She smiled more and he grinned.

"You're smiling for me, my fiery dreamer?"

She rolled her eyes before she glared at him.

"You wish Robert."

"Come closer." She rolled her eyes.

"No."

"Alora."

"Robert."

"Come closer." She rolled her eyes and moved closer with her arms folded. He laughed and pulled her closer, arms folded and all. He kissed the top of her head and she rolled her eyes trying not to smile.

"Robert, the same way you got my number from Hades, will you check on him when you get to Botswana?" She asked him. Hades probably didn't have anyone in his corner now that Reba had forcibly been taken away by her step-parents. As much as she had detested him for being epicentre in her sister's life, his parents didn't give any flying fucks about him and the human part of her understood why he was always with Reba and didn't mind blending into her family.

"I don't know how you guys know each other but talk to him." He slid his fingers in her hair and she used both hands to hold his hand.

"Don't touch my hair like that. Ke tla go betsa kana."(i'll beat you.)

"I'd like to see you try." She contemplated picking her pillow to hit his head but she would have to pick it up in case it fell.

"Chess?" She asked.

"Lora?" She lifted her eyes to him.

"You're not a failure okay?" She let out a harsh

breath and nodded.

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[06/02, 19:41] : REBORN

55

Inside Reba's bedroom, she laid in bed. How was she going to explain herself? Would the media hound her the moment she stepped outside the house? Would the brand she worked with ask her to make a statement? The only confidence she had ever had was to walk the runway but now she can't even summon that confidence. She turned on her side, how was Hades? Who was helping him with

his withdrawal symptoms? He was trying to get clean, he was really trying and wasn't she who wished he was sober. She closed her eyes and remembered that party at 17 when she had Hades accompany her, the music was so loud and he kissed her half drunk in the back seat of his car. Her first kiss and she had wished he was sober to experience the moment with her. She hugged herself, she wasn't even holding her phone nor the house keys. How was she going to convince her mother to take her to Hades' house so she could get her phone at least. Alora said she was going to call and she wanted to call Hades. She closed her eyes not imagining how alone he was. Tears filled her eyes, he didn't even defend himself when he was told he influenced her. She rubbed her eyes and got out of bed. She thought about it and then she sat on the bed. What if her mother loses her temper again?

Meanwhile Bokamoso knocked on the door. A flabbergasted Susan opened the door and she looked at her first born with relief in her eyes.

“Hi BK.” She hugged him and Bokamoso hugged her back.

“Is Reba okay?”

“She is in her room.”

“You got her?” Susan nodded and Bokamoso breathed out in relief. Now they could find a way forward to deal with their sister’s drug addiction that has suddenly come to light.

“Can I speak to her?”

“Okay.” Bokamoso walked past his mother and he found the room Reba occasionally used when she was visiting their parents. He knocked on the door.

“Who is it?” Her voice was muffled by the blankets she was under and Bokamoso smiled.

“Bk.”

“Coming.” He heard the rustle of the blankets and he leaned against the wall waiting for her to open the door. The door knob twisted and it swung open. Her gangly figure came into view but it was swallowed by her oversized clothes. She smiled at him as she

pulled the hoodie back.

"Hey Reba." He used his hand to mess with her hair and she held his hand. He chuckled. Alora would be spitting profanities at anyone attempting to do that to her.

"Can I come in?" He asked her. He didn't want to suffocate her and he watched her think about it for a minute before she walked inside and told him to follow. How did his sweetest sister resort to drugs? It was difficult to believe that the girl who was a force to be reckoned with behind the camera lens was this shy away from it and was no hooked on drugs. Reba sat down. She had been ignoring her compulsions and she was making progress right? She said to herself as she sat on the bed and her foot started tapping on the carpeted floor.

Bokamoso took the chair which was next to the study table and he faced his sister.

"Are you okay?" He asked her and he watched her purse her lips and nod. He took that as an answer. He didn't want to overwhelm her.

"You were crying."

"I'm sorry if I'm making you worried about me. It was never my intention. I'm sorry." She said and she closed her eyes.

"I'm so sorry." He got up from his chair to hug her.

"I'm so sorry." Her words came out as he rubbed her back and she held back tears.

At Hudson Co. , Hades made his way to his father's office. He avoided the stares of the people in the office buildings. The news had made it's rounds here and he was sure the media attention was something his father's Company wasn't looking for. He was smart not that smart to Alora and Austin's extent but he got his degree regardless of the alcohol abuse right? He licked his lips, wishing he was holding a bottle of bourbon to combat the words from his father's mouth, they always hurt

more than physical punches and kicks could. They cut deeper than the whiskey glass bottle could. His father was an alcoholic himself and he never hid it from Hades but he did get the job done at the company which was a legacy from his grandfather. Hudson Co., has always been a family company. One he wished he didn't have to lead one day. He sighed as he knocked on the door.

"Come in." His father's rough voice sounded and he stepped inside the office that had one of the best views in the city. His father was facing the view with his hands in his pockets.

"At least you came and you aren't stupid enough to stay away." He said. Hades sat down and Fred Hudson turned to face his son. The resemblance was uncanny and it was with no doubt that Hades was his son. Through and through.

"The morning has been eventful." He said.

"Thanks to your ex-wife." Hades said and Fred faced him.

"She did this?"

"Because she didn't get money. You know how to pick them don't you father?" The father was bitter and it left an even bitter taste in Hades' mouth.

"Careful, the money that reports in your account every month has my last name." And he hated that but never did anything about it. He sighed and looked at his father, his sharp jaw ticking as he waited for Fred Hudson to spew his nonsense so he can go to his empty house. He felt his heart hollow. Reba was gone. He pushed her to the back of his mind for the time being.

"I'll deal with her, for now get clean or something." Fred said and a bitter laugh escaped Hades' mouth.

"Like you are?"

"Don't patronise me."

"I am not. I am asking father."

"It's your mess I'm trying to solve here. Make sure that Reba is clean too. You dating a former model boosted the sales and now they plummeted because of the scandal that just surrounded you two. Work with the company publicist as well and I'll

talk to Susan since she is Rebantle's manager. All in all I'm dealing with your mess." He breathed out and Hades leaned back.

"Are we done?"

"Just go!" Fred said and Hades didn't need to hear more to get going.

Hours later at Susan's house after she had been on countless phone calls trying to remedy the situation and come up with a way forward, she headed to the bedroom she shared with her husband.

"Thabiso I'm sorry about what I said earlier on. It was in the heat of the moment." Thabiso put his phone down to face her.

"Aren't we a team? Maybe still in the same heat of the moment you might even tell Alora that she is not your biological child and hurt her feelings regardless of how offish she seems." Susan shook

her head.

"I would never do that. Alora is my daughter."

"And I thought all five of these kids were our children, I was too forward I guess."

"Don't be like that."

Thabiso picked his phone and checked the time.

"I have to go."

"Where?"

"Out." He said and he got out of bed. He slid his feet in his slides and picked his car keys off the stand.

"Thabiso we are still talking." She threw her hands in the air. Thabiso walked past her and closed the door. She sighed frustrated.

Thabiso knocked on Reba's door and he heard the rustling of the blankets. She opened the door and she looked at him.

"We can go." She nodded and walked back inside the room to wear her shoes. She walked out a few

seconds later as they walked side by side in silence. Susan opened the door to her bedroom and stepped out. She saw her husband with Reba.

"Where are you going? She is in no state to leave the house." Susan said and Rebantle shrank back as Thabiso looked at his wife. She was handling this all wrong.

"She is not a porcelain doll for crying out loud Susan. Rebantle is old enough to make her own decisions." He said. Rebantle opened her mouth to apologise. She didn't want them to fight because of her.

"And her being old enough led her to take drugs right? I don't care if she is in her mid 20s, she is not fit to be out there." Rebantle breathed in and out. See why her drug addiction was better when it was just a secret and only Hades knew. She rubbed her arm and closed her eyes.

Thabiso's gaze landed on Reba and he breathed out. He put his arms around her.

"Reba, let's go and you'll be back."

"I'm so sorry. Sorry." She said near tears and Thabiso glared at his wife before he breathed out.

"There is nothing to be sorry about okay?" He assured her and led her out of the house. Reba wished she didn't have to think right now, if there were drugs nearby she would be so high and nothing would burst her bubble of happiness even if it was temporary. Those hallucinations were better than facing reality.

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Next insert to follow in an hour or two. Hi.

[06/02, 19:41] : REBORN

Thabiso parked his car outside the yard and Reba gave him a grateful look.

“Go do what you do before we head home.” She nodded and she got out of the car. She almost tripped as she half ran to the gate and Thabiso chuckled. That was young love, he could see past their addictions and he saw love. Even though it didn’t seem like it to other people. He looked at his phone and he switched it on. He was sure he was going to find missed calls from Susan. He hated how she handled the whole thing and it was so unlike his level headed wife. Did she feel out of depth or was she trying to act like super woman and save everyone?

Rebante knocked on the door.

“Hades! H open the door!” She said and that drew Hades out of his thoughts. Was that Reba? He breathed out and looked around. Thankfully he hadn’t opened the bottle of whiskey he had bought. Was she back?

“Coming.” He got up and walked to the door to open up for her. The minute the door was open she hurled herself in his arms. He held her, his body engulfing her frame. She let go of him and he smiled at her. They had been apart for more than seven hours and she hated that. She placed her head back on his chest.

“Hi.” She said softly.

“Hi love.” His voice was intoxicating on it’s own. Did he know that? Reba asked herself. Hades was the kind of handsome that was harsh and was all in your face, he didn’t blend in and she knew girls wanted him but he was hers right? Right? She asked herself and shook her head. She didn’t have much time.

“What is it love?”

“I came here for my phone and clothes.” Hades swallowed and nodded. He lifted his head and saw the car. Thabiso raised his two fingers in salute and Hades nodded in acknowledgment.

“I’ll help you.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Hades I’m scared.” She said.

“Talk to me.”

“I want a fix.” She said under her breath and he closed his eyes. She didn’t let go as they walked inside the house. He closed the door and held her hands.

“Where do the urges come from?”

“I’m upsetting everyone and it’s my fault. I don’t want to think about it Hades.” She said.

“And?”

“And there is nothing to take my mind off my own thoughts. I don’t want to think.” She said as she removed her hands from his. She held her hoodie sleeves and Hades looked at her. She was so cute but that was besides the point. He shouldn’t enable her, that was what got them here.

“Love, you don’t h-“ she shook her head.

“Ever since I got there, my thoughts have been racing and the compulsions were so strong. I-I just want a small fix. Even if it’s weed though heroin will

be efficient but weed can do because it's easier to find than heroin." She paced up and down as she started thinking about where she can find drugs, she didn't do weed. It wasn't strong like the drugs she took but it was be-

Her train of thought was cut off when Hades held her.

"Reba we are not going down that road again." He said sternly and Reba touched his cheek.

"I-I know but-" she bit her lower lip and released a tired sigh.

"I know you H, you're going to drink. You need something stronger to process everything and you don't want to have to process. I know you Hades." She said softly and he faced the other way, knowing that she was right. Here before him, stood his best friend, lover and girlfriend. She knew him like the back of her hand and she accepted him. Even if he was such a bitter bastard but he accepted him and loved him.

"No. I'm not letting you destroy yourself once more

love. I love you too much to let that happen.” Reba sighed and nodded. He held her hand.

“Let’s help you pack your clothes okay?” She nodded and let him lead her to the room they had shared for over a year. She had some fun memories here as well as memories she preferred not to think about. When they got to the room, she took out her suitcase and placed it on the bed.

“I don’t know when I’ll be back. I don’t want to go.” Reba said. Hade stood by the bed and he just nodded. She didn’t want to have to leave him all alone, Hades had only her for support as weird as that may sound. He may be rich but he had her, he has only had her from the time she agreed to be his best friend when they were teenagers till now. He had no clutch to hold onto and she had this paralysing fear that the moment she leaves, she might find him deep into his addiction. Deep into that dark hole, they both fought to get him out of. They were addicts and their dynamic was weird to understand but she knew he had her. She had her family whom she was guessing at this point wanted

nothing to do with Hades. She closed her eyes, her chest aching at the possibility of Hades dying from alcohol poisoning. She opened her eyes and blinked back her tears but it was too late. They rolled down her cheeks and Hades was by her side in seconds.

He held her.

“Love, it’s okay.”

“I don’t want to lose you.” Reba said and Hades kept quiet. In his teen years he had been sure he wasn’t going to live past 24 but here he was and it was because of her. Right now, he wasn’t so sure.

“Hades say something.” She begged. He sighed and kissed her forehead.

“I love you okay Reba?” Reba moved her head and sniffed. He didn’t even reassure her. She just nodded then disentangled herself from him so she could go pack her bag. In twenty minutes she was done, she didn’t pack up everything but only the stuff she was going to need. The suitcase was now on the floor and ready to be taken away. She wasn’t sure if her mother was going to let her out of her

sight, she didn't want to offend her mother and disobey her. She hated conflict entirely and she would agree to anything than to see people fight or quarrel over her. She found her phone and slid it into her hoodie pocket, she looked around the room and she was conflicted. Would she see Hades again, would her mother understand that she needs Hades? She walked into his open arms and she fit perfectly with him. They didn't let go for a while and she was the one to break the strong hold. She stood on her tip toes to kiss his sharp jawline then lips. She opened her mouth and he did the same, his hands now moving down to her flat behind. She appreciated that he never commented on how she didn't have any ass to grope and loved her anyway.

"Is this goodbye sex?" He asked and she nodded before she broke the kiss and smiled.

"You spoiled the mood."

"I can still have you against the wall." He kissed her nose then her cheek. She grinned. She was making Thabiso wait and she felt bad about that but then Hades. She kissed him again and this time he

picked her up, she wrapped her legs around his waist as he placed her on the bed, gently as if she was something breakable. She looked up at him as he looked straight into her eyes.

“I love you.” He said and she nodded. Her hands on his jacket and already unzipping it. He threw it across the room and she looked at another obstacle, his t-shirt. She slid her hands underneath it to feel his skin and he lower himself on her to kiss her without even removing her clothes, he was torn between removing her clothes to feel her skin or to remove her bottoms so it could be easier for her to get dressed when she left. He shook his head. He would have to think about that later. Reba made things easier for him by lifting herself off the bed and removing her hoodie. She placed it on the floor and he did the rest. In minutes they were fully naked and kissing fervently. Hades’ lips sucked on her neck as he #EXPLICIT

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[06/02, 19:41] : REBORN

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Hades watched Reba get dressed as a tear fell, he quickly wiped it away and he got up from bed, picking up his boxer shorts from the floor. Reba breathed out. She was hoping for the best and she was hoping that her mother would understand her. She hoped it would get better and her step father would allow her to see Hades.

Hades held her in his arms as she stopped midway with slipping the hoodie over her head.

“I’ll visit. I promise. We can beat this.” She said softly. She didn’t know how but she was better than

heroin and any other drug she could take. She told herself. Hades nodded and kissed her forehead.

“I’ll miss you.” He said and she smiled sadly.

“I’ll call every day, I promise.” She placed a finger on his lips and rubbed the, before she moved back and wore her hoodie. She checked for her phone in the pockets N’s thankfully it was still there. She looked at the messy room and the bed where they just made love. She swallowed tearfully and hugged him.

“I love you.”

“Best friends?” He said with a croaky voice and she grinned into his bare chest.

“Forever in our world. Best friend and lover.”

“And everything in between.” He completed in a breath. She nodded and kissed his bare chest.

“I don’t want to let you.”

“So don’t.” He said. Reba shook her head. It was impossible, her mother was so unpredictable at this point and maybe the distance would do them good right? But it can also do more harm.

“I have to.” She let go and she licked her lips. He kissed her cheek and his lips lingered there for seconds before he moved his lips away and stepped back.

“I’ll call.” She said and she walked over to her bag and she picked it up. Okay it was heavy, she decided to pull it as he watched her walk out of the bedroom. He rubbed his eyes and followed her out as she pulled the bag to the door. She smiled like everything was okay. He licked his lips again. Rebantle opened the door and walked out, leaving the better half of her heart inside the house. Her hand grazed her cheek. His kiss, her cheek. He watched her leave. She wanted to scream that the universe was not fair, if she had not gone through all that while modelling she would be okay. She wouldn’t be so dependent on drugs and her boyfriend. She would be happy and cheerful and not so scared and covered like a little mouse.

Thabiso got out of the car and met her halfway to get the bags. He looked at her and the sadness in her eyes was apparent. Was it something they

always missed? He couldn't even remember the time she genuinely smiled if his memory served him well.

“Thank you.” Reba said softly and he nodded. She was his daughter, regardless of what his wife said in ‘the heats of the moment’.

At Princeton, Alora looked over her notes on how she could help Rebantle. She wasn't the most affectionate sister in the world but she would try. For Reba she would try her best so her older sister can be okay again. She did want to imagine the stigma Reba was going to face in class or the stares. UB was a big school and everyone now knew, they knew Rebantle Moremi, the big model was now a drug addict. A full drug addict and there were pictures to support that. She pushed back her hair, worried all over again. She just wanted to know how and when but she was going to wait. For her

sister to open up to her. She checked the time, it was almost night time there. She should call the bank on Monday morning. The door knock was what made her turn her head.

“If it’s Robert at the door, please die! I don’t want men with big egos in my room!” She said and she heard his laugh. She smiled and shook her head. She schooled her features to form a frown and that glare she had mastered to scare the male species away was already in place. She got up and walked to the door. She opened it and folded her arms.

“Weren’t you supposed to go and never return?”

“You are dramatic!”

“Dramatic you say? I don’t think you’ll be saying that if I cut your heart into two would you?” He clutched his chest in mock fright.

“Now you want to come for my heart? I assume your hyperboles should scare me?”

“Fuck you Robert!”

“I did say I would fuck you in seconds Lora.” Her

face heated and he smirked before he moved closer and kissed her forehead then his lips moved to her nose before he kissed her cheek. His lips lingered on the corner of her lips and she stood there rigid, silently hoping he kissed her lips but he breathed on her lips, his lips not meeting hers. She parted her lips and her eyes looked at him wanting him to kiss her. He straightened and her fisted hand hit his chest.

“I despise you ten times over and wish you would burn in hell.” She said and he actually laughed before he lowered his head to kiss her lips which parted in an instant.

“You wanted me to do his baby?” He said in a breathy voice in her mouth and she nodded as she adjusted her height by standing on her tip toes and unsure of her actions, she placed her hands on his chest then her fingers clutched his shirt to pull him to him. His hand snaked to her waist, her body fully flush against his. She could feel his hard planes and she opened her eyes. She didn’t even know when she closed them, she let go of his shirt and

moved back. She breathed out and she watched him rub his thumb over his lips and how the hell was that erotic? She hated how he was sure of himself in everything he did, he knew just how to touch her, how to kiss and he probably knew sex better while she was a virgin. Not that she didn't know the technicalities of sex, she was smarter than that. She even watched porn at one time to try and see how it would go. Masturbation? A big flop. Toys? They irritated her and she threw all that shit away. She hated it being good and sex was something she was sure she was not good at. Austin's hand cupped her cheek.

"Get out of your fucking head Alora." He said and she didn't say anything.

"Don't forget to check on Hades tomorrow." She said. Changing the topic.

"Alora, don't overthink everything, I'm too smart for you to try and change the topic with me."

"You're 1% more smarter than me."

"That still makes me smarter than you baby." She

rolled her eyes.

“I’m not a baby.” She said and he chuckled.

“O rata go itentsha. It’s cute.” Alora paused. She has never been described as cute. A bitch? Yes. A demon? Yes. Aggressive? More times than she can remember but cute never made it to the list. She rolled her eyes.

“I’ll check on him and update you. Anything else?” He asked.

“That’s all.” She said and he touched her head. She held his hand.

“Hands off my hair Robert! I’ll fry your d*ck, don’t do that.”

He used his other hand to hold her hand and kiss it as his gaze locked on hers as he kissed her hand. Alora flushed and he had to try not grin like a Cheshire Cat.

She removed her hand and she placed both hands at her back.

“I managed to Google everything and I’m compiling

the information on drug addiction, what I can do to be cuddly for her when I get there. A shoulder to cry on. I have to practice on you.” She said and he watched her in fascination as she rambled on about her research. He stepped inside and closed the door as she walked over to her desk to get her papers. He left her alone for two hours and now she was on full on research mode.

“Robert are you listening?”

“Yes.” She took his hand and made him stand in the middle of the room.

“This is out of character and weird. Dare use this against me, I’m sticking a pen in your eyeball.” She threatened and a smile threatened his lips.

“Got it?”

“I understand Alora.” She nodded and walked closer.

“Or should I role play how I’m going to ask her? Let me do this first.” She breathed into her hands and she wrapped her arms around his height.

“Is this soft and cuddly? Welcoming?” She asked

him and he laughed. She let go and bit her lip in frustration.

“Robert work with me.” Austin pulled her to him.

“Your sister knows your character, just be there for her.”

“She needs support, hugs and warmth.” She said as he held her in his arms as she stood there doing nothing. Not even hugging him back.

“That’s not you and she knows it.” Alora knew he was right but this was Reba and she was going through a lot.

“Darling, let’s just go with you being you.”

“Are you always being you around other people?” She questioned and he kept quiet.

“If you are pretending with me Robert, I will walk away.” She said. Her finality not putting the issue up for discussion.

“Ee mma.” He responded and she breathed out.

At Hades house, he opened the first bottle of whiskey. He could remember when he told his father that he thought he had a problem and he was told he was an embarrassment and should stop trying to seek attention. He put the bottle to his lips and the bitter concentrated liquid touched his lips. He welcomed it into his system as if it was the water he needed for survival. That was it, drowning out the thoughts. The fact that his secret was out, it put Reba in the spotlight and she was so sweet and didn't even ask how it happened that everyone knew about this. He would take the blame for her addiction any other day than watch her get slandered and dragged. They didn't know half of the things she went through and he got angry on her behalf, thinking of how some of her modelling friends or people she had thought were her friends, touched her anyway they wanted, violating her. He closed his eyes, forgetting his childhood as well because it was never nice.

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A FEW DAYS LATER

[06/02, 19:41] : REBORN

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Austin faced James as he brought his hands together.

"I realised I would do anything for Alora and not feel like I'm wasting time because I'm not getting anything from it."

"You do know what that feeling is." Austin shook his head.

"That is a very far-fetched notion James." Austin replied coolly.

"Is it? I have been hearing of Alora since you were 15 and now at 23 you got her and you don't stop talking about her." Austin stood up and slid his hands in his slack pockets before he walked over to the open window.

"What we have is mutual understanding and respect, unlike most human beings, her intellect allows her to understand me without it rubbing her off the wrong way." He said.

"Same goes for you but you know far too much about me than anyone knows." Austin added and he finally faced his therapist.

"I assume she accepts your narcissistic behaviour." James asked.

Austin shrugged. He has always been first and been there for himself. Didn't have to fully depend on people, did things only if they benefited him. Manipulator, oh he had a few traits he wouldn't change. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he slid

it out.

Lora: Check on Hades.

He chuckled. He didn't forget. He only arrived yesterday for fuck's sake.

Austin: No good morning?

James watched his client, Austin wasn't a texter. He was rarely on his phone.

Lora: You don't deserve a good morning

Austin: Okay baby.

He slid his phone back in his pocket before he faced his therapist.

"I have to go."

"How is your plan going?"

"Starting my MBA next year if that's what you're asking."

"You know you really don't need it."

"I do. To be better at everyone." he said and he

walked out of the office as James stood up from the spot he was on to prepare for his next client.

Alora stared at his last text before she took out her notes. She had the urge to flung them across the room but the pages will tear and crumple and she will panic. She took a deep breath as she dialled her sister's number. She couldn't wait to finish with school. She now wanted to be there for her sister.

"Hello." Reba said at the end of the line.

"Hi Reba. How are you?" Reba went silent.

"I miss Hades and at school everything is terrible, they just take photos of me and call me names." Reba said with quiet sadness.

"I can't even go to the shops alone, Rora." Alora closed her eyes. She couldn't imagine how Reba must be feeling.

"I'm so sorry. So sorry that people are prying into

your lives now all because of me. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it."

"Don't apologise, I don't care about the media. I care about you even though I can execute my revenge by suing them. Who are the people taking pictures of you? Is it men? Can I have my boyfriend do something about it?"

She heard Reba giggling and Alora frowned.

"Your boyfriend huh?"

"Don't start."

"Did you guys have sex?"

"God no!"

"You still can't bring yourself to?"

Alora guessed this change of topics was okay to take Reba's mind off of things.

"No. Intimacy is-it throws me off my balance."

"My two nerds. I can't wait to see how you guys look together. Your duo makes me feel dumb because you and Austin are so smart."

"You are not dumb."

"I know. I'm just okay, so 'your boyfriend'?"

"Please shut up! He doesn't even know I say he is my boyfriend." Reba laughed and Alora smiled.

"I wouldn't want to boost his ego. Reba I'm dating an egomaniac, what the hell is wrong with me?"

"You love him." Reba said and Alora paused.

"I do don't I?"

"Ye-"

"It's a rhetorical question Reba."

"Yay! Making me feel dumber now using words like rhetorical." Alora chuckled.

"Anyway, love and hate. Maybe you hated him because he upped you in everything. Upped is the right word right?"

"Yes."

"Yes that. And now you no longer see him as competition since you are at different phases in life. Gosh I feel so wise." Alora placed her phone down

and clapped her hands.

"Give it up for Lady Reba." She said with humour in her eyes.

"I should venture into philosophy. Give me the names of philosophers Rora." Alora chuckled.

"Socrates, Plato, Immanuel Kant, Aristotle, David Hume, Dani-"

"Okay those! I bet I can up Plato. His names sounds like Pluto in a way. I think." Alora smiled.

"I bet you can Reba."

"Yep."

"How is it at home?"

"Mom is being mom and Mooketsi is on his way, Bokamoso checks on me and Emory is being Em everyday."

"You're comfortable?"

"I miss Hades. I miss him so much it hurts. He doesn't answer my calls anymore."

"I wish I can make it all better."

"It's beyond your control Rora. Thank you for calling. Bye."

"Bye." Reba cut the call and Alora closed her eyes. What was she supposed to do miles away from home?

Reba tried calling him again. She bit her lower lip as it rang and sent her to voicemail.

"Hey baby. Answer the phone. Hades you know you're no good alone. Please answer, tell me you didn't kill yourself." Her panicked voice said as she talked.

"What kind of alcohol are you on? Baby hold on for me, in this world it's just us. Us two and if possible we wouldn't be living on this terrible earth. Hades answer the phone!!" She half screamed with tears on the phone. She bit her lower lip and wiped her tears. She put the phone down. She rubbed her

arms and closed her eyes. She shouldn't think he would do that, her mother didn't know what to do with her. The funny thing was that men were understood. Hades' addiction was understood and the media brushed it off because it was normal. It was rare for women to be drug addicts and they were having a field day with her. Tears filled her eyes. She wanted a fix. She needed one, she wanted to block out herself out. But she should check on Hades first. Yes. Yes. That. She walked out of the room and headed to the sitting room. Her mother was in there and she looked up from the laptop.

"I found you a therapist to help since you don't want to talk to us." Susan said.

"I want to check on Hades! He's not fine. I know he isn't." She said and Susan shook her head.

"No! You need to focus on you and only yourself."

Reba shook her head with tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Mama as hard as it is to believe, he is a part of me. The good part of my thoughts. Mama he has no

one.' Susan ignored Reba as she furiously wiped her tears away.

"Please! Ka go kopa!"

"Reba focus on your own therapy. His family has money, he will be fine." Reba shook her head in disbelief. She walked back to the bedroom and checked her phone. She called him again but voicemail. She took out the phone cover and looked at the money she had. P100 was enough for a taxi special to Hades' place. She breathed out. She walked out of her room. She also walked past her mother to head to the door and she was surprised that her mother watched her without trying to stop her. She walked to the gate and it was locked with a padlock. Even the small gate. Tears filled her eyes as she hit the gate. Hades wasn't okay, he wasn't and she couldn't do anything. Susan put her laptop down and walked to the door.

"Reba, I love you and you know that. I want you to focus on yourself without any distractions. You'll thank me when you're clean and maybe in future you'll find someone who truly loves you and won't

let you use drugs. Someone who loves you wouldn't do that." She walked closer to hug Reba who was stiff in her arms.

"I hate you so much!" Reba cried out.

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[06/02, 19:42] : REBORN

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It didn't take long for Austin to get to Hades' house. Alora had sent directions. He looked at the quiet house as he parked his car. It was too quiet for his liking. Funny thing was that he had noticed

something was wrong when he met Hades at the club and he drank as if the world was coming to an end. He walked to the door and knocked. There was nothing. He knocked again before he rubbed his mouth. He knocked again before he tried to open the door and it was locked. He bent down to look at the keyhole and the key was still in the door. He walked back to the car to check his toolbox in the boot. In minutes he found the correct tool to try and pick the lock to open the door. In five minutes he pushed open the door and the stench of alcohol filled the air he started breathing as he walked inside the house. His eyes flitted around till they landed on Hades and he was passed out on the floor with bottle of alcohol over the table. Austin walked over and he crouched over to Hades. He placed two fingers on his neck to check if his pulse was still there. It was.

"Seems like the alcohol will have to be drained from your system." He picked him up and Hades didn't even stir. It knocked him off and it seemed like he had been drinking non-stop. He placed him on the

couch and he made a quick decision to take him to the hospital instead of calling an ambulance.

He'll just have to carry him to his car.

Reba lay on her bed, exhausted from the crying and still not wanting to sleep. She didn't want to sleepwalk or wake up from a nightmare or anything. She looked around her room. Nothing. Hades' phone wasn't going through and she didn't want to bother Alora. Her brothers were busy and had work. School? Nothing was getting through her head and she was afraid that her intrusive thoughts will get the better of her. She forced herself to stay still and closed her eyes, she had to believe Hades was okay.

At the private hospital, Austin sat on the chair

silently observing. His quiet nature drew the attention of most of the hospital staff, all of them noting who he was and who he brought in. Austin although silent, his dominance and self assurance was felt with no words. A doctor made his way to him and cleared his throat as words jumbled out of his lips. Austin raised an eyebrow as he stood up, his height towering over the doctor's and intimidating him more and the doctor coughed into his hand.

"Mr Hudson will be okay, he has a lot of alcohol in his system." Austin had gathered that himself.

"He might wake up later this evening and we are trying to drain some of the alcohol from his system." The doctor informed Austin since he brought him in. Austin was still silent.

"And it seems like he has an uh alcohol problem. We can-"

"Allow me to deal with that." He quickly dismissed the topic and the doctor excused himself as he walked away.

Austin slid his hand in his pocket and checked the time. Alora was free and he shook his head. He had even memorised her timetable to know which times to call. He dialled her number and it didn't even ring more than three times before it was answered.

"Hello darling."

"Did you read my texts?" She asked. Her voice a bit higher than usual.

"Yes. First calm down. Take a deep breath and imagine me touching you." She rolled her eyes.

"I would never! Your touch repulses me Robert!" Her voice returning to the normal one he knew. He had prevented an episode on her side.

"Why did you call?"

"I found Hades."

"Thank God."

"I'm the one who saved him, not God Alora."

"Get off your high horse."

"I do deserve something higher and credit worthy and it's not a horse." Alora groaned in frustration. If he was in front of her, she would have been glaring at him though it never moved him.

"Is he okay?"

"No. I'm at the hospital. He nearly drank himself to death but he'll live."

Alora touched her chest. Her sister loved Hades and just like Alora fiercely loved her sister, she did what was in her power to make sure what her sister loved was okay. Which was Hades. With the added fact that he didn't have anyone, a part of her understood his loneliness. Having family but them not really paying that much attention to you.

"Make sure he is alright." Alora said, her eyes wandering around as she crossed her legs on the bench she sat on.

"Okay baby. And Lora?"

"Hmm.."

"Don't panic. I'll update you." He said. Alora nodded

and she hung up. She knew he never did things that didn't benefit him. Austin was complex yet straightforward. She mused and shook her head, she didn't know whether he did this to win her over or just because he truly cared. Either way she was so grateful to him.

She checked her phone. She wanted to call Reba but it would be like she is suffocating her if she called over and over again. She folded her arms. It will be alright. She assured herself.

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[06/02, 19:42] : REBORN

That day, Austin had left the hospital to go back to his office and get a few things done. Just as he got ready to leave his office, the door opened and in walked his mother.

“I want to meet her.” She said and Austin fixed his blazer as he looked at his mother. The powerhouse of Mathews Inc. , the woman who started this empire and was ready to let go but not quite yet since he was still interim CEO and she had the final say.

“She has school.” He said simply and his mother raised an eyebrow in question.

“She is the reason you fly out to America as if you live there?” Austin wasn’t going to answer that. The only reason he would travel would be because of business but Alora was personal and he didn’t feel like discussing his girlfriend with his mother.

“Even if you don’t tell me, I will find out her name. She works there?”

“Princeton final year student.” Her tilted her head.

“Smart? Corporate girl?” He picked his briefcase before he checked his watch.

“Yes.” His mother observed her son. They did have that motherly son bond and they usually discussed business and they were civil to each other. There was no play of useless emotions like love. She taught him to depend on himself only and being at school made him much wiser, he used people or in a smarter term, a master manipulator to get what he wanted. He worked smarter and harder.

“I figured that you would go for a submissive woman who didn’t want to join corporate. Someone like Chanda.” His mother said. He didn’t want a woman who would say yes to everything he said. He wanted someone who could challenge him and keep him on his toes, speak her mind and be independent without him and Alora was all that. He just passed his mother as he walked out. He was not having this discussion with Celine. Not today. He took out his phone as he checked for messages. None from Alora.

Alora finally decided to call her sister who answered almost immediately.

“Rora? I hate it here!” Reba said the minute she answered and Alora swallowed.

“I’m listening.”

“Hades isn’t answering. He is no good alone, I don’t want to lose him Rora!” Reba’s low whisper came over the phone.

“Are you crying?”

“N-I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologise.”

“I know Hades and I are so messed up but he is a piece of me I wish I didn’t need but I need him so much, mom isn’t listening to me. She isn’t and makes decisions for me…” Alora blinked tears, she has never heard her sister so scared. Reba wasn’t

even worried about herself.

“They make it seem like I’m an invalid and as if Hades is something I should stay away from like a bad drug, I don’t know how to make people understand that our love may look like a tragedy but he is my remedy. I want to breath fine knowing he is okay, I can’t let let my own voices haunt me. Rora I’m so scared.” Reba said as she placed the phone down and sat on the floor with her hands on her knees, shaking as she cried. Alora’s tears choked her as she listened to the painful sobs, the crying moving something in her that she didn’t even want to feel because she didn’t want to cry. She covered her face as she breathed out, Reba’s sobs not even stopping and getting even worse.

“I-I don’t want to use again but I need to forget everything. Everything Rora, the words, the slurs thrown my way, the sexual advances, inappropriate touches, the almost rape I want to forget everything. I want to make it stop Rora, how do I make it stop?” She blubbered and Alora’s heart raced. Almost rape? Slurs? She covered her mouth with her hand as the

tears rolled down her cheeks. Reba held that in? All of that? For years and she was escaping it all. A choked cry escaped from Alora's lips as Reba's own river of tears flowed.

"I-I he stayed when I told him that. He didn't run a- what if he is gone?"

Alora's snivelling got to Reba and she shook her head.

"Rora I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry! I'm so sorry." She apologised in between the tears as Alora opened her mouth, she doesn't cry gpddamit! But she couldn't stop the tears. Her sister had never heard her cry ever since she started to go to primary school and the waterworks started. She looked up.

"Re-Fuck! Don't apologise, I'm here okay? As far as I am, I am here okay? I-" Alora wiped her tears.

"Rora I'm so-"

"Don't apologise. I'm fine. I'm fine, I'm here for everything okay? Trauma dump on me if you want. I'm here for you." She said as she sniffed and she

rubbed her eyes. Rebantle's mind told her she made a mess of things, she was tired of feeling delicate but it was hard not to, she let everyone down. She used to let herself down when there was no one around and now she wasn't sure how everyone saw her now. She used drugs to block herself out now there were no drugs and Hades wasn't there.

“Reba you're still there?”

“Y-yes.”

Alora breathed into her hands. She needed to get a grip over herself. She fanned her face and she was sure it was red and her eyes were red. She hated it but Reba, her sweet sister went through a lot. She deserved the world and not what she was going through.

“Reba?”

“Hmm?”

“Hades is okay okay? Austin is with him. Austin is with Hades okay?” Relief washed over Reba's features as more tears filled her eyes.

“He is really okay?” Alora didn’t want to break Reba more with the truth that Hades almost drank himself to death.

“Yes. Austin is with him. I’ll call Austin in the morning to connect him to you. I promise.” Alora said. Reba nodded. Alora rarely broke her promises.

“I love you okay?” Alora assured her.

“I love you and I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

Alora tried to school her face but the tears still rolled down her cheeks.

“I had something in my eyes, a splinter or something.” Reba gave out a low chuckle.

“Okay Rora.”

“Just a splinter, nothing much.” Alora didn’t want to even elaborate on Reba’s confessions because those weren’t conversations that were handled over the phone. If only the months could move as swiftly as her lessons did. She wanted to go home.

“Bye okay?”

“Bye R-Rora.” He call ended and Alora couldn't lift off the heavy feeling in her chest and she walked to her dark closet. She closed the door and half screamed into her hands at her ignorance of what her sister has been going through. She failed her older sister. She failed her so much, her chest caved and she covered her mouth screaming into them. She didn't hear her phone ringing on the bed and she missed her boyfriend's call.

At Susan's house, Susan knocked on the door and she opened it. She found Reba in bed and she sighed. She sat on the corner of the bed and she looked at her daughter. She was always the happiest among all her children, how could she have missed that? She had been so happy with her career taking off at a young age and everything working in her favour.

“Reba are you okay?”

“Yes.” She said whatever her mother wanted to hear but she had become such a liar, she had been able to hide her addiction and she could feel herself shivering from not getting a fix.

“I want what’s best for you, the road to recovery is not an easy one but we are here for you. A change of environment will be good for you. Being here might actually help.

“Okay.” Reba replied. She was getting worse. She didn’t want to worry her mother, she cared though right? In her own way.

Susan rubbed Reba’s leg through the blanket and stood up.

“Anything you need, you can talk to us. We are here for you.” Reba nodded and Susan walked out. Reba closed her eyes, trying to sleep but sleep eluded her. She got out of bed and she placed the room scratching her arms. Her bedroom door opened and her eyes widened when she saw her step father.

“Are you okay?” She nodded frantically and he walked closer.

“Want to go out for a drive through?” She nodded, anything to get out of the house.

“Get ready and a drive would do you a world of good.” She forced an anxious smile as he walked out and she walked to her closet and picked out her hoodie. She slid it over her head and she was ready.

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[06/02, 19:42] : REBORN

61

She lifted her hands and faced the mirror. She was done alright. She breathed as she stepped out of

her bedroom and she walked to the sitting room. She found her step father with Emory and she smiled. Emory got off her father's lap and ran to hug Reba. Reba pushed her sister's braids back.

"Hey there, how was school?" Reba asked.

"Daddy says we are going for food and ice cream" Reba smiled.

"Yes we are." Her sister gave her her small hands and Reba gladly took it as Thabiso stood up and walked to the door.

Reba breathed out, she will be fine and she needed the fresh air. She didn't want to be cooped up inside the house like some kind of prisoner.

Alpha finally got out of the closet and she rubbed her eyes. She closed her eyes, tired to do anything. She walked out of her room to go wash her face with water and maybe use her eye drops to make

her eyes less red. She knew they would be swollen in the morning and she didn't want people asking questions or looking at her strangely. Minutes later she was back inside the bedroom and opened the closet to take out her cosmetics bag. She found the eyedrops and she sat on the bed. Exhausted. She shook the small bottle and widened her eyes as she opened the small bottle. A few drops landed on her eye and she blinked before she did the same to the other one. She blinked a few times before she picked her phone. She saw Austin's missed calls. She bit her lower lip and she called him. Hopefully he answers her.

"Lora."

"Robert." She replied. She cleared her throat.

"You weren't answering your phone."

"You're not the boss of me Robert you do know that."

"You never miss my calls."

"The world does not revolve around you."

“It does Lora. If you actually re-“

“Shut up!” She said as she smiled. She loved bantering with him. She paused. She loved? Loved? Her eyes widened at the realisation and her heart raced. Loved? That translated to her actually loving him an-

Her world stood on its axis. She recalled her conversation with Reba earlier today, not the one that led to her crying. That rhetorical question. Fuck! It wasn't a bad thing. Not at all but when did it happen?

“Lora?” He asked at the end of the line, her sudden silence alarming him.

“I'm here. I'm still here. Uhm what did you want to talk about?”

“I was checking up on you.” She didn't have a retort for that so she just nodded.

“That's a nice gesture Robert.”

“There has to be a much better reply than that.”

“I'm not inflating your ego Robert, I can still feel it

and you are miles away.”

He chuckled.

“I’ll tell you when Hades wakes up. I’m at the hospital okay?”

“Thank you so much. It means a lot to me.” She said and he nodded.

“Lora, your voice gave you away. What’s going on?” He asked and she heard footsteps.

“I’ll be in my car in minutes then I’ll FaceTime you.”

“There is no need for that.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” He hung up and she stared at the blank screen. She didn’t him to comfort her. She didn’t need a man, she wasn’t the overly emotional type so it was never going to happen again. She rubbed her eyes again. Her phone rang and she answered him immediately. The dim light in his car illuminated his features and she looked at his lips. The first lips to ever touch hers and she ignored that feeling in her chest that told her, his lips were the only lips that were going to ever kiss

her. Her eyes flitted to his head and she smiled. Austin smiled. It was rare to see her smiling and it was always refreshing to enjoy the rarities of life. Rarities of her, parts of her no one knew but him.

“You were crying.”

“Dust Robert.”

“You had dirt, I’m listening baby.” He saw her soften as she faced the screen. Her eyes were going to swell soon enough.

“Robert?”

“Yes?”

“You are practical and all, do you believe in love?”

“No. Love is an emotion that often leads to bad decisions sometimes. Something that isn’t practical and logical.” Lora bit her lip.

“Same goes for religion, they are both the same in the context that you want to believe in something that doesn’t exist.”

“Okay. I understand you. As flawed as that sound. So you don’t believe in fairies?” He laughed.

“Lora, that is a silly notion that the world should be rid of. No need to fill kids’ heads with fantasies that do not exist and are not even part of the real world. Realism often surpasses such illusions.” She nodded.

“But sometimes it’s better for one to believe in something to be happy.” He shrugged.

“That may be your stand Lora, I have mine.” She nodded. She knew where he stood but he had said something along the lines of them being endgame but she sighed. It was okay. It was better than nothing. Honestly.

“Now to the crux of the matter, why were you crying?”

“Robert don’t start.”

“Alora, you do know I will get on the first flight out of here heading there just to find that out right?” She paused. Her heart soared. Okay he cared.

“No need for such.”

He raised an eyebrow and she thanked his parents’

genes for making him good looking. She doesn't want kids but he was always immaculate, his curly hair was nice to touch and she wished he could grow it longer.

“Speak.”

“Don't command me. I'm not an insolent child but okay fine. It's my sister, she is concerned about Hades and she told me stuff that happened to her.” She saw his eyes soften a fraction.

“You cried?” He asked, his voice lower and she faced the other way.

“I'll be okay.” She whispered, not facing the screen.

“You're not okay.” He said and she sighed.

“Anyway I'm okay. I didn't break a bone.” She said.

“It broke your heart and you had no one to hold you.”

“I'm not a delicate doll Robert.” She still didn't look at the screen. She has always been there for herself, maybe it was because she had been constantly told she was the daughter of a side chick by her father's

family and she didn't want to distress anyone with her little whims and was there for herself. Tears filled her eyes and she bit her lower lip.

"Lora look at the screen." She faced the screen and she blinked.

"I'm hanging up."

"Don't." He said. He hated the geographical disadvantage he had, looking at her crying and he decided then and there to never make her cry or anything else. It set him off when Alora was unsure of herself and now her crying was his undoing.

"I'm not crying, I swear," she rubbed her eyes and forced a smile. She rarely smiled too. He watched her try to glare at him but her eyes glazed over with tears and she rubbed her eyes.

"I'm okay Austin."

"You're not." He said as he leaned back. He hated seeing her like this and he could do anything about it, not even hold her.

"Lora do you hate me?" She looked at him with tears

in her eyes trying to glare through the phone screen.

“I will always do. You’re my nemesis Robert.”

“But you are dating me.” She rolled her eyes and rubbed them.

“I’m doing you a favour.”

“That last kiss didn’t look like a favour.” She chortled.

“Get over yourself. J e te hais, Robert.”(I hate you, Robert)

“fais-toi?”(do you?) she nodded and he smiled. A smile formed on her lips, the tears no longer in sight. In minutes he had talking about something completely different and they got into a debate about the economy and he had fun crushing her points while she fumed, turning all red and cussing him out.

Meanwhile in the hospital room, Hades half conscious heard the blipping machines. He wondered how he ended up here. He opened his

eyes and the light almost blinded him. He closed his eyes and waited as the machines beeping sounded closer and not as if the sound was fading. When he opened his eyes the second time without the light assaulting him, his eyes scanned the room. It took him minutes to recognise his surroundings. A hospital. He was alive.

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[06/02, 19:42] : REBORN

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Hades' heart pounded, easing the heart monitor just as a nurse walked inside the room. The nurse

smiled looking at the gentleman. Finally he was awake and they could see what to do. Hades looked at her, he gave her a questioning look as she walked closer to his bedside and there was no water.

“Hello Mr Hudson, how are you feeling?”

“Like hell.” His sharp and raspy voice replied. His throat felt like he had been consuming sand for the past few days because it was so rough and dry.

“Let me get you water.” The nurse said and quickly exited the room. Hades didn’t move his heavy head from the pillow. He had the mother of all hangovers. He was sure he was supposed to die. How did he keep dodging death? God must hate him to want to keep him on earth every fucking time. He closed his eyes, his headache amplifying with every passing second now.

Austin smiled before he said bye to her. He hated

the distance between them. He pocketed his phone and got out of his car, locking it as he walked inside the hospital to see if there was progress. He headed to Hades' room. He opened the door and he got inside. As soon as the door closed Hades opened his eyes and he frowned. Seeing a familiar figure before a blanket of realisation covered him.

“You're awake, you took your time for sure.” Austin said as he slid his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall looking at Hades. His face calm and not giving anything away.

“What are-ah.”

“I would be saving my energy if I was you Hades. It's not easy consuming more than 70% of alcohol and still surviving.” He said and Hades closed his eyes, wanting for the sharp pain to subsidise.

“How did you find me?”

‘Focus on getting through the night Hades. Your questions are irrelevant at this given moment. Point is you're alive and it would be interesting to know why you wanted to kill yourself with alcohol but that

is another topic for another day.” Hades was about to reply when the door opened and the nurse walked in holding a glass of water and some pills.

“We will have to check you in the morning, for now have water and these pills.” She said as she helped him sit upright. The nurse turned to look at Austin who didn’t seem to want to move from where he was standing and the nurse turned back to Hades. Two prominent men in one room, well only one if she didn’t include Hades who was just an alcoholic with a fat trust fund. Hades laid his head back as the nurse walked out and he looked at Austin.

“Is-Is Reba okay?” He asked. Austin nodded and Hades breathed out. As long as she is okay. It was hard with her not being there, now that she was gone there was a possibility that she might not need him again. He closed his eyes, pain squeezing his heart as tears rolled on his sides and Austin silently witnessed that. Hades let the tears roll silently, his father wasn’t here to witness that or to tell him to wipe those tears as quick as he could because he was embarrassing him. He opened his

eyes expecting Austin to judge him or say something but Austin's face was impassive as he stood there. He brought his hands and rubbed his eyes.

"If you want to talk, I'll be here." Austin said. Hades, who has had only Reba these past few years didn't know how to comprehend a gesture like that.

Thabiso brought back the girls home and Emory who had her own share of sugar from the ice cream was all jolly. Her older sister couldn't keep up and Reba was at least smiling. He left the girls to their own devices as he walked to the bedroom where Susan was staring at the ceiling.

"Susan, you are slowly going to lose your own daughter." Susan blew out air. Frustrated.

"Where did I go wrong? They are all happy. Her brothers work, Alora got into her dream school and

Reba had the opportunity to pursue her passion which was modelling. What did I do wrong?" She asked him. She didn't know how to deal with Reba at this point. She didn't know how she failed her when all her kids were fine and excelling. Her eldest happily married for that matter.

"Kids grow up, things happen. Kids learn to hide things from their parents. Reba is a sweet child and she doesn't need to be treated like a prisoner. She made her own decisions and you don't have to blame Hades for what Reba decided to do." Thabiso said.

"It's hard not to because she spends most of her time with him."

"Have you asked yourself why? Why she cried when you suddenly kept her away from him?" Susan kept quiet.

"Of course they have their own problems but beyond the rumble, there is love. Even if it flawed, it is there. She feels safe around him and maybe that why we don't know anything or why she stared

taking drugs.” Susan breathed out.

“I’ll try.”

“You don’t have to push your daughter away, treat her like a grown adult and don’t take her autonomy from her. Sooner or later she will resent you for that.” Her shoulder slumped as Thabiso headed into their bathroom and she was left there with her own thoughts. He had a point. How did she deal with this? She was disappointed in Reba because how could she consciously choose to take drugs as if there were no other means to deal with problems. She sighed and got out of bed. She walked out of the bedroom and saw Reba close her little sister’s door before she walked to her own bedroom. She sighed and headed to Reba’s bedroom. She opened the slightly ajar door as Reba removed her sweater. Reba looked at her mother and Susan rubbed her eyes.

“I’m sorry.” She said. She had run out of things she could say and those were the words that were on her tongue. Was she keeping Reba here because her kids had grown and didn’t want her any longer

that she used this situation to control her child and be the parent again. Tears filled her own eyes and Reba just nodded. Susan guessed it was going to take more than sorry to get through to her daughter but it was a start.

Mooketsi shook his head, it was too early to introduce his wife to his family. The Reba issue was still new and needed digesting so he will have to wait. A few months maybe? Hopefully.

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THREE MONTH LATER

[06/02, 19:42] : REBORN

63

At Austin's house, Hades found Austin in the kitchen shirtless while sipping coffee.

"Alora is coming back home today." Hades said and Austin nodded. He knew that. He was planning on going to the airport but he was sure her family took first priority so he wasn't going to be there for long.

"I want to say goodbye." Hades said in the silence.

"I am proud of the progress you have made."

"I'm sure you'll be glad to have me out of your hair darling and deal with your little demon." Austin chuckled.

"Scared she will scratch you?"

"Alora has a crazy element about her. No offense." Austin raised his hands up as an indication of it being nothing.

"Everyone thought so, I always thought she was a genius." Hades shook his head as he walked to the fridge to take out milk. He looked around the kitchen. There was no alcohol, not that he would have any. He has been trying to be clean and it was hard but he was trying. Austin turned out to be a friend, one he never saw coming, him praising Hades for his small accomplishments and even living with him in his space so the loneliness doesn't propel him towards a bottle. Some Scotch or Jameson because that had been all he knew. All he could use to fill the void in his heart and he had a deeper void now that Reba was gone even though they called each other. The communication was limited and the contact was close to zero. It was silently killing him. Piece by piece and he had learned to share such thoughts with Austin, over coffee which wasn't a good replacement for the alcohol. He had come to figure that out and even though he felt dumb under Austin's calm stare and the silent confidence Austin had, he was an okay friend. His first friend ever since Reba.

"But I'll see what to do so you can say goodbye. It's just three more months of rehab to solidify what has been happening." Hades breathed out and nodded.

"Do you love her?" He asked and Austin kept quiet. They both knew Hades was asking about Alora.

"Our relationship and its context is difficult for people to understand."

Hades shook his head.

"That was a simple question and you're avoiding it." He said and Austin shrugged.

"Does it matter?" Austin asked.

"It does." Hades said. Not that he was going to say it but Reba had told him about Alora's fear of intimacy and he hoped that Austin wasn't just after Alora to sleep with her and leave her. That may explain why he was supportive of Hades, he was trying to score points with Alora. Austin walked out of the kitchen and Hades sighed.

At the hotel room, Mooketsi looked at his wife. He still didn't have enough courage to tell his parents about his impromptu marriage. He had decided not to sleep at home and opted for a hotel room. They were all going to meet Alora at the airport later today. His wife smiled as she sat down to pour juice.

"Okay tell me about your family and all I need to know." She asked.

"You know Reba." She nodded as she pushed her silky hair back and Mooketsi smiled.

"Reba is the one the media always talks about. Is she okay? I mean she is currently getting better?"

"She is, Zara don't worry." She nodded and brought the glass to her lips.

"We have Bokamoso, you do know him right?"

"Do I? Not sure." Mooketsi shrugged.

"Then we have my youngest sister. Alora. Out of everyone she is the-how do I put it?" Zara didn't

know they had descriptions.

"Once you meet her, you'll understand me. Trust me. My mother and step-father. That is all. The parents will be angry but otherwise my siblings are cool."

"Got it. I got it." Mooketsi kissed her forehead then her cheek

"I love you." She smiled. She didn't want to be in this city but she was going to bear it all out just because she came with her husband. She sighed. Crossing her fingers she doesn't meet Hades or cross paths with him because her curiosity will be peaked and her mother told her to never ask questions.

Questions always led to trouble and her mother had been through a lot already, she didn't want to open old wounds.

"Zee what's up? You have that gloomy look on your face."

"I-I have a question and I fee-"

"Ask away."

"How is Hades? Like his character?" Mooketsi's jaw

ticked and Zara felt like she should have kept quiet. Mooketsi breathed out. His wife was asking about another man and it ticked him off.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Zara quickly said and Mooketsi breathed out.

"He is tolerable." He said and Zara took that.

"I'm sorry. I know how you feel, with your sister's saga and him being involved in all of it. I didn't mean no harm."

"I'm sure you didn'."

"Babe, I didn't. Honest to God." Mooketsi nodded.

"Enough about people who don't matter, what have you planned for the weekend?"

"Besides meeting your family? Uhm we'll go for quad bikes. That's all I have in mind. I am sure our marriage will cause drama."

"They are a chill bunch."

"But we didn't go through the normal magadi patlo process." Mooketsi breathed out and kissed Zara's forehead. She blinked before she smiled and looked

up at him. They wouldn't understand their situation but he hoped they would understand their love. He was still trying to talk her into having his children and she refused on the basis that his family didn't know her existence and it would be wrong to some degree to have kids without her being known.

"You're cute."

"And you need to get ready to pick your sister from the airport."

"Join me."

"I don't want to impose an-"

"Your family okay? You're Mrs Zara Mooketsi Moremi." She grinned.

"Okay. I'll stay in the car though."

"Zara!"

"I'll stay in the car. It's final." He groaned and she laughed.

At Susan's house, she got ready and she faced her husband who was sitting on the bed.

"I can't believe Alora is coming home. For good now." Susan started off and Thabiso nodded.

"I'll have all my kids in one roof and I am sure Alora will find a job. She might have already been scouted by a bank or by a huge company to work for." Susan said dreamily. They had found Reba a therapist to help and although the therapist had advised that Reba be sent to a mental rehabilitation centre. Thabiso had Susan halt that and thought it was better she was with family than being sent off to strangers.

"I'm sure Alora will tell you her plans once she arrives."

"I guess so. Let me check on Emory. Alora's flight is landing in an hour or so."

Austin read her text over and over again. He wasn't part of her family and she wanted him at the airport. The better part of him wanted to keep working and not drop everything to see her even though he last saw her a month ago but the part of himself, the one he refused to acknowledge, was already at the airport waiting for Alora. He would do anything for her. Reluctantly he dialled Hades who answered immediately.

"Miss me already?" Hades bantered.

"You're heading to the airport with me." There was silence.

"I don't think the Moremi's would appreciate that."

"They will have to get over themselves right? I'm in my office. Be here in an hour."

"Austin you do know I'm older than you."

"And how can I forget that fact darling?" He said as Hades chuckled then hung up.

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My sincerest apologies. This work has been nothing short of breakdowns, group projects being rejected then redone, catching up with school work, getting ready for tests and exams and more assignments. Let's catch up this side now during this Easter holiday. Thank you for the patience

[06/02, 19:42] : REBORN

64

Alora stared out the small window as the airplane's velocity tore through the bare sky. She placed her fingertips on the window glass in thought. She

closed her eyes. It was over and it was time to join the real world. She was not going to hide behind the world of academia and yet again she felt out of her depth. Her racing thoughts making her want to scream but of course she couldn't do that. She removed her hand from the window and placed them on her thighs. The only fear she had was the fear that maybe she was going to go nowhere with her plans. That Lora Cosmetics was not going to succeed or get the funding she needed because already she was going to deplete her trust fund. She breathed out. Another fact she had decided to confront flooding her thoughts. In her plans for the future she never saw Austin as being a part of them nor them being together. She had decided to tell him she loved him even if she knew he wouldn't reciprocate the feelings but him knowing was okay because she lived her truth. She loved and she didn't hide that fact. Like she effortlessly loved her family even if her expression of weird and awkward she loved them nevertheless.

At the airport, Hades sat in the car with Austin who checked the time.

"Her plane is probably the one landing and it's almost three." Hades nodded. He was seeing Reba? How was she? He wanted to hold her and never let her go because tomorrow he was leaving for rehab. It was going to be a long three months of no contact unless they check on him. For the short time he has known Austin, he knew he was going to pass by to check up on him.

Austin got out of the car and Hades followed. He locked the car as Austin breathed out. His face revealed nothing but cool composure but he was sure he was nervous. He was also interested in seeing Austin relate to Alora. Out of all the people, Alora dating was a shock given the fact that she threatened to eliminate the male species everytime without fail. Hades followed Austin as they walked to the field where the aircraft had landed. In

minutes they had arrived and he saw Alora's family. Reba turned her head and her jaw dropped as she saw Hades. She smiled and looked down. Her siblings turned to see him and she saw the distaste on Mooketsi's face and how her mother ignored the two gentlemen. Reba smiled at them and waved with a huge smile. Austin nodded and Hades longingly looked at her. She was an adult. Reba said as she excused herself and jumped into Hades' arms. Susan opened her mouth but Thabiso raised an eyebrow at her and she kept quiet. Reba buried her face in the crook of his neck as he held her in place.

"Hi baby. I missed you." She said and he licked his lips.

"I didn't abandon you okay Hades? I love you okay? I love you!" She kissed his neck and she moved her head to look at him. She grinned and buried her face on the crook of his neck once again. Hades had his best girl in his arms and she was in his arms. Reba wondered if Hades knew that he was more intoxicating than the alcohol he consumed

and she would never tire of him.

"Hi love." He said smoothly and Reba grinned. Austin watched their PDA and he turned his head to watch them. Reba slowly slid down Hades' body and she placed her head on his chest before looking up at him.

"We'll make it love." Hades said.

"We might not be in a Marvel film and we are stuck in this horrible earth but we'll make it." He kissed her forehead and rubbed her chin.

"I have so much to fill you in on." Hades chuckled.

"We have forever I guess love."

"And that means we'll get our happy ending?" Reba asked and he nodded. She was satisfied with that answer and she turned to face Austin. She always felt stupid around smart people.

"Uhm hi." She said and Hades looked down at Reba then at Austin.

"Hello Rebantle." Reba cringed.

"Will he always be using my full name?" She asked

Hades in what she thought was a whisper.

"I can still hear you." She closed her eyes in embarrassment and Hades chuckled, kissing her hair. Austin slid his phone out as a text reported. He read the text.

Lora: I will murder you Robert if you aren't at the airport the minute I get off this flight.

He didn't respond and he slid his phone back in his pocket as he waited for her to show up.

Bokamoso and his wife glanced at Reba who seemed more animated and showed more signs of life than she has ever shown the past three months.

"She looks happy." His wife said and Bokamoso had to agree. Mooketsi shuffled his feet, nervous about today's dinner and introducing Zara. He knew Alora was going to be the centre of attention for the next few weeks. With her waiting for her results and graduating from Princeton University. A fucking Ivy League school. She has always had big achievements. Sometimes he was jealous that she

had all that brain and it was surely something she might have gotten from her biological mother. He swallowed the jealousy down as Susan gasped and everyone's eyes were facing forward as they watched her push her hair back. As always there was no smile plastered on her face. She stopped and looked at her bags and she dragged them across as she made her way to them, she was much lighter. It must have been the climate back in America. Alora was much closer and she looked at everyone who came to see her. Everyone was here. Her little sister was the one who broke the silence as she rushed to hug her. Alora touched Emory's hair.

"Hi there you." She breathed out and Emory grinned.

"Are you back forever Rora?"

"Yes my little goblin." She said and Susan rolled her eyes with a smile.

"Alora my child is not a goblin." Alora shrugged.

"She is." Emory let go of her sister's legs and she stood behind Alora's large suitcase and Alora gave

Susan a pointed look.

"See why she is a goblin? Why is she behind my suitcase."

"The wicked witch of the west is back." Hades bantered and Alora shot him a glare, noticing Reba in his arms

"Shut up Hades and don't steal my moment." Her eyes landed on Austin. All polished and good looking with a fresh cut. She never caught that man slipping. A grin lifted his lips and she glared at himn he only grinned wider. Her attention went back to her family.

"This is all so cute guys. I would be crying but you know" she trailed off and Bokamos laughed.

"That's the Alora we know."

Everyone laughed and her eyes landed on her other brother.

"Hello Moks." She said and he shook his head.

"You're being nice?"

"For once." She said and her step father smiled in

her direction and she acknowledged that with a simple nod. He walked to where she was to take her bags and Emory just took Alora's hands.

"Su you're lucky I love this little goblin here." She said as she squeezed Emory's hand and walked to where Reba was with Hades. Reba got out of Hades' embrace and hugged her sister.

"Hey there sis."

"You good?" Alora asked with one hand awkwardly placed on Reba's back while Reba hugged her with everything in her.

"I'll be okay." Alora sighed.

"That's not an answer and I demand a full explanation. A report if you must." Reba laughed and Alora tried so hard not to smile.

"Your boyfriend is scary." Reba said and Alora broke the hug and looked at Austin across Reba's shoulder.

"He is not."

"I'm scared of saying something wrong and he

corrects my pronouncements. Is that the correct word?" Alora shook her head.

"We'll talk but I'm happy I get to be here now. With you." Alora said quietly but Reba heard her. Alora let go of Emory's hand and she walked to Austin. The rest of the family watched curiously. It wasn't as if they didn't know who was that. Austin Matthews was making waves in the business sector and they thought just because Hades was an heir to a multimillion corporation he came here with him since Austin himself was heading his mother's very successful company which was worth billions but next few seconds proved them wrong as they watched how his hand wrapped around Alora's waist. Mooketsi's eyes popped and Bokamoso squinted his to make sure he was seeing correctly. Susan frowned while Thabiso watched the show. Amused by everyone's reactions.

Reba grinned as she silently cheered them on. Look at the two nerds. Her sister wasn't even repulsed by his touch but then again Alora had months to get used to it. Reba looked at Hades.

"Look at how he is looking at her." Hades agreed. Austin had lowered his head to talk to her, his hand on the small of Alora's back and them whispering between the both of them.

"He is looking at her as if she invented the whole universe and she was to be adored." Reba said.

"And he said he doesn't love her." Hades breathed out. Reba frowned.

"He loves her. The A* team. He will admit that. I ship them. Lostin? Cute huh? I know. I'm smart too." Hades chuckled and kissed Reba's head.

"You're too cute." He said.

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Alora looked up at him and his lips then his eyes again.

“Thank you.”

“For what ma chérie?”(my darling)

“Coming and helping Hades.” He wanted to kiss her right there and now but he knew his girlfriend. He opted to take her hand and kiss it. He would do anything for her, she should know that by now.

Her heart raced, she noticed how he was looking at her and she hoped he would kiss her. Just a peck on her lips and then he should step back. Instead he let go of her waist and she lost the warmth of his hand as he moved back. She glared at him and folded her arms.

“Tell me what you want Lora.” She rolled her eyes at him then gave him a murderous glare. Austin knew his girlfriend just alright. She was about to threaten

to do hideous things to his d*ck or plan bodily harm to him. If not that, she was about to threaten murder or declare her hate for him.

“Don’t you dare forget that I hate you Robert. I despise you and your existence.” She said with such venom and Hades stifled a chuckle.

She turned to glare at him, not minding that she had gotten everyone’s attention.

“Wena shut up! Don’t you start!” Reba rubbed Hades’ chest. She had gotten used to Hades and Alora exchanging these for more than a decade. Hades shook his head. How were they supposed to keep up? One minute Alora was lovey dovey with Austin and the next she was giving him a deadly glare. She was a first class lunatic for sure. He looked at Austin who wasn’t moved but instead he looked amused as he kept his eyes on the little she devil shooting him glares. Austin chuckled as Alora cleared her throat. She faced her family, the shocked looks on their faces were priceless and Reba took out her phone. She snapped a few pictures as she smiled. She knew her sister had it in

her, to love a man she thought. Even if she hasn't been intimate with her boyfriend she was giving it time. Alora had intimacy issues and she had to work through them. Reba mused.

"Don't be too surprised. Everyone that's my.." she took a moment to fake gag before she looked at Austin.

"My boyfriend." She touched her chest. It felt so awful admitting it to the public. Well her family was the public in this sense and they are going to think she is having sex with him and all those nasty things people do when she is only content with his kisses and he has never pushed her further or demanded for sex.

Mooketsi laughed.

"You have a boyfriend?" She had to restrain herself from telling him that she just said that. Of course Austin was larger than life and all but she was the one doing him a favour. She didn't want them to get it twisted.

"I just said that dumbass." Mooketsi raised his

hands in mock surrender and Bokamoso nodded.

“We’ll accept that you have a boyfriend. As young as you are.” He said. Of course he was being such a big brother.

“He hurts you he has to deal with us.” Alora shot her boyfriend a glare.

“I think she will deal with him just fine.” Hades chided.

“Reba I am going to kill Hades Hudson autwe?”

“Such violence ma chérie?” Austin said smoothly. Everyone noticed that he wasn’t moved by Alora’s short bursts of anger and how his presence was felt even though he hadn’t said a word to them. Alora opened her mouth to speak but Austin surpassed her and finally greeted her family and she didn’t know if it was an Austin thing but in the next ten minutes her whole family fucking liked him.

Someone kill her right now. Emory even left her side to speak to the six foot five man whom she called her boyfriend. Such a traitorous goblin. She clapped her hands.

“People, focus! You came here for me. Including him. Me.” Austin raised an eyebrow. He was the narcissist and here she was wanting everyone’s attention to be on her.

“vous êtes jalouse?” (You are jealous?) Austin asked. Reba gasped. She understood them from the little French she learnt when she was going to France. Alora rolled her eyes.

“I’m not going to dignify you with a response.” Mooketsi frowned. He thought she would turn all soft and mushy but she was the same old Alora. Would kids make her soft?

Austin placed his hand on her back and she paused as he looked down at her. She would tell him once they were alone.

“Join us for dinner.” She whispered up to him.

“You want me to come?” She nodded looking up at him. Reba swooned. They were so cute.

“Look at her in love.”

“Your sister is fucking confusing.” Hades muttered

and Reba hit his chest.

“She is cute.”

“That doesn’t make her any less scary.”

“One of these days I will let her kill you.” Reba said. Bokamoso smiled alone. Who would have thought? He hurried his wife along excusing them but promising to show up at the dinner. Mooketsi followed as he said bye too.

Reba and Hades spoke for a few minutes before she left his side to speak with his parents.

“Can Hades come for dinner?” She asked her mother.

“Re-“

“Of course.” Thabiso said and Reba hugged the both of them.

“I’ll be with Alora. She is really responsible. Thanks.” She said and walked over to Hades and Thabiso chuckled.

“Did she just-“ he shook his head.

“Why would I want Hades to come?” Susan asked and Thabiso held his wife’s shoulders.

“Try for the kids. Look at how happy she is with him. They are kids, they need guidance and not us suffocating them. She is doing better in terms of her trying to sober up excusing that little relapse she had but she is doing better. She looks happy with him and full of life.” Susan watched as Reba’s mouth moved as she talked to Hades and he listened to her as if his life depended on it. Her heart softened a little.

“See? Just dinner and her spending a few hours with him. That was all she asked of you.” Thabiso emphasised.

“Fine, I get it.”

“Good. Let’s take Alora’s things to the car and get going with Emory.”

The parents said bye and left the two couples there. Alora frowned. Her handbag. It had most of her things. Sanitisers, wipes, her phone. She stepped

back from Austin's embrace.

"Wait!" She ran to them as they stopped in their tracks. She got her handbag which was on top of the suitcase.

"We'll be there for dinner." She turned her back on them just as Austin, Reba and Hades were heading her way. She waited for them till they caught up with her and instead of allowing Austin to touch her, she took Reba's hand and walked forward with her.

"Whoa! Slow down."

"I'm listening now."

"I can hear you." Austin said.

"If you really want to be alive by the time we get to the car, please shut up or do me a favour. Die!"

"How do you tolerate this?" Hades asked.

"Months of practice darling." Austin replied him and Alora rolled her eyes.

"Okay after dinner. I'll tell you all about it. It's not nice and pretty. You don't have to listen really. I'm okay." Reba answered her question.

“I want to listen. Really listen. After dinner then. Is it like a sleepover?” Reba smiled and intertwined her fingers with Alora’s.

“Like when we were kids? I want those nights back. Yes! A sleep over in my room and we have marshmallows.” Reba went on and Alora smiled looking down before she lifted her head to look at her sister. The guys were walking behind them.

“Reba do you love Hades?” Alora asked and Reba turned to look at him. He winked at her and she grinned before she looked at her sister.

“Even deep in our addictions, our love looked like a tragedy, he was and still is my remedy. Rora, he is part of me I can’t shake off. We went from being best friends to lovers and I don’t know about the future but we’ll get our happy ending. I’m two months sober and that is progress. A lot of progress.” Reba breathed out.

“Even though everywhere I go, the media labels me as a drug addict. A junkie. If it was a man he wouldn’t be getting bashed. Not that I’m hating on H

but he isn't getting bashed and I'm sure people sympathise with him because he is male and men go through a lot too but I get harassed by people with their phones trying to take a picture of me and saying she is the junkie." Reba blinked back the tears.

"It's hard but I know I'll always be a drug addict but I'm more than just drugs Rora." Reba's voice cracked and Hades' hand snuck up to touch her shoulder. She turned and silently cried in his chest. Alora gave Hades a grateful look. She didn't know how she was going to comfort her sister. Austin used the chance to hold her waist and she sighed as she leaned against him.

"I don't need you. You do know that. I don't need a man. Not at all." She said and he rubbed her arm.

"I know. But you need me Lora." She released a sigh.

"I-" she paused as she watched Hades comfort her sister and her heart clenched. She gave stiff hugs and this man tolerated them. She didn't know how to console people but she did love fiercely. She

looked up at him.

“I’m always honest to myself and principles.” She started out without breaking eye contact with him.

“I know what your response is and I’m okay with it okay?” She said as he just looked down at her. Not letting her go. They were still at the airport and she didn’t know why she couldn’t wait till she was settled to tell him this.

“I-You..this is not going the way I expected.” She pushed her hair back and moved her hands down to push his back but he didn’t let go and she released a frustrated sigh.

“Lora?”

“Hhmm?”

“Calm down.” He kissed the top of her head.

“Breathe and calm down. Try to get out of your head for a few minutes? Can you do that baby?” Trust him to throw in the endearment and have her internally screaming.

She breathed in and out.

“Good girl. That’s it baby.” He encouraged smoothly and she wanted to scream at herself. She didn’t want to be his good girl because she liked it and hated it. Did she love being praised?

“Better?” He asked and she nodded.

“Good. What did you want to say?” She breathed out. Then she breathed in and out again. She’ll wait if she is this nervous to tell him she loved him to death. Irrevocably. Every word in the dictionary to describe that she loved him. Even to the moon and back. She fucking loved Robert Austin Matthews and she was getting hot thinking about it.

“Forget it.” She said and she stepped away from him. He didn’t make an attempt to touch her and he just raised an eyebrow her way.

“Die!” She mouthed and he realised she was trying to switch the mood because she was too afraid to say what she wanted to say.

“Lona! Di lovebirds, cut it out we have to go.” She clapped her hands trying to break Reba and Hades up.

“Now that she is angry she takes it out on us.”

“We don’t have time. Let’s go please!”

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Alora sat in the front seat as Austin closed the door. She turned her head to see Hades and Reba whispering back and forth. Good God. They were annoying and cute at the same time but mostly annoying. The door closed as Austin settled down and looked at her. He took a few moments to

observe her and she faced the other way. Why was he looking at her? He chuckled and started the car. At the backseat, Reba straightened up and she whispered.

"I love watching their interactions. They are so cute."

"Their banter is cute?" Hades asked with a lowered voice and Reba nodded.

"Look at Rora turning away thinking he isn't looking. Then look at him smiling looking at her. Aren't they cute?" Hades chuckled as Reba took his hand and placed her head on his bicep, content with being Alora and Austin's cheerleader. Alora shifted in her seat and she took out her phone. She found the aux cord and she connected her phone.

"I hope it's music that won't kill us."

"I sure hope it does kill you guys. All of you except Reba." She replied and went through the songs she listens to.

"Is it classical music? You smart people like sophisticated music and stuff."

"No Reba. It's not classical music. I listen to that when I'm studying." Reba grinned.

"See Hades, I am a smart person..." Hades kissed her cheek. He loved her. She was just a ball of sunshine he wanted to protect even from himself. Austin was silent and Alora played Young the Giant's Mind Over Matter. Austin turned to face her and she looked back at him. His other hand slid into hers and he brought her hand to her lips. It was time he was honest with her, he thought to himself as he held her hand. Alora breathed out, ignoring the flutter in her tummy. She was yet to tell him about her parentage and not the trash the media wrote about her parents.

You know you're on my mind
And if the world don't break
I'll be shaking it
Because I'm a young man after all
And when the seasons change, will you stand by

me

Cause I'm a young man built to fall

The song played in the car with no one talking over it and Alora was thankful for the silence. She leaned back on her seat as he drove the car. He was always so confident in himself and all he could do. She wished she could always be confident and not break down in her dark closet all alone. She let go of his hand then picked it up to interlace their fingers. She watched him smile and she rolled her eyes irritated.

"Don't you dare say anything Robert." The smile only got wider and she shook her head. Reba watched them and smiled.

"They are in love." She whispered to Hades as she yawned. Alora turned to face them and she tried to not allow her lips to turn upwards in a smile. They are in love. It was so effortless, she could understand now why they lost their minds and lost their woes. She could hear it in the silence, they

were truly in love. She faced forward and released a sigh as her boyfriend drove them home.

"I'll give you the directions." She said and he didn't respond. How was he always this calm and not wanting to set the whole world on fire?

Zara stared at the mirror as her husband placed a hand on her shoulder. He kissed her neck.

"Nervous?" He asked. She nodded as she looked down at her ring.

Mooketsi had left his ring in the car when he went to get his sister and now they have dinner which starts at seven.

"We should buy roses or something." Zara said. So nervous about everything and how this is going to come off as.

"Zee relax okay?" She sucked in a deep breath.

Austin parked the car outside the yard and Hades got out with Reba. Reba just held on tight to him and Alora's eyes flitted to their intertwined hands. She could feel his gaze on her, assessing her and all. He let go of her hand and she lost the warmth from their contact. Even in the silence, she looked up at him and he didn't usually bring down the barrier but she could see how he looked at her. His large hands undid her seatbelt and he picked her up. She didn't know why she wasn't throwing a fit over him handling her like a porcelain doll but he placed her on his lap and wrapped his arms around her.

"I missed you." He whispered in her ear before his lips dropped to her neck and her heart raced. Was he going to want sex now that she was here? Her thoughts crashed into each other and she placed a hand on his chest to push him back. He didn't fight her but instead looked at her.

"Baby I'm always going to say this, you need to get out of your head." He said softly and she released a shaky breath.

"Tu n'as rien à craindre quand tu es avec moi."(You have nothing to fear when you're with me) He repeated the words and she nodded. He lowered his head to kiss her and she didn't push him back, instead her hands crumpled his shirt as their tongues found solace together, his darting in and out and her receiving his kisses and catching the rhythm the kiss was going at. His hands were respectfully on her waist and didn't move further down. She appreciated that. Relationships were out of her depth and she didn't exude the same confidence like she did to her studies or things she was good at.

He broke it and his breath hit her lips as she opened her eyes to look at his hazel browns. His lips turned up in a smile and she moved her hands to place them on her lap. He took her hands and placed them back on his chest.

"Keep them there." He said and she nodded. He

wanted to kiss all that worry away, he didn't exactly like it when his girlfriend wasn't confident and that scared him more than the Alora who always had guns blazing and was ready to trample every obstacle in her way. She removed them seconds later.

"I crumpled your shirt. Sorry about that." She said as she smoothed the lines with her perfectly manicured hands and he laughed.

"Robert, I can claw your eyes out. Don't laugh." She threatened and he kissed her forehead.

"Your ego is already suffocating me."

"Glad to hear that. It should. It's not easy to kiss someone with a high-" she placed a finger on his lips.

"Don't!" Instead of removing the finger, he opened his lips to suck on it and she gasped and removed her finger. He laughed and she punched his chest.

"Don't do that."

"What?" He asked with humour coating his voice

and she glared at him.

"You know what." He shook his head.

"You are still coming?"

"You asked and I don't think I can say no to you."

Alora thought about it. Translation: He would do anything for you. She could live with knowing that he cared for her in his narcissistic way and not fully love her like she did him. She just hoped he wouldn't up and leave by the time she gives up her virginity. She breathed out. She got off his lap and picked up her bag.

"See you here at seven." She got out of the car and he leaned back.

Alora rolled her eyes spotting Hades and Reba.

"Break it up!" She shouted.

"Hell must be freezing with you on earth."

"Says the one named after a god."

"Is that a compliment Alora?"

"I would rather die than compliment you Hudson."

Reba we need to get ready." Reba kissed Hades and walked to the gate with Alora. Hades headed to the car as the gate slid open and the girls disappeared into the yard.

"We have approximately two hours to get ready." Hades just nodded as he leaned back. He will say goodbye tonight.

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Susan looked at the table and she was happy she

had all her children under one roof. She counted the chairs that were there. Mooketsi was the only one without a partner and she was starting to have her own suspicions but anyway this was a family regardless. The dinner table was complete. She hummed as she walked back to the kitchen to check on her pots.

Meanwhile in the bedroom, Alora picked out her dress and she realised she wasn't wearing it to impress her family. Austin was coming. To have dinner with her family. She placed the dress on the bed and took out a pair of heels. Heels always made her feel powerful and in control of things. They were a confidence booster if she could say that. Heels were her best friend. Along with make-up. Anything that needed her exhilarated confidence needed heels and makeup. She sat on her chair and took out her cosmetics bag as well. She was bathed and hair was held back in a tight sleek ponytail to put emphasis on her eyes and her face. Which was bare of makeup currently. Could she be the face of her own cosmetics company? Alora Moremi, CEO and

Founder of Lora Cosmetics. It had a nice ring to it but she had to work hard to make it happen. Starting with her plans to renovate her mother's house with her trust fund. The rest of the money will be a heavy investment into her company. She wasn't going to work for a man. She wasn't doing that. She has been planning this ever since she was a teenager who experimented with make-up. Well Reba's make-up which she rarely used and her decision had solidified. Business and make-up were where her heart was. She knew Austin was 100% behind her and she was sure Reba would support everything she did. She wasn't sure about the rest of her family. Carefully she took out her eyeliner and concealer.

Two hours elapsed and Alora walked out of her room in her dress and heels. Her phone was in hand as Reba walked out of hers.

"Okay! Slay us!"

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"It is." Alora took a moment to look at her sister who was in a yellow dress, yellow was the perfect colour to describe her personality. She was a ray of sunshine that needed to be protected even if it was from herself and her addiction.

"Right colour." Reba twirled.

"It's the first time in months since I've worn a dress." Reba touched her collarbone.

"I don't look too fat right?" Alora walked closer.

"You were never that to begin with." Alora said. Modelling had destroyed Reba completely.

"Okay. I'll take your word for it. Let's go and I'm sure the others are on their way."

"Let's." Alora reluctantly took her sister's hand.

"You remind me of Maleficent." Reba stated as she happily took Alora's hand.

"Now we are comparing me to movie characters?"

"Just an observation." They walked to the dining room and Reba looked at the seats.

"Uhm if we sit in the middle seats, Austin will sit next to you and I will sit next to Hades but we'll still sit next to each other." Reba flopped her hair.

"I feel so wise." Alora had to smile and shake her head.

"It's not easy keeping up with the A star team but someone has to do it. I also understand French dear sister, okay not all of it but I understand you and Austin speaking in French. Is it like a secret language? That's cool. Waitse le ratana se movie, you have a language you speak just to shut us out. That's cute."

"Let go of my hand." Reba didn't.

"I have a question, are you guys going to go all the way?"

"Rebante!"

"I take it your intimacy issues are still there, no biggie. Okay I can be a big sister now. We'll talk sex

and everything later tonight." Alora scrunched her face.

"You're being weird and I don't want to talk about sex. I can proudly say no man will have the power to say they are-urg having intercourse with me."

Reba shrugged.

"No man but Austin. The but is silent. We'll talk. You know I lost my virginity at 18 and ok it-" their conversation was interrupted by Susan walking in and Reba blushed in embarrassment.

"Oops!" She did not mean for her mother to overhear that conversation.

Alora glared at Reba.

"Let go of my hand." Reba ignored her. Her mother overheard her talking about sex? Awkward. So awkward.

"Reba I love that dress on you, it looks gorgeous and yellowy and sunflower-ish."

"Thank you."

"Su the word yellowy doesn't exist and I'll excuse

the word sunflower-ish because those are my exact thoughts." Susan smiled.

"We are not at the English fair Rora."

"Fine!"

"You look stunning in that dress."

"I always do. Thank you." Alora's attention went back to her sister's.

"It's a good time for you to let go of my hand."

"Sit down Alora." Reba said and Alora wanted to touch her head but her ponytail. Gosh her ponytail would be ruined. She sat down and Reba did to.

"Okay, I love your eye makeup. I was useless at this even though I had sets and sets of makeup."

A topic Alora like and she knew everything.

Skincare was her element she can do it. She turned to face Reba as she started explaining the process and how she got there. Listing everything she used and other alternatives one might use depending on their skin.

"Are you sure you didn't study cosmetology?" Reba

said and she wasn't sure it existed.

"I did. I was an honours student so I had a choice to pick other courses that were not part of my degree. I chose most cosmetology courses. It made sense."

"That's so cool. So you can apply other people's make up?"

"Yes. And it's more than makeup. Skin care as well, what to use for what. It was not as in depth as dermatology but I read up on that online."

"That's a whole lot of studying." Emory made her way to the table and Alora watched her push a chair back then sit down. She didn't want children. She had figured that out when she hit twenty and everything she read up on gave her a million reasons not to want children but the one that stood out was the fact that she wasn't sure if she could love a child properly. Of course she loved her siblings but loving a child was different.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Emory asked and Alora shrugged.

"You're fascinating little goblin."

"Fascinating? What does it mean?"

"You're interesting." Emory nodded her head in agreement. As if she knew she was interesting enough to capture her sister's attention.

"I want to look like a princess. Like you."

"I'm no princess. I don't need a prince to save me." Emory pouted and then placed her hands on the table.

"But Austin is-is your prince." She said and Reba nodded.

"Bulls eye Em. You are correct." Reba said at the top of her voice and Alora rolled her eyes.

"He is not my prince. I don't need saving, Emory listen to me. Girls don't need princes to save them, you are your own hero. In fact a shark." Emory's eyes widened.

"Sharks are scary."

"Exactly. Be a shark and go for what you want. Relentlessly." Alora concluded knowing Emory didn't understand the last word. Thabiso made his

way down and he picked his seven year old up as she giggled.

"You girls look beautiful today." Reba said thank you and Alora nodded. Emory smiled as her dad put her down. Susan finally came back with the pots to place them in the middle.

"Give me a few minutes." The intercom rang and Thabiso stood up. Time to welcome the guests. He pressed the button to open the gate. A minute later there was a knock and he opened the door to let in Austin and Hades who greeted him. Austin handed him the flowers.

"For the lady of the house." He had said and Thabiso took them as Susan walked back in the kitchen. She smiled as she received their greetings while she placed more food down on the table. Austin took his seat next to Alora and he kissed her lips. Just a peck. Alora used her finger to wipe his lips.

"You'll get lipstick on your lips and it doesn't look good on you."

"You care." He grinned and she used the tip of her nail to touch his cheek.

"I can deliver on my promises." She said and his grin widened. What the fuck?

"Give it your best shot."

"I hate you."

"I don't believe you."

"Okay pop quiz.." she quickly said.

"The stakes?" He asked.

"You stop talking to me throughout dinner if you lose."

"If you lose what happens?"

"I never lose." He smirked as he moved his head back, her perfume threatening to undo him. She wasn't even doing a damn thing than to glare at him with those dark eyes of hers and he was fucking hard for her.

"I want to up the stakes." He said. She frowned.

"I'm listening."

"If you lose, we get to move in together for a month." She raised an eyebrow.

"You had to just ask if I want to move in with you." She murmured as she moved her face closer to his.

"Do you baby?" She kept quiet.

"Lora, talk to me.." Reba looked at them with hearts in her eyes. She was their biggest supporter. She made Hades notice.

"Soon they'll be on each other's throats." He said and she agreed.

The moment was interrupted by a door knock and Reba did the honours of heading to the lounge to open the door

"Hi guys. Welcome to the family dinner, step in." She ushered her brother and his wife inside. They headed to the dining room and she waited by the door. She heard a few greetings pass in the dining room. She was waiting for Mooketsi now then dinner could start. A minute later there was a door knock and she opened the door.

She paused as she saw Mooketsi with a lady. He didn't say that he will be bringing a date along but the more the merrier right.

"Hi guys. Welcome and you can proceed to the dining room." Mooketsi nodded as they walked to the dining room with Zara holding his hand. Reba closed the door. Now time to eat. Not that she was going to eat everything but yeah. She pressed the button that finally closed the gate and headed to the dining room. Everyone was seated and their mothers sat at the opposite side of the table and Thabiso did the same.

"Hello everyone and Mooketsi you brought a date." Susan said with excitement in her voice.

Mooketsi nodded and he opened his mouth.

"Zara this is my family. That's my mother, father, Bokamoso and his wife over there. Reba and Hades, Alora and Austin and Emory."

"Nice to meet you Zara." Thabiso said and Zara said thank you. She was nervous and her heart raced. She squeezed Mooketsi's hand underneath the

table.

"Everyone meet my wife Zara." Alora widened her eyes, Reba gasped and placed her palm over her mouth. Bokamoso placed his fork down and Susan blinked. Thabiso moved his head forward while Emory was nonchalant to all that was happening around her. Austin being the calm being he was, watched and waited for someone to say something. Zara looked at Mooketsi with panic in her eyes.

"W-wife?" Susan asked again. Maybe her hearing was wrong. Mooketsi nodded and silence enveloped the room. The rest of them were too stunned to speak.

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No one moved for what seemed like eternity till Emory spoke.

"Are we eating?" She asked in her small voice and Alora wanted to avoid a confrontation even though the better part of her would delight in one. Watching chaos ensue was fun but that was not the picture she wanted Austin to have of her family.

"I believe we should eat Emory." She said and her eyes moved to Susan who couldn't actually believe what was happening at her dinner table. Reason 100 not to have little goblins. Look at the stunt Mooketsi pulled on them.

"We missed a few chapters." Reba shook her head after she said that.

"I agree." Bokamoso added on.

"I am waiting for cameras to come and say 'just jokes or just kidding.'" Reba went on and Hades had to touch her shoulder to make her shut up. Zara swallowed. Her eyes moving to Hades who looked so much like his father. The resemblance was uncanny and you wouldn't even doubt his parentage. She looked at the rest of the family as she shrank into her seat.

"It's not a joke." Mooketsi replied.

"Mo-"

"We are all gathered here to hear all about America from Alora who just arrived today. She had a very long trip and she wouldn't appreciate the drama. We have guests as well and we'll solve this little mishap after dinner." The finality in Thabiso's voice had everyone looking at their plates and Mooketsi regretted shifting attention from Alora over to him. Of course it was Alora's day. She just arrived back home from her four year degree.

Susan breathed in and out to calm her nerves. She wasn't going to make a scene. Dinner must go on.

She plastered a smile onto her face and she looked at Alora.

"Okay, Rora tell us how you two got together. It seems like I'm severely out of touch when it comes to my children's lives." They all got the dig and Reba patted her head while Mooketsi found the plate a bit too interesting. Zara was looking at Hades before she faced Alora.

"Well you know dating. I can't believe I said that." Everyone chuckled. Alora was crazy. Brains and all. You had to admit she was crazy.

"How?" Thabiso asked and she looked at everyone at the table.

"Do I have to tell you guys?" Sue queried. Austin was amused and she badly wanted to wipe the amusement off his face. Her hands moved to her neck then she caught his gaze on her. Her face heated up and he chuckled in amusement.

"Okay! For the record I'm doing him a favour. He is very privileged to have Alora Moremi as his girlfriend." She winced.

"I'll enjoy this." Hades said and she shot him a glare. Zara's eyes widened. That glare was scary. Was that what Mooketsi meant when he said she'll understand when she meets her? Damn and the fact that no one except her looked scared out of their seats was a surprise.

"The day I kill him.." she groaned before she composed her features and Thabiso opened the pots as the others passed their plates around to get dished for.

"He got my number from Hades." She said and Susan was surprised.

"In my defense, he convinced me." Hades chirped in.

"No, you were doing the Lord's work Hades. Go on Alora!" Alora shook her head. Her sister was something else.

"This story is interesting, go batla motho a ngatha nama a reeditse."(I should be biting into my meat while listening) Bokamoso's wife giggled.

"My relationship shouldn't be that amusing. Our IQs combined surpasses all of you guys' IQs." She

fought back and Austin laughed.

"Agree!" She faced him and he smiled.

"I'm on her side. I'm under duress." Alora rolled her eyes.

"Look we completely understand Austin." Mooketsi added. Alora was Alora.

"Well nna Alora I'm listening. He got your number from Hades and what happened? How did you agree? You're as difficult as a mule so we want the juicy details."

"I can't believe you guys want to make my relationship gossip."

"Is it gossip ma chère if it's said in our presence?"

"I don't need your opinion." He grinned as he took his plate from Susan and Alora shook her head.

"He called and we started talking. That boring stuff."

"Talking stage is never boring." Zara said and Alora gave her a dead stare.

"Do you know Austin tota? I was bored gore." She

said just to rile him up and he raised an eyebrow.

Reba whispered to Hades.

"I told you they are in love, look at how he is looking at my genius sister."

"I can't defend Austin anymore, the wicked witch of the west has won his heart."

"So cute. Now they are throwing big words and French at the dinner table. Go sa nna bothale ekete e tlo nna problem."(Not being smart is going to be a problem)

"Long story short, he flew over to Princeton to get me for our first date." Susan swooned.

"He flew over? For a first date. Yoh!"

"Yah neh!" Bokamoso's wife said. People live the movie like life. Flew over? Just like that? Flew over? To America?

"Did he kiss you? Like prince do to princesses?" Alora's face heated. She was not answering that seven year old. No.

"We went to an art gallery then dinner. He got me this necklace." She said to Emory as she lifted the necklace she was wearing. Now everyone gave those little sighs of something being romantic and she wanted to die. She whispered over to him.

"Keep your ego in check." They didn't know he was an ego maniac and like she had always said, he behaved differently around people and they didn't know him like she did.

"Why?"

"I hate you. You should choke on a bone or something."

"Look at you, all flustered because a child asked about a kiss." He changed topics and she placed her hand over his mouth.

"Shut up!" He grinned over her palm and Susan smiled. Alora was always angry but she was happy she found a match. Austin didn't seem to mind her overly intelligent child whose way of thinking was peculiar to say the least. In fact he looked taken by her. No one smiled at Alora's threats or anger

bursts though they were indifferent to them.

Alora breathed in.

"Now here we are. Enough about my relationship. I would like to keep it private just as it is. That means I won't be telling the public about my relationship and in this context you guys..you guys are the public. Austin and I are together and that's all you need to know."

"Well Austin, she can't cook." Bokamoso said and Alora's pursed her lips.

"I am sure my very rich boyfriend wasn't looking for a cook was he?" There were 'ooohs' at the table and Bokamoso chuckled.

"Alora 1 and Bokamoso 0." Mooketsi said and Reba laughed. They used to do this at dinner tables. Keeping scores for whatever foolish reason.

"I always win brother." She smirked.

"Okay okay! So after graduation, what's the way forward?"

"I'm not talking about it today. Otherwise, you

should eat guys." She picked her fork and started eating as the people chatted amongst themselves.

Reba and Hades whispered back and forth with little laughs in between as Mooketsi tried to calm his wife down. Susan looked around and sighed. Her kids had their own lives. Lives she felt severely excluded from. She should have expected this. They are all grown except for Emory but they were adults with their own minds. Somehow it hurt more that they keep stuff from her. What did that say about her as a mother?

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Dinner went by far much better than Alora expected and she watched her narcissistic boyfriend blend in with her family and he answered their questions as easily as he would a quiz. She placed her glass of juice down as she also watched Austin talk with Hades. Hades was still that bitter person but Austin handled him well. She could say they are friends now. Hades has been on the sober road while he was living with Austin and she loved Austin also for that. It would break Reba to lose Hades to his addiction. She was scared it would make her sister spiral out of control and they would never be able to help her. She picked her glass as Austin's hand rested on her thigh. She looked at it and back at him as he continued conversation. She licked her lips and drank her juice as she leaned back. Her gaze swept on Zara who was observing everyone. Their eyes locked for a brief moment and she had a feeling she scared her as she watched Zara squirm in her seat. Immediately her brother's eyes landed

on her and she shrugged as she raised her glass before she watched Austin talk. She watched the way his lips moved with every syllable uttered and how his face remained void of emotions except the occasional smile he threw around. She saw that it didn't quite reach his eyes. He was always calm, so calm and she fell into deep thought about how their relationship will progress. Of course he said they were endgame. They had just started dating and how could he be sure of that? She sighed. Of course she knew, she believed in fate and the universe working for the greater good. He was her fate, whether he would admit it or not. They had met almost a decade ago, when she was busy picking up a new language and he was already fluent in the language. They were competitors. Ever since then and she hated him but was that hate a cover up of the love she felt for him?

It was, she mused as she brought the glass to her lips once again. Regardless of time, distance and all the other circumstances they always met. She drove down different roads and they all led back to

him. This hot man who had his hand on her thigh.

Ten minutes later, Emory declared that she was tired and wanted to sleep. A very evident indication that dinner might as well be over. She didn't know when she was going to get him alone. Like really alone so that they can talk but she wanted to talk and lay all her cards on the table.

"I enjoyed dinner." Reba declared with a happy glow on her face. Alora concluded it must be from seeing Hades after so long. Reba looked at Hades and grinned. She took him in again, this man who loved a drug addicted girl like her, the girl who carried so much baggage from her ended career. Seeing him was like a fix, she wanted to see more of him and being around him for so long was like her first breath out of water. Heavenly. Glorious. Hades leaned in to whisper something in her ear and her smile faltered as she nodded. Hades' heart pounded as he contemplated telling Reba but he had to. He had to let her know and besides the happy bubble they had been in today, he wanted to know about her progress so far and everything.

Susan cleared the table and Zara didn't know what to do with herself as her father-in-law looked around the table. She saw Hades standing up and Reba following him as they walked out the door. She watched how Alora, the girl who gave her shivers look at Austin lovingly before she scowled at him.

Susan finished clearing the table and Thabiso saw that as an opportunity to talk to Mooketsi.

"Mooketsi and Zara can stay at the table."

"That's my cue to leave." Bokamoso said standing up holding his wife's hand. They headed to the kitchen to say bye to Susan then said bye to Alora.

"I think I'll talk to Austin in my room. Yeah, my room." She said standing up and she took his hand as he grinned.

"Don't grin! God I hate you!" She said as she led him to her room.

"But we are heading to you bedroom."

"Your sexual references will not affect me." She opened the door and waited for him to step inside

before she closed it. Before she could even turn, his whole body covered her and she leaned into him. His hands on her waist.

"Lora talk to me."

"Your moving in suggestion..."

"What about it?" He was reassuring and everything. She

"It's too soon." She breathed out.

"I understand." She nodded.

"I-I hate sharing spaces and I-" he kissed her neck.

"Continue."

"Us moving in together means sex and I am not ready for that."

"Still don't want to give up power yet?" She closed her eyes.

"No." He chuckled.

"It still brings me back to you scared you won't be able to dominate in the bedroom." He was accurate.

"And baby, I'll be here when you change your mind."

"You won't leave after?"

"No. I promise." Alora breathed out. This man never breaks his promises. She turned and her hands touched his cheek, the heels giving her height an extra boost. He smiled and she parted her lips in an attempt to kiss him first. Austin just lowered his head so that she can kiss him properly. He appreciated her trying, she never initiated kisses and this was a first. He let her guide the kiss, it was slow as fuck with her doing her own probing before she broke it and sighed.

"Lora, it's okay."

"Of course you'll say that." He kissed her this time, taking control of the kiss and she placed her hands on his chest. He smiled into the kiss.

"Good girl." Her face heated and she broke the kiss to punch him.

"Careful Robert."

Outside in the quiet of the night, Hades sat with Reba as she placed her head on his shoulder.

"How has it been?" Reba breathed out.

"Horrible. I have more compulsions than necessary and the therapist mom found isn't helping."

"Tell her." Reba breathed out. He knew it wasn't easy.

"She is trying even though I silently feel her judging me. That her child turned into a drug addict and now she is spending money getting her fixed. Like I'm a toy and I'll be okay. The therapist doesn't help with my sleep walking. It is worse." Reba breathed out.

"I think about drugs more than I think about food or anything. I"

"Talk to me love."

"I usually google ways to get high." She cringed and closed her eyes.

"I-I don't know." She concludes and breathes out.

"But thinking is better than doing right? That's

progress.." she went on again. She opened her eyes.

"I wish I can be close to you forever."

"I wish so too..."

"I'm leaving tomorrow." Reba stilled.

"What? Why?"

"For rehab." She swallowed. He was going to get better. Wasn't that what she wished for when she was 18 when he confessed his love for her drunk at a party and tried to kiss her? He was going to get sober.

"I've been trying. Austin usually thinks he is right and can be a prick at times but he has helped too." Hades said. The concept still weird given that it has always been Reba in his life who knew everything.

"For how long?"

"Three months." Another long three months without him. Tears filled her eyes and he sniffed.

"Okay. Okay. I'll survive." She said. She'll be strong. She'll be fine.

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Inside the house, Susan glanced at Mooketsi and his wife. The fact that he has a wife being such a foreign concept to her.

"Mooketsi why didn't you tell us? Marriage is such a huge commitment and to go into it without at least letting the normal processes take place is careless." Thabiso started out and Mooketsi swallowed.

"It's complicated."

"Uncomplicate it for us." Susan said and Mooketsi looked at Zara. He breathed out.

"It was supposed to be a marriage of contract." Susan's eyes widened. Was this some sort of movie where she wasn't given the script?

Zara looked at her in-laws. It might have been easier to fool her mother that they had been in love at the time but they were in love now right? It was supposed to be something quick and easy.

"Contract? Nna ke helets we."(I'm out of words)

Mooketsi breathed out still holding Zara's hand.

"It was honestly supposed to be marriage on paper and then we fell in love and here is my wife." He lifted her hand to kiss her.

"Where did I go wrong?" Susan asked and Thabiso rubbed her back.

"You didn't go wrong. Let them live and make their mistakes."

"It's not our fault mother. We grow and we are adults, I am sorry I didn't go about this the right way."

It was an error on my part and I apologise. I love Zara, I was hoping you'd love her like your own daughter and accept her. We can still go about the traditional process of magadi and patlo as well." Zara smiled at him and nervously faced her in-laws.

"Nothing I say will change your mind?" Mooketsi shook his head.

"Okay. You're my kids and I can't stay angry forever. I was just shocked that major decisions come into being without me even knowing."

"Mom it's not your fault. All of us are adults and regardless, we'll still find our ways back to you." Mooketsi said and Susan smiled.

"Zara welcome to the family." She smiled and Zara smiled.

"Can I like hug you?" Zara asked. Mooketsi chuckled. Trust his wife's personality to peak it's rear head as soon as someone likes her or shows her kindness.

"Of course." She got off her seat and Susan stood up as Zara walked round the table to hug her.

"Okay I heard so much about you."

"Good things I hope."

"All good things. Thank you! Thank you!"

"Zee, you can let go now." Mooketsi chided and Zara let go as she pushed her hair back.

"Oh sorry." Mooketsi stood up and walked to his wife's side.

"See? All of this is resolved nkw everyone's happy." Susan gave Thabiso a grateful look. He handles everything so well and she was sure if he wasn't here, things were going to be a mess. A big mess.

The front door opened and they turned. They saw Reba pass them. She smiled.

"Good night everyone." She said heading to her room. Reba on her way to the room, she passed Alora and Austin. She smiled.

"I'm waiting." She said and walked into her room. Alora looked at Austin.

"Ignore her." They walked past the people in the dining room who gave them weird looks.

"He is leaving." Alora defended herself as she led Austin outside.

"I guess we should leave as well." Mooketsi said as he hugged his mother and gave his stem father half a hug.

"Bye and Zara should pass by tomorrow." Susan added.

"Of course. Bye."

They walked out and Susan looked at her husband.

"So far so good?"

"So far so good. They have to spread their wings and fly anyway." Susan breathed out.

"Am I a bad mother?"

"No you're not. But you can't cut the umbilical cord and I think they feel like you're controlling their lives. Let them fail and win on their own. Kids always

know where home is."

"I still feel like I failed Reba."

"Reba is a work in progress, she fell behind in a lot of things but she is slowly picking the pieces of her life."

"I didn't want to put her into rehab because I thought it would be like I'm sending her away because of her drug addiction."

"We did discuss that, rehab would be good for her though. She is not too far gone." Susan sighed.

"I'll ask Alora to suggest it. She is closer to Alora than she is with me."

"Sisters." Susan chuckled.

"I never had that with my sister. If only I had forgiven her she would have been here."

"It's not your fault. Everyone is the master of their own lives and their decisions. You didn't force the pills down her throat."

She nodded.

"I suppose not." She smiled at him as she lowered her head to kiss him and touch his grey beard.

"I love you and thank you." She said sincerely as he smiled and kissed her back. She laughed.

"I think we need to take this to the bedroom." She gave him a naughty smile. He stood up and picked her up as she squealed. That moment Susan came to a realisation, maybe if she had met Thabiso earlier she would have given him a chance instead of Moremi. Everyday she discovered that Moeremi didn't love her like she loved him and he gave her three children and went on to cheat on her to give her the fourth. She shook her head. She was only grateful for the kids at this point.

Austin hugged Alora and she hugged him back. No snide remarks or anything.

"I'll call when I get home."

"Don't. I am having a sleepover with my sister."

"Okay." He kissed her neck and then her forehead.

"You looked beautiful tonight."

"See? That's why I'm doing you a favour. You don't deserve me."

"Careful little dreamer."

"I'm not little."

"Your age and height say otherwise."

"Robert fuck you!"

"You have no idea how I want to do just that to your body." His voice dropped an octave and it sent shivers all over her body.

"Fuck the pretty lies out of you and have you screaming my name for the world to hear." She was heating up.

"Know what else?" She shook her head.

"Have you at my mercy." With that he let her go and walked to his car. He didn't turn back and she could feel the goosebumps tracing her skin. Fuck! She quickly turned on her heels and headed to the house.

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It took Alora a whole hour to get ready for her sleepover, she ran her hands over her pyjamas before she headed to Reba's room with a pillow. The pillow smelled fresh so their mother washed the blankets. She was thankful for that. She knocked on the door.

“Tsena.”(get in)

She opened the door and stepped inside. She

looked around and Reba had the chips and sweets on the bed. She breathed in. They won't spill on the blankets. They won't spill. She calmed down and smiled.

Reba patted on the carpet and Alora carefully placed her pillow on the bed and sat cross legged on the carpet with her silk pyjamas. Reba looked at hers and grinned.

“We are matching. Silk pyjamas. I'm taking pictures.” She picked her phone and she took pictures as Alora observed in silence. Was Reba using her sunshine personality to hide her problems and all the turmoil she experienced? All those raging thoughts?

“The pictures look so nice, if I wasn't trolled on social media I would post them. I'll send them to you and besides I don't want to drag you into my mess.”

“It's not your mess. Reba we are here with you. Behind you.” Reba placed the phone and picked up the packet of chips.

“You guys honestly don’t have to get involved.”
Alora breathed out.

“How did it start?” She asked. Her voice losing the usual hostility it carried and the sound of Reba opening the packet of chips filled the room. Alora waited.

“I tried heroin at 17. It was nice getting high and you know how experimenting stuff is like. I did that once. Nothing had been wrong. My modelling here was really good and I was getting okay grades at school.” She went dead silent for a minute before she continued.

“The. Paris happened. God it was awful!” She admitted and Alora moved closer as Reba ate her chips.

“The yelling at me for being slow..” she breathed out.

“They literally told me I was fat. I wasn’t but I was told to lose weight.” Alora saw Reba fight back tears. Reba had always been on the lean side so she could guess how being told she was fat had her confused and altered her.

“I starved for days, at a mere salad and a slice of bread everyday. Just too keep track of my calories to fit into the dresses. I was being paid for that, I couldn’t literally fight management right?” Reba sucked in a breath.

“It began the ugly cycle of my constant vomiting and over exercising everyday to lose calories and being conscious of what I eat.”

“I-I didn’t eat just anything Alora.” And Alora could realise how ignorant she had been, Reba was always swallowed whole by the clothes she wore but that had always been Reba’s style of clothing so they never saw anything wrong. Reba dominated the catwalk so they thought she was okay. Reba placed the packet of chips down.

“And America? God that was worse, the racial slurs they called!” She wiped her tears.

“I was called a monkey, an ape. How is that human? How is that okay? I was just another human being and they sexually assaulted me. So many times than I can count because I-“ she shook her head.

How could she fight them when they had the power to ruin her career and make things harder than her?

“Explain sexual assault.” Alora’s voice rose as she breathed through her nose and Reba shook her head.

“I’m okay, I’m alive and there is nothing to be done.”

“Explain sexual assault Reba.” Reba shook her head.

“You’re getting pink, it’s in the past. I’m okay.” she reassured her sister as she wiped her tears.

“I’m over it.” Alora shook her head.

“You’re not because it led you to doing drugs.”

“I needed to cope somehow, when you’re high you don’t think about your problems and they don’t consume you as much as they would when sober. Weed didn’t have that kick but I went with so many drugs. Many new ones to choose from. They helped me escape and I wanted to escape everyday but it wasn’t possible so I took them when I wasn’t strutting on the runaway, at rehearsal or fittings. They were my escape. My happy place.” Reba said

as she scratched herself and she looked up at the ceiling hugging herself. How could she tell her sister who wants her to get better that she wanted drugs? She wanted a fix, maybe some coke if not meth? Something to give her kick and help her escape her thoughts of helplessness at what she experienced and how she could do a damn thing to stop it from fucking with her mind. She felt Alora's arms wrap around her and she didn't realise she had moved closer.

"I couldn't picture anything past 30." Reba added and she blinked back tears.

"I wa trying but it was n't working, I figured that eventually I would die from an overdose even if I had weeks of sobriety because I always went back." Alora didn't know what to say.

"I only talked to Hades who has his own demons to fight. And I think, as much as we love each other if one of us was to die, the other would follow shortly." She sniffed and Alora held her.

"I don't have any words of sympathy but I love you."

“I-I love you.”

“I’m here. Forever to stay, I’ll walk through hell fire with you. If your wings are broken, borrow mine okay? I’ll stand by you. Just like Hades is getting sober, Reba you are too. I know it won’t be easy but we won’t know unless we try.” Alora assured. She was trying to keep her voice even trying not to cry.

“Fate and the universe works in a mysterious way, everything will fall in place. I want you to have faith in yourself. Just this once that we’ll beat the addiction and talk through the emotional and psychological damage that led to it and Oh know we can’t wipe the actions away but we’ll learn to deal with them in a healthy manner.

“Al-“

“I’ll be there for you every step of the way. No matter how tough it gets. Believe me, you’re my sister and I love you regardless of your flaws.” Reba nodded and placed her head on Alora’s shoulder.

“Even with Hades gone, I’ll be here for you. You’ll both be fine.” She said. Knowing she and Austin

were there for them in every aspect.

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A WEEK LATER

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Austin shook his head at his therapist.

“That’s inaccurate.”

“Austin, you are human. The sooner you deal with the emotion you’re fighting the better.”

“I care for her, more than I have ever cared for

anyone. In fact I don't care about anyone but her? I do. Let's not confuse that." James chuckled.

"You are smart. You do know how you're feeling, don't suppress the emotion." Austin's phone beeped in his pocket. James watched Austin take his phone out of his pocket and he smiled, a genuine smile. Not the condescending ones he gave people already those cocky grins.

"James was that all we had to discuss today?"

"How is it going with convincing her?"

"Alora is independent. Most of her life she scared men away and they fled. She shot them glares that were more than clear warnings to stay away so of course she wants to be in control of everything and she is scared she can't control this." Austin said as he checked his watch. He picked his shit jacket from the chair.

"James I have to go. Oh and I have a date with Alora at my house tonight." James watched him go.

Austin was doing things he never did. James had been surprised when Austin had told him he was

living with Hades. Austin didn't like sharing his space. Now he had Alora in his space. It was just a matter of time till he stopped deceiving himself.

Austin read Alora's message and as he was about to type she called. He answered immediately.

"Darling."

"How casual is casual?" She asked.

"Your kind of casual wear."

"What will you be wearing?"

"Pants and a shirt."

"That's not casual."

"Lora, the dress code doesn't even matter. I just want to have you comfortable at my house yeah? Anything you're comfortable in." He softened his voice for her and she went quiet.

"Okay. See you at six."

"Bye."

She hung up and he chuckled as he briskly walked to his car.

Alora put the two dresses on the bed as she asked herself questions as what would be deemed as casual. What was her casual was not Reba's casual and other girl's casual. Should she wear heels? Of course how can she leave those. She picked the mini skirt that had a see through lace on top of it. That was casual enough if she paired it with a shirt and sandal heels. Okay that was sorted. Her hair was fine, she has never had to worry about that. She'll do her makeup as well later on. She carefully put away the clothes and sat on the bed. Too many things to do, so little time. She was hoping that by the second week of January her mother's house would be renovated. She wanted to move as soon as possible, her own space and to work on her brand in peace. Staying with her parents was fine but she didn't want to stay with them, the rest of the money from the trust fund will be heavily invested in her new project that is going to consume the rest

of her life. She had sent emails as well a few days ago, for investment. Heavy investment into her brand regardless of whether it was still non-existent at the moment. She closed her eyes. She had a lot to deal with.

There was a knock on her door.

“Come in.” The door opened and her step mother stood by the door.

“Should I fully come in? I know you like your space and all.”

“You can come in.” Susan stepped in inside the room that was much more neater than the other rooms in the house.

“Can we talk? It’s about Reba.” Alora nodded.

“Of course. Take a seat.” Susan sat on the study desk chair and Alora faced her.

“I’m listening.”

“I was thinking she goes to rehab. Maybe a month or two. So she can see how it goes, I didn’t want it to seem like we are shipping her off away that’s

why she has been here.”

“Rehab might be a good option, but you should change therapists as well. Find one who is able to deal with a drug addict and isn’t just there to tell the patient how to feel.” Susan leaned back.

“She hates her therapist?” Alora tilted her head.

“In not so many words, yes.”

“Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Because she knows you are trying and now you are upset. She didn’t want to upset you. Reba never wants to upset anyone at all. She just wants to make everyone happy.”

“So rehab?”

“It might work but let’s start with a new therapist first, you might find that with a new one she might not even need rehab. Or the new one might recommend rehab based on his or her observations and discussions with Reba. She still sleepwalks.” Susan bit her lower lip. Alora was right, Reba was still sleepwalking and they had gotten used to her

episodes to the point of guiding her to a seat when she is sleepwalking and watching her so she does not hurt herself or hit anything. The sleepwalking was a normal occurrence in the household.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Thank you.” She stood up and left while Alora sighed as the door closed.

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73

Austin’s office door and he glanced from his stack

of papers as his mother replaced another document on his desk.

“I want a review of that document by my desk tomorrow morning and I want to meet her.” He finally raised his desk.

“Meet who?”

“The girl who has your attention. Austin you used to fly in and out of America for her.”

“Not yet.”

“It wasn’t a request. I want to know the girl who has captured your attention. I’m being decent by not having anyone search for her because I’m sure you’ll be decent enough to allow me to meet Alora.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Seems like you know her already.”

“I can’t question your taste because she is beautiful and smart but like I asked the last time, do you want a smart woman? A woman who is into the corporate world that she forgets everyone and lives for her job?”

“Are we talking about Alora or you here?” His mother winced and he realized he not a nerve. Of course it was true. His mother got married, divorced, lost his brother in a still birth but even while she was pregnant she was in the office working and showing her superiority. This has been a company she built from scratch and he had been taught to rely on himself from a young age. His mother didn’t love him and that’s as a fact they both knew, she never hid it and how could he believe in an emotion he was never shown and has learned to decipher as fake and stupid?

“Alora. Corporate women put their jobs ahead of their families and usually didn’t want children.”

“You didn’t want me?” He asked and looked her dead in the eye.

“I am talking about Alora here. I thought you would like a submissive woman, one who isn’t consumed about work.”

“Well if I wanted one I would have went after one.” He liked a challenge and Alora challenged him in so

many ways and he was never bored in her company. Her fats mind and intellect drew him in even before her body came into the equation.

“If that is all.”

“The document on my desk in the morning.”

“Got it.” She walked out and he took out his phone to text her.

Austin: think you got distinctions in your finals?

He waited for her to text back.

Lora: I am 200% sure I graduated with the highest honours.

Austin:we’ll just have to see once Princeton releases the results don’t we?

Lora:Are you calling me stupid? Robert fuck you!

He chuckled and he placed his phone down as he continued to work.

Reba walked inside Alora's room uninvited and she threw herself on the bed as Alora turned from her desk.

"Reba I just made that bed."

"And it's supposed to be crumpled sometimes." Alora sucked in a deep breath and held her pen tightly.

"What brings you here?"

"Okay, are you spending the night with Austin?"

"No."

"Why not? It is a good way to bond wa bona?"

"We don't bond that way." She said and Reba slid her shoes off as she sat cross legged on the bed.

"How do you guys bond?"

"We read together, we play chess with stakes. We never play a game without an end prize or some sort of gratification from playing the game."

“Nna La ntena now. Why can’t you kiss and cuddle like the other couples?”

“We aren’t like other couples.”

“True. You two are too nerdy anyway. But spend the night. See how it goes.”

Alora shook her head.

“No. That step is-“

“Alora you are not moving in or anything. Just the night. You’re an adult and let mama know if I’m not coming home tonight.”

“She will think tha-“

“Does it even matter? Alora, get out of your head sometimes.” Alora blinked. Austin said that all the time.

“Experience stuff without overthinking it. So what if he leaves after the sex which I doubt he will. He is a good guy. Above most people’s league because of his tax bracket and looks. Waitse it seems I do understand economics anyway, you would have enjoyed the sex.” Alora sighed.

“What if I don’t enjoy the sex?” Reba chuckled.

“You are not confident of your skills are you?”

“I read about it and novels depict sex but I can’t-
“ her face heated.

“I don’t think I fill the sexy part of sex. Like attractive and all.”

“Alora you are everything but confident in your sexual skills? Tell him.” Alora sighed again. She didn’t want to admit to failure of even weakness.

“Let’s drop this issue.”

“I am playing my big sister role here and nothing will stop me. Try stuff out with him. Maybe not the actual act of sex but foreplay to make you comfortable with the idea that you’ll have dick stuffed inside of you.” Alora gasped and Reba picked a pillow throwing it her way.

“Now you are messing my arrangement.”

“Lora, you can still take over the world after sex. Have you tried to tou-“

“Now let’s drop this conversation.” Reba sighed.

“Okay. But think about what I said. You are helping fight my demons, I can also help you fight your intimacy issues.”

“Those two are not the same.” Reba shrugged.

“But so far how is it?”

“I miss him but I’m counting weeks, he’ll be here soon I have to be patient and he will be back right? Besides you are here now.” Alora nodded.

“You can exit my room now and leave me in peace.”

“You love him?” Alora sucked in a breath and nodded. She never found the perfect time to tell him that she loved him but she did.

“That’s cute. He loves you too.”

“How do you know.” Reba paused.

“You just know, Alora you hate men with your entire being and he is the only man who has ever been close to you. As much as you think we are not watching we do watch. There are glimpses of you that you’ll never show us but he knows. All in the space of three months. I did say love and hate are

too similar and you have known him for over half a decade and you were probably like he has seen me for years and how I work let me give him a chance.”

“Don’t be Oprah on me.”

“Le cute and I am rooting for you. You even blush for him.”

“Shut the fuck up please!” Reba laughed as Alora cracked a smile. Specially for her. Reba laughed more.

“You smiled for me. Making people happy is my new superpower. I have to try and study for this economics test. Why did I decide to major in economics and statistics?” Reba asked.

“Because you love school?”

“I hate school but I have to study, spend the night and tell me how it was. See you later.” Reba hopped off the bed and Alora rolled her eyes with a much wider smile at her sister who left the bed creased and the pillow was still on the floor. Her phone beeped with a message and she looked at the YouTube link he sent and the message under it. She

always cringed at the name she recently saved him with hence he was not allowed near her phone.

Mr Alora: Use headphones (reminded me of you) and see you later. Have a productive brainstorming session. And also can you bring along your proposal so I can have a look at it?

She replied with an ok and she picked her headphones to listen to whatever the link entailed. She clicked on it and she waited as she put on her headphones. She watched the song load and she used her paper to hide her face even though she was alone. This was corny and cheesy as fuck and she grinned but he sent her a song? Because it reminded him of her? Not the spiteful and always angry her? She was his favourite girl? She grinned more before she regained her composure and listened to the song. She couldn't help but laugh softly listening to Justin Bieber's Favorite Girl.

He is thinking of her? Okay he had the fact right that she was always number 1 but she was his favourite

girl? She grinned more.

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Aloes checked the time as she ran her hands down her skirt. The little breeze outside wasn't going to make her change her attire. She heard a car engine outside and saw that as her opportunity to exit the room with her file and handbag. She walked to the lounge where everyone was chilling and Reba grinned.

“Alora it’s a date not a PowerPoint presentation.”

“This is my casual wear. I would never wear a mini skirt to a presentation.”

Reba shrugged.

“You look breathtaking.” Thabiso added.

“True. Is it a date? Why the file” Alora looked at her family. They wouldn’t understand.

“It’s a date. Uhm I’ll be back late.” Susan waved her off.

“Even if you don’t come home today we understand.”

“Why would she not come home today?” Emory asked. Susan shook her head.

“You are too young to understand.” Emory just shook her head and looked at her big sister.

The intercom rang and Thabiso walked to the door. He pressed the button for the gate to open and Reba could see Alora was nervous. She couldn’t imagine living in Alora’s head. She was sure she was always thinking about something and her

memory was sharp. She picked the mug that had the strong coffee. Caffeine hopefully was giving her an energy boost minus the high feeling that drugs could give her. She paused and shook her head. She shouldn't be thinking of drugs, she shouldn't be thinking of such. Not now. She willed herself to focus on her sister and she smiled as the door knock sounded. Alora kept her ass down as Thabiso opened the door. Austin greeted him as he was let in.

He greeted everyone and his eyes landed on Alora who stood up. She willingly walked to him and he took her hand.

“Thank you and I will bring her back in one piece.”

“I am not an object.” She retorted and Susan smiled.

“Okay. Have fun kids.” Austin walked out the door with her and she glared at him.

“We're working on my proposal first?”

“No. We are relaxing but I will go through it Lora.”

She nodded as he led her to his car. He opened the door for her. She got inside and he closed it before

jogging to his side. Alora placed her bag and file on her lap as the door opened on his side.

Meanwhile inside the house, Reba excused herself and headed to the bedroom. Susan waited a few minutes in the lounge, passing time with her husband and youngest before she excused herself and headed to Reba's room. She knocked on the door.

"Come in." She stepped inside and Reba smiled.

"How can I help? I studied today and I have a therapy session tomorrow. You already know that."

Susan nodded.

"How is therapy going?"

"You met the therapist. It's okay."

"Is it?"

"Yeah!"

"What did she say about the sleepwalking?" Reba paused. She couldn't remember but the therapist

had dismissed and was trying so hard to convince Reba that she had depression and that she should talk. Therapy was hell for her but she tried to tolerate the woman. She was getting paid to help her.

“She said I’ll be okay.”

“Would you be interested in seeing another therapist?” Reba placed a finger on her lip.

“I-if it’s okay with you.”

“So we can compare and you choose the one you like.” Reba smiled, she loved that idea.

“Ok. It is a good idea.” She was trying not to sound excited that she might be switching therapists.

“I’ll let you know by next week.”

“Thank you and mom?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.” Susan smiled and walked over to hug her.

“I love you too and I am proud of the progress you

have made.” Reba nodded. Her mother broke the hug and they smiled.

Alora kept her eyes on Austin and she watched him grin.

“If I didn’t know any better...”

“Shut up!”

“Anyway you can come over to my house anytime you please.”

“Anytime?” He nodded.

“I’ll give you my spare keys.” She leaned back and smiled.

“You’re smiling.”

“I know.” He smiled. A much more gentle and genuine smile. He lov- he paused and shock his head. Where did that word come from? He liked seeing her smile, it was such a rarity and he was

willing to enjoy the rarities of life with her.

He opened the compartment and took out his house keys. He pressed the button for the gate to open and she watched as it revealed his house. Now it was really sinking in that she was dating someone who's net worth is a million times hers because at this moment she had a net worth of zero but she was hoping to make it a million in three years or so from her cosmetics line.

“You live alone?” She asked.

“Excluding Hades yes, I like my own space.”

She nodded as the garage door opened as well and he parked his car.

“Did I push too much when I said you should help Hades?” He paused.

“He is an alcoholic and checking up on him at his house was not going to help. He was going to relapse and I don't think it would have been nice to see that he died of alcohol poisoning.”

“You like him?” Alora asked.

“What is that question supposed to mean?”

“I mean you like him enough to have him stay with you for three months?” Austin paused and considered the question. He has never had a friend recently and since his association with Alora turns out he had one. Hades if he could say that and Reba minus the fact that she was scared of saying anything less intelligible in his presence.

“I can’t say that because the only person I’ve ever liked enough was me and still is.” Alora nodded. Of course she was dating a self loving person who couldn’t even fathom loving another human being platonically or even romantically.

“I see.” He got out from his side shortly after the engine stopped and walked over to her side to open the door for her. He took her hand while she held her file and handbag with the other.

“You cooked?”

She asked and he chuckled.

“Of course. Unlike some people I picked up that skill.” She rolled her eyes.

“I am not going to be some man’s cook Robert.”

“I am not some man Alora.”

“I can make omelettes if that is any consolation. Will I ever live down the fact that I can’t cook?”

“Ms perfectionist? I don’t think so.” Alora glared at him and he laughed as he slid his hand on the small of her back.

“O mantle.” He said close to her ear and she shivered.

“Thank you.” He placed a kiss on her cheek and she used her hand to wipe his lips.

“Powder. Don’t kiss my cheek, you’ll have the makeup on your lips and I won’t kiss you.”

“You want to kiss me?” She breathed out and nodded. He lowered his head to capture her lips and she opened her mouth more to let him dominate the kiss. The taste of his lips was her idea of luxury. A reward after a long day. She placed a free hand on his chest as they kissed. He broke it and she opened her eyes. He had lipstick on his lips. She

used her thumb to wipe the lipstick.

“Better.” He bit his lower lip and pecked her lips again.

“You’ll do amazing!” She was lost till it clicked.

“These are the big fish and what if they see makeup as something too childish.” She gnawed on her lip and this time he used his thumb to rub her lips.

“Alora Moremi can do anything and you are graduating with honours from a top school.”

“Okay fate makes everything work. Go through it and get back to me.”

“Lora?” She looked up at him.

“I like being your teammate than being your rival.” She grinned. An actual grin and he felt his growing.

“Me too darling.” She used his endearment on him and she chuckled. Of course his pride was growing. She didn’t use his first name and opted for a pet name.

“Are thawing sweetheart?”

“I hate you.” He lowered his head to kiss her again.

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At Austin’s house, Alora sat on the high stool with her hair tied up as she bit the pen she chastised herself against that as she watched him read her proposal. He was the business man here and she was just starting and as much as she didn’t like being helped, his was appreciated. She watched the way his eyes squinted and formed creases at the corner of his eyes and how his pink lips were in a

grim line. She picked the wine glass and downed it. What if it wasn't up to par? She got up nervously and she walked closer to his side to see which page he was on. His hand easily slid around her waist.

“Relax.”

“You're silent.”

“I'm still reading it.” She sighed and picked his glass to finish his wine for him.

“Slow down sweetheart.” He pecked her lips as she held the glass with the other hand.

“Well it's making me nervous.”

“I thought nothing scared you.” She stepped out of his grasp and released a sigh.

“You're already established and right now I'm just Alora Moremi who is going to be a highest honour graduate from Princeton University in a few months. Regardless of my perfect G.P.A and intense projects I've worked on, how can you trust me with half a million?”

“Alora you have a solid business proposal, you're

fretting over nothing.”

She waved her hand in the air in a way that was new to Austin.

“Are you saying that because you’re my boyfriend?”

“Actually no. Alora this is solid and if I was an investor I would run with it, knowing it will also fatten my pockets in the long run. As you just noted, make-up is the new in thing for women. There are always different brands to choose from and yours caters for women of colour who usually react to other make-up brands made by countries outside Africa. Same goes for your long term plan of expanding into the skin care industry by using indigenous fruits like Morula. Alora this is brilliant and you are nervous because you’ll be pitching to a panel.”

“I hate patriarchy.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Then take on the world sweetheart.” She shook her head and smiled. She walked over to the counter to refill the glass.

“You’re drinking a tad too much today Lora. What do

you need liquid courage for?” She paused.

“Who said I need courage?”

“Why do you want to dull your senses with alcohol?”

“Answer my question.”

She took a sip and swirled the berry red liquid in the glass. Was she really trying this out? It seemed like a bad idea but if she doesn't face her fears then when? She hated to admit that her sister was right. They didn't have to have sex. He was not even forcing her. She walked to where he was, his shrewd eyes on her.

“Al-“ she shut him with a kiss. It was unsure at first but she didn't stop, she placed the glass down on the counter.

He took control of the kiss and pulled her onto his lap. His hand settled on her thigh as she opened her mouth wider and he moved his face back to look at her.

“Is this why you need the liquid courage?” He asked with a grin.

“What a way to ruin a moment Robert.” Austin rubbed her chin and kissed her nose then her cheek before he licked her lips and she didn’t complain.

“I see what you’re doing Alora.” She got comfortable on his lap, her heart racing a bit.

“What am I doing?” He placed his thumb on her lips and he used it to rub her inner lip before he put her thumb in her mouth. She was confused at what she was supposed to do with his thumb in her mouth.

“Suck it, sweetheart.” Austin saw the goosebumps on her skin and her confused eyes followed by the glare that was meant to scare him but as usual he got hard. Patience. He can still jerk himself off. It took her a whole minute before she actually started sucking his thumb and he smiled kissing the top of her head. They hadn’t even taken things that far and he knew what girl his girl was.

“Such a good girl.” He said and her face went pink. He slowly took out his thumb and rubbed her lips.

“I’m patient darling. Don’t do anything you’re not fully comfortable with okay?” He kissed her

forehead and she pushed him back.

“How did I do?”

“Alora baby not everything is a competition.”

“You didn’t seem stimulated by-Fuck!”

“Baby I’m overs timulated if you want to know and I like whatever you do okay? Don’t worry your pretty little head about it.”

“Your face gives nothing away.” He took her hand and placed it on top of his pants.

“That’s how hard I am for you. The cock you always threaten to cut off is always hard for you.” He whispered in her ear. Alora went more pink. Okay she wasn’t stupid, it was eventually going to fit, okay she wasn’t seeing his cock at all but she could tell he was well, big. But would it hurt when it went in? Was she going to accommodate him?

“Lora get out of your head for minute. Please.” She blinked and moved her hand back.

“When you are ready, this cock will be all yours okay? For your maximum pleasure.” He kissed her cheek

as she slowly nodded. She wanted to close this topic now.

At the rehab centre, Hades sat down on the corner of his bed. His whole life he had been made to feel like he was worthless and he turned to drinking for comfort. Who wouldn't with a mother like his and a father like his who always told him to behave and not embarrass him in front of his business associates? He wondered how Reba was doing. He was getting better because she would get better too and they can be together with no addictions even though they will have to rethink their life choices and everything in between. For the first time, he was getting excited for the future. A future he had never envisioned before.

Austin watched Alora move her chess piece. He wanted to tell her, something he didn't want the world to know because he knew that they wouldn't understand but he wanted her to know who he was. No one clearly understood his principles. He closed his eyes and opened them then he looked at the chess board. He moved his castle and Alora gasped. How could she not see that move?

“Checkmate.”

“There is no way I'm calling you every hour. You repulse me Robert.” He chuckled. In five minutes, the game was over because he let her win.

“This victory isn't sweet, you let me win.” Alora said as she packed the chess pieces. She was still navigating her way through this intimacy thing but after she made sure the chessboard was placed away, she sat next to him on his carpet and he kissed her cheek before he breathed out. Alora was the most practical person he knew, he has known her for over a decade and he remembered that she

once saw him with him and she didn't say anything. Here she was, dating him.

"Austin?" She looked up at him and he smiled.

"I have something to tell you." She placed her head on his chest then removed it.

"My make-up is going to stain your t-shirt."

"I don't care about the t-shirt." He placed her head back on his chest and he breathed out heavily, his fingers lightly rubbed her thigh as silence filled the room.

"I just want you to know who I am." He started. She was the closest thing to happiness he has ever known.

"Okay." Alora waited for him to say more.

"Tv-" He didn't think he was going to be able to take it if Alora judges him. He closed his eyes and kissed her head, holding her small body in his arms. She didn't say anything and his heart raced. He sucked in a deep breath.

"You're still there?" He asked Alora.

“Yes. Fully awake.” He gave a low chuckle and kissed her head one last time before he opened his mouth to tell her.

“I’ve been with men before.”

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All I can say is SCHOOL! hello my oxygen tanks.

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Alora parted her lips as he waited with bated breath for her to say something. Her face didn't reveal anything.

"Alora." Alora sucked in a breath and placed her hand on his cheek. He took her hand to place it higher.

"I had suspicions. Remember the first week we met at high school?" He gave a nervous smile and she appreciated that he trusted her with his truth.

"How can I forget?" He said huskily. His world had been black and white before he met her and ever since his meeting with her, it has been splashed in colour. She had no idea she was discussed in his therapy sessions.

"You are not going to ask me to explain?" She shook her head.

"I have a gut feeling that you are going to tell me more." He breathed out and kissed her hand.

"Well I have had relations with both men and women." She nodded. He was experienced as they come.

"Do you identify yourself under the rainbow spectrum perhaps?" She asked. Her voice a bit unsure because she didn't want to come off as

judging him.

"I don't have a label for who I am. Reason being is I'm attracted to people, their minds, their souls and everything that makes them. Their heartbeats and their odd character traits. I don't see gender. I haven't been using a label and this is my truth. I don't need a label to understand who I am. I can't identify myself with one." Alora smiled. Okay she understood but she wasn't done.

"Am I allowed to ask questions?" He nodded. He still didn't let go of her hand.

"Uhm how many men have you been with in the past?"

"Two." She nodded. She wasn't jealous or anything.

"Have y-" she breathed out.

"Looked at other people since I have been with you?" He completed the sentence for her and she nodded. Her cheeks heating up.

"No. I'm monogamous and Alora, I'm attracted to you."

"Looks or brain?"

"Both. Equally. You're my perfect match." She nodded. That meant he loved her. In his weird way since he won't tell her he loves her.

"So, I hope I'm not prying too much but were you a uhm.." he laughed. She didn't have to tread around him like he was fragile glass that can be broken.

"Alora you can ask anything you want without being scared to hurt my feelings." She breathed out.

"Uhm top o-or bottom?" He grinned and rubbed her lower lip with his thumb.

"I think that's for you to find out for yourself sweetheart." She shuddered.

"What do you mean?" He raised an eyebrow.

"You're not dumb sweetheart. You know exactly what I mean." He moved his thumb and her pink tongue darted out to wet her lips.

"How many people know?"

"You, my therapist and the guys I have been with." He said and she looked at him with question.

"Alora you're the only person other than James, my therapist who would understand. I know that the world would never understand my truth and would try to put labels on me to that I truly have never defined myself with. I am attracted to people and not gender. That is my truth." She placed her head on his shoulders. He knew she would understand, he knows her. He trusts her enough to reveal parts of himself that aren't public knowledge even though the spotlight is starting to shine on him for his smart moves at his mother's company. His mother doesn't even know and he told her? She wasn't crying was she? She blinked the tears back. She was going to ruin her make up and girls like her don't cry. Girls like her are not overly emotional.

"Thank you for trusting me with this." He nodded and looked down at her.

"I would do it again in a heartbeat." Alora came to the conclusion that he loved her he just didn't want to admit it to himself or to her. He will soon. Eventually. He wrapped his arms around her and they basked in the silence as their personal

thoughts took over.

Reba sat at her desk frustrated. Okay she didn't need a fix. She was getting clean and she made so much progress. She got up from the chair and sat on the bed as she pushed her braids back. She should sleep. That will take the edge off but if she sleeps, she is going to end up sleepwalking and she was going to wake up tired. She breathed out. She didn't have a choice at all. She got under covers. It was better not to switch off the lights anyway.

At Francistown, Zara sat on the edge of the bed as she fixed her hair bonnet with her free hand while her other hand held the cellphone. Her mother's phone was ringing. She closed her eyes and hoped

she wasn't going to hurt her mother.

"Hello Zara. Are you okay?"

"Hi mom. Yes. I-" she stopped midway.

"What is it?" She had contemplated telling her but she wanted to.

"I saw him." Silence.

"Who?"

"My brother." She said with a low voice even though she was alone in the bedroom and Mooketsi was working late.

"Zara you have no busines-"

"He is my brother. They are so alike. I-I just want to get to know him. He doesn't even know I exist." Zara long knew about him. She found out when she was ten and had always hoped her father would introduce them but he never did and her mother had said she didn't want to hurt Zara. Zara didn't have to know him. She didn't use his last name that was why it was easy for no one to even have an inkling about her father.

"Zara let sleeping dogs lie."

"I will have to see him. For more than a decade I kept this to myself. My own brother doesn't even know I exist. He doesn't."

"He will blame you for his parents divorce do you want that?"

"It's not my fault. Mama I wasn't born, it's not my fault my father decided to cheat on his wife. It's not."

"He will blame you still and you'll be crushed. Zara don't do that. There has been peace and I would like to keep the peace."

"But he's my brother."

"And I'm your mother. I raised you while he grew up with money and everything he can want and need."
Zara breathed out.

"Okay. I understand. Bye."

"Bye and I hope we never have this talk again."

"Ee mma." She hung up. She was going to tell him though. Whatever he does with the information was

going to be up to him. She peeled the blankets off and got undercovers. She switched off the lamp but kept her eyes wide awake as she thought of the perfect time to tell him.

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Alora rolled her eyes at him as he refilled her wine glass.

“If you continue, this is the last time I’m here.”

“I know you don’t mean it.” She had decided to play

music in the background as they played scrabble in the lounge. She wasn't even aware of the time. She loved him and although it was a truth she was going to admit soon enough to him, she loved his company and how he allowed her to set him on fire because of course she was a fire and she had never saw the need to be more quiet or to put a leash on her personality to accommodate a man. He took in a stride. He was her soulmate. She deduced as she pursued her lips and put her glass to her lips.

“What are you thinking of?”

“How to beat your ass.”

He arched his eyebrow as a smile broke out on his lips and she picked the deck of cards to throw in his face.

“Stop smiling.” He picked the card and placed them back on the deck.

“You are so violent Lora.”

“Am I?”

“And I wouldn't have you any other way. Come

here.” She placed her cards face down on the table and folded her arms. He had no right to command her like that. Austin watched her fight her thoughts before she glared at him as she reluctantly moved closer. He knew his girl. He was always spot on. Was she going to admit it to herself that she loves being dominated inside the bedroom or was it up to him to show her? He picked her up and placed her on her lap as she gave her that cat like glare. His eyes moved to her lips and he moved to her eyes, he watched her eyes dilate and her tongue dart out to wet those pink lips of hers.

“You’re spending the night?” His voice caressed her and she shivered. The heels were long discarded but her makeup was still in place. His large hand traced her thighs and she placed her hand on top of his.

“As long as we’re not doing anything.” He grinned.

“It’s a yes?” She looked around his house. It was clean and big and they don’t have to share a bed.

“We are not sharing a bed right?”

“We are.” She tilted her head.

“As long as you don’t touch me.”

“Your demands are exhausting, get out of your head baby. We won’t do anything unless you decide to seduce me and the chances of that happening are absolutely zero.” Her lips settled into a grim line.

“You’re basically I saying can’t seduce you and will fail at such miniature task?”

“Alora, you keep forgetting that I know you.” She shifted on top of him and she paused as her eyes widened.

“What the hell Robert?” He laughed, his hands wrapping around her waist.

“You do so little to seduce me and that happens.”

“The minute I glare at you, your cock is supposed to shrivel up and die.”

“You have no idea how those glares turn me on. No idea.”

“You’re sick in the head.”

“Am I?”

“Yes.” She yawned and looked at him.

“Stay on your side of the bed and I will stay on mine. Got it?”

“Do I look like I follow your rules?”

“Robert I will fucking kill you.”

“I like your hyperboles.”

She groaned and he laughed as he kissed her neck. Softly. Gently. She relaxed into his body and he used his hands to fix her shirt collar. Alora thought about it. She didn't bring extra clothes. She'll have to change in the bathroom. No man has seen her naked and she was going to keep it that way. She wasn't that drunk too. Just a little buzzed but she can work it out.

“Let me take you to bed.”

“Let me finish my glass of wine.” She extended her hand to get the glass and she downed it in one go.

“That's enough for the night.”

“Will you always do that?”

“Do what?”

“Take me to bed?”

“Yes.”

“Always?” She yawned as she looked at him getting on his feet with her in his arms.

“Of course sweetheart.” She smiled and settled into his chest as her eyes fluttered close.

Austin saw that little smile and it tugged at his heart strings. The alcohol finally got to her and she was out like a light bulb. He kissed her forehead.

“You’re so out of it sweetheart. I know you’ll threaten me in the morning because I got you out of your uncomfortable clothes.” She released a soft sigh. She was out.

“And your makeup. I don’t think I have the right products for those but I’ll try.” He kissed her forehead and he walked up the stairs to his bedroom.

The following morning

Zara sat at her vanity table as she got ready for the day as her husband fixed his tie. She placed her makeup brush on the table and faced Mooketsi.

“I want to go back to Gaborone. For the weekend.”

“Why?” She faced the mirror and took a deep breath.

“I have to see my father.” Mooketsi paused. What father? He knew Zara was raised by a single mother and he met her mother. There was no father in the picture and Zara had said so.

“What father?”

“I lied Mooketsi. I have a father, he wasn’t around much but he paid maintenance and passed whenever he could.”

“Wait! Wait! You lied?”

“I had to. My mother doesn’t want anyone to know

and even though I want to go see him, I feel like I'm betraying my mother but I have done almost everything for her, I have to do this for me."

"Who is your father?" Zara breathed out.

"Fred. Fred Hudson." Mooketsi cursed under his breath. That explains why his wife was looking at Hades at the dinner and he had to pretend he didn't see that because he didn't want to come out as jealous. Hades was her fucking brother.

"That means that Hades is-"

"Yes." Zara concluded.

"Can you got with me, you don't necessarily have to meet my father I-"

"I have met your father my love and he is not a nice guy."

"I know."

"I'll go with you." He walked over to the vanity table and placed a hand on her shoulder. She placed hers on top. Grateful.

"Thank you."

He nuzzled her neck and she giggled.

“We have to go to work. Stop!”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Alora woke up. Her body feeling a bit cold. Her eyes scanned the room and the unfamiliar bed she was in. Everything was still a bit groggy and it took her minutes for her brain to be fully functional. She sat up straight and looked at the blankets she was in and how the room smelled so male. Even the sheets and the comforters she was under. She looked down at herself and saw the crumpled up shirt she was wearing. She paused, her finger on her lips as she tried to retrace her steps on how she got here and was wearing this particular piece of clothing. The door opened and in walked the six foot five man in his suit and cuff links shining. He smiled.

“Morning my fiery dreamer.” She glared at him without saying a word. Okay, she might not be a morning person.” She rubbed her eyes and then touched her face before she looked at her fingers. She looked at the white pillowcases, no makeup stains on them. She licked her lips. No lipstick on them. She glared at a put together Austin.

“I don’t remember changing clothes.” She folded her arms, pushing her breasts up as they peaked out of the half buttoned shirt she was wearing. Austin’s eyes moved to her breasts and she followed his eyes. She groaned as she fully buttoned the shirt and placed her hands on either side of her.

“My face is up here. Robert look at me!”

“Honey I am.” He undid his tie a bit to breathe. Fuck!

“You did this?” She shrieked and her face blanched.

“I am so going to kill you!” And that was her lunging out of the bed to try and attack him but she stopped midway as the shirt rode up her body, revealing her juicy ass and her lace panties. She groaned and pulled it down frustrated.

“I hate you Robert!” He walked closer and held her wrists.

“You’re beautiful when you wake up.” His cologne invaded her senses but even if he was good smelling she wasn’t relenting.

“You should have woke me to get dressed myself.”

“You were out like a light bulb. For what it’s worth, I’m not really sorry.” He watched her roll her eyes and he chuckled. He kissed her lips but she didn’t open her mouth for him.

“Kiss me.”

“No.”

“Alora.” He saw the goosebumps on her skin and how she softly parted her lips for him.

“You’re being such a good girl for me.” He whispered on her lips before he kissed her and he used one hand to hold her wrists up over her head. His other hand settled on the small of her waist, it was itching to go lower but she might do good on her promises and cut his eyes out with her nails.

She kissed him back and he tried his luck and his hand landed on her ass. He squeezed it and she moaned in his mouth. She broke the kiss and looked up at him. She was going into her head and overthinking things again. He let go of her wrists and rubbed her bottom lip.

“There is breakfast downstairs. I can leave the car for you and let the driver come pick me up. Morning sweetheart.” He pecked her lips and she just looked at him.

“My clothes?”

“In my wardrobe.” He pulled her closer till she was flush against him.

“Your shirt is going to be wrinkled.” She said softly as she placed a hand in his chest in an attempt to push him off but she stopped and let it linger there.

“Get ready and have breakfast with me. You can change into another one of my shirts.” He kissed her nose and she blinked.

“I like them better when they’re on your body.” He let her go and winked at her before he walked out.

Alora pushed back her hair. Did he have combs? A hair straightener? She straightened her hair all the time she didn't have it plaited because the curls were unruly and she didn't like struggling. She hugged herself as she smiled. She should make the bed and get ready.

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[06/02, 19:44] : REBORN

78

Alora tried to use her hands to straighten her hair. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair was a mess and she hated that. She buttoned up

the shirt she was wearing making sure her breasts weren't exposed to his greedy eyes and she looked at his slides. She hated not wearing heels that gave her confidence and her bare face? No wonder she wasn't such a morning person. She slid her size four feet in his size ten slides and covered her face. This was embarrassing her. She didn't want to even pick up her phone because it was already embarrassing that they thought she did stuff with him, stuff she didn't even do and would never think she would do with him. She finally walked out of the bedroom and passed a few rooms as she walked down the stairs. She headed to the kitchen where she found him on his laptop and a mug of black coffee besides him.

“Finally.”

“You're working.”

“Have a seat Lora.” He closed his laptop and she folded her arms.

“You cooked?”

“I'm not that useless. Unless you're referring to your

-“

“Don’t Robert! I am still angry at you for getting me naked while I was asleep.”

“Well you’re going to be very angry for a long time honey.” He got up and walked over to the island where he picked up the plate and placed it in front of her. He walked over to the coffee machine as well and placed a mug underneath it. The smell of the coffee filled the kitchen and she looked at her plate. She picked the fork and knife as she cut through his version of a healthy burger. She brought the fork to her lips just as he placed her coffee next to her plate. He kissed her forehead.

“Your coffee just the way you like it.”

“See. You don’t need a woman who can’t cook. Cooking is not a gender role but a basic life skill.”

“One you don’t possess sweetheart but I’ll take 5e compliment.”

“Fuck you Robert!”

“Such a foul mouth in the morning?” He chuckled as

he took his seat and watched her eat. With her messy hair while she was wearing his shirt.

“Do you want kids?” He asked and she shook her head.

“No.”

“I want five.” Her eyes widened.

“You’re such a narcissist and how would you be able to love kids?”

“Five is a challenge, I like challenges and maybe. A big maybe I might believe in that fake notion of love yes?”

She shrugged.

“I don’t want any.”

“Why?” She picked her coffee and went silent as she sipped on it.

“I don’t think I’ll give them the right environment. Mothers are usually soft women and I don’t possess that soft quality in me. I call Emory a fucking goblin.” He chuckled.

“I think it’s cute.”

“My step mother thought it was weird at first and I refused to hold Emory when she was a baby because babies sense energy and I think she was going to know I didn’t connect with her. I think I loved her when she was then able to fully talk and understand what I’m saying.” He smiled.

“Why are you smiling?”

“You love your sisters and you think you won’t be able to love a child?”

“I can’t even stomach having sex so...” he raised an eyebrow.

“You think we are going to have sex? Just sex?”

“Who said I’m going to have sex with you? Calm your ego.”

“We’ll see baby.” She faked a gag and he laughed as she smiled into her coffee mug before she fixed her face into what she deemed her normal look. He was supposed to run now, run that she doesn’t want kids or even possess half the qualities good women

have. But he didn't. He smiled at her and they even discussed the day's business affairs with her pointing the bread knife in his direction and him shrugging her off as if she didn't threaten violence. Before she knew it, she was done eating and he was on his feet ready to go to work.

"I called my driver, I'll leave the car keys with you and the house keys." He kissed her forehead with his hands on her shoulders. Holding her there.

"Will I see you later today?" He asked and she shook her head.

"No."

"Hmm! I'll convince you otherwise during the course of the day." She rolled her eyes at his confidence and he smiled. He heard the intercom and looked at her.

"I have to go. Don't miss me too much."

"Get over yourself."

He laughed and kissed her one last time before he walked out of the kitchen and she spun around in

her chair. She breathed out. She had to go home and continue working on her proposal then check on the builders at her mother's house.

She took the plates to the sink and she washed them, dried them before she found the cabinets the plates were supposed to be in. She was clean and all she had to do was get dressed in her own clothes, get her stuff and get going. What was she going to do at home? Sneak in? She shook her head. She is not a damn teenager and then there was Reba. She was going to ask questions. God! She walked up the stairs to his bedroom and she unbuttoned the shirt. She looked at her reflection in the mirror. Half naked with only her panties on. Porn stars were definitely sexy, knowing what to do and how to move and then there was here. Sexual skills close to zero. She face palmed.

At the office, Austin placed the report on his mother's desk and she looked up at him.

"Did you thoroughly go through it?" She asked. Of course he did. He woke up at four fucking a.m to make coffee and work on the report till seven and now he was at the office at nine.

"Of course." She looked at it and leaned on her chair.

"When do I see her? Set up a dinner date."

"She is busy."

"Is she?"

"I would appreciate if you don't push."

"But I want to see the woman who has you this besotted. Setup a dinner date this Friday at 8pm. Have a good day Austin." There it was. There was no room for discussion.

He walked out and took out his phone to send her a quote he remembered from her favourite book. She texted back and sent more quotes before she out of the blue asked a question which he answered immediately as he walked into his office.

Alora pushed the seat forward and she made sure her footing was right. She had gotten rid of the heels as she started the car and the garage door opened. She shouldn't dent his car, she didn't even have the money to fix it with everything going on. She slowly reversed and once she was out, the door closed. She pressed the button to open the gate as well and she slowly reversed. Now that was done, she connected her phone to the car Bluetooth as the gate closed shut. She swerved off into the road.

Twenty minutes later, she was mid traffic when an officer stopped her. She rolled her eyes, she was driving at the speed limit, she didn't overtake some of these shitty ,ale drivers who thought the road was theirs. She lowered the volume as she drove off the road and stopped. She rolled down her windows as the officer took out his notebook.

“Can I see your driver’s license? Wa it se gore o tlhodia batho mo traffic with your volume?”(do you know you’re volume is too loud?) Alora half rolled her eyes as she picked her handbag and took out her wallet to take out her license. He took it and he smiled looking at her. Even her license photo was beautiful, he read out her name.

“Alora. Beautiful name.” She didn’t reply as she took her licence back.

“Is that all officer?” He paused. Her voice was icy and he expected something sweet.

“I might charge you for loud music. A pretty lady like you doesn’t deserve a charge.”

Alora rolled her eyes bored and glared at him as he tried not to look scared. He swallowed.

“Can I have your number?”

“Is. That. All. Officer?” Her tone more icy and unwavering. He quickly nodded.

She rolled up the windows and joined the road. He rubbed his head, watching the car worth six years of

his annual salary untaxed join the road. He licked his lips. No wonder people didn't date independent women. They acted like men and wanted the respect men got. He didn't see a ring in her finger. She probably chases men away with her attitude and they usually end up miserable and alone then resort to Ben 10s. People wanted humble women who smiled and had respect and were sweet. He assured himself with that as he faced the traffic and continued with work.

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[06/02, 19:44] : REBORN

By the time Alora arrived home, she was tired. As someone who has a driver's license and never really put it to good use, driving home was tiring. Austin should come get his car. She pressed the intercom and the gate slid open. She walked back to the car and drove inside the yard as the gate closed. She leaned back on the driver's seat and groaned. Her hair was messy, her clothes weren't fresh. She calmed herself down and got out of the car, taking her bag and the file that had corrections she needed to work on ASAP. She closed the door and walked to the main door. Reba opened immediately.

"Ah! You took my advice and spent the night. Wise." Alora rolled her eyes.

"I was too drunk and I didn't take your advice." Reba laughed.

"You smell like men's shower gel and body lotion."

"Rebante not now." Alora had to admit that his shower gel and body lotion was much more expensive than hers, that said a lot. Even his

afters have that she found in the cabinets and his cologne. He had taste. She had to admit.

“See how nice it is to come home smelling his products after a very good night.”

“I was drunk!”

“Did you vomit?”

Alora fake gagged.

“No.” Her cheeks heated. Maybe she did. She wouldn’t remember but she didn’t. He would have mentioned that in conversation.

“Let me go take a shower and get back to work.”

“I need all the details after that shower. Toodles sis.”

“I hate all of you.”

“Hmm. Lies but bye.” Alora dragged herself to her bedroom and she leaned against the door the minute she closed it. Everything was still in place. No one touched anything. Good. She likes that and wanted that.

Reba smiled but her smile soon turned into a sad one. She wanted to ask Austin about Hades. How he was doing and if he was allowed visitors back in rehab. She doubted they did though because the purpose is to take him out of his old life so he can rehabilitate in a new environment. She rubbed her eyes so the tears won't fall. Good thing was that her mother asked her if it was okay to see the new therapist on Friday. A few days from now. She was nervous and all but she hoped it was going to be okay. She walked back to her bedroom and took out her laptop to search her new therapist. She typed in Dr Violet Carson. She smiled that she had the choice to approve or disapprove her next therapist. She read up on the thesis Dr Violet did for her Master's. It was heavily on about depression and how it interconnected with PTSD. That was some heavy research. She also had a dissertation for her PhD about the brain and how it uses drugs, still heavily related to trauma and everything. Reba read up on that. She smiled, feeling as if Dr Violet had

been writing about her in her dissertation. Okay. She can try her on Friday and see how it goes. She didn't read about what her topic for her doctorate degree was but she was a very learned woman who had made strides in the psychology field. She closed her laptop. Maybe by the time Hades comes back, she will be a better woman. One who is intent on living and not letting her past hold her back in the worst of ways. There was hope for the future.

Alora pushed her freshly flat ironed hair back as she went through her proposal, adding the few details Austin noted. Her fingers skimmed down his handwriting and she smiled. She was oddly turned on by his handwriting, how his letters flowed on the page, those were some of his ideas and he had no problem helping her. Thinking of Austin, she picked up her phone just as there was a door knock.

“Come in.”

Reba walked in with biscuits and juice.

“I’m here for the tea. Technically I have juice but you have to tell me what happened.” She sat on the mat and Alora pushed her hair back again.

“We played. Cards and chess.” Reba scrunched her nose.

“Chess? On a date? You guys are so fucking weird.”

“Shut up!”

“Just saying.” Alora looked at her phone. She placed it down seconds later.

“We had drinks, I couldn’t do it okay? I-I can’t bring myself to do some stuff.” She finally said and Reba nodded.

“Your intimacy issues are deep.”

“Do you blame me?” Reba paused.

“You never really talk about yourself and your needs, even growing up.”

“I’m okay. I’m fine.” Reba shook her head.

“Alora, you are always there for me. Even mikes

away you were there. You listen without judging me, I can still do the same.” Alora sighed.

“I’m okay Reba. Just okay. I love you and I do that because I love you. Every piece of you.” Reba smiled.

“So you guys didn’t even try foreplay?”

Alora’s face heated.

“No.” But he was big. She said in her head. He had placed her hand on his dick and he was big. Reba sipped her juice watching Alora zone out and become more pink. Something did happen but she didn’t want to spill. She got a biscuit and bit into it. Her little sister didn’t know it but to her, it wasn’t a man who saved her. It was Alora. She saved her without knowing it and she had so much love to give beyond that exterior of hers that her brothers didn’t quite understand but loved nevertheless.

“We didn’t do anything.” Alora said suddenly. Okay he kissed her and placed his hand on her, he saw her half naked when she was out. What could be more embarrassing than that.

“You’ll be fine. Eventually you’ll be fine, you love him so it might take months but you’ll give in to him sexually.” Alora shook her head.

“How do you give your body away just like that?”

“Rora, sex is a fifty fifty thing. You both experience pleasure wa bona? It’s a give and take and it doesn’t involve one party. Once you do have sex, you’ll see. Trust me.” Alora shrugged it out.

“Okay topic closed.”

“That was fast.”

“It’s a very uncomfortable topic to talk about.” Her phone beeped and she read the message.

Mr Alora: My mother made dinner plans for Friday. 8pm. I’ll pick you up Lora.

She placed her phone down.

“Mother has found me a new therapist.” Alora’s ears perked up.

“Really? What’s his or her name? Is the therapist the

right person to deal with drug addiction? Will you be okay?” Reba smiled.

“I googled her. She sounds okay.”

“Give me the name so I can make my own research. Your current therapist was the pits right?” Reba released a heavy sigh.

“She made it all about how I’m not being fair. That I had everything a child could wish for and I still took drugs. That spoiled kids did that for attention.” Reba rubbed her eyes.

“How can I open up about why I’m taking drugs when I hear that in every session and she then tries to tell me to stop. How was she even a licensed therapist?” Alora got up from her desk and sat down on the floor next to her sister.

“You don’t have to go through that with a therapist anymore. We’ll keep on looking for therapists till you find the one for you. If the next one isn’t okay, I’ll ask Austin to recommend his.” Reba nodded and frowned.

“Austin has a therapist?”

“Yes. I wouldn’t say a therapist now since the man has been with him since he was a teenager till now, I assume that they are kind of friends now. Probably the only one who knows how to cut off Austin’s big ego.” Reba chuckled.

“I love you.”

“I love you. Don’t forget that.” Reba hugged Alora. It all seemed like it was going to be okay.

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A FEW DAYS LATER

[06/02, 19:44] : REBORN

At Dr Carson's office, Reba intertwined her fingers together and looked at her new therapist. She had that kind look on her face. It was pronto going to be hard or was she good on paper but still going to judge her?

"I'm Rebantle Moremi. Uhm as you know, from the tabloids. The washed up drug addict model." Violet's eyes softened as her forehead creased.

"Rebantle you're beautiful." That was off topic and Reba flushed, even though her skin didn't give anything away. It was such a long time since a stranger complimented her beauty and she just gave the dr a grateful smile.

"And hi, I'm Dr Carson but you can call me Violet if you want. If you're comfortable with it." Reba nodded. Another instance where she was given a choice and she decided to use her dr's first name.

"I won't lie and say I never keep up with the tabloids. I do and Rebantle you're not liable to use such a label on yourself. You're not a drug addict, I would

prefer to say you use drugs to cope with something that you don't want to talk or think about. Am I right?" She nodded.

"You don't talk much do you?" Violet asked softly and Reba wanted to scream that she hadn't had to use her voice against people. She had to listen to people who were supervisors or older than her, people who had power and her silence had been golden. Only it killed her more and more till she wanted to be free of her thoughts. Only Alora could listen and laugh or give her frown that had her smiling. Alora had some nice facial expressions even if 90% of them spelt murder and menace.

"It's okay, you don't have to talk but I'll be willing to listen and for your peace of mind, I won't tell your mother about what we discuss." Reba released a sigh of breath she didn't know she was even holding in. That first therapist reported everything and yet again, her rights had been trampled on and she always kept silent as the former therapist prattled on.

"You are an adult and next year you'll be 26?" Reba

nodded.

“How long have you been using?” Reba’s wide eyes that were more like her father’s in that instant were glued on the doctor. She was gentle and her voice wasn’t exactly soft but her actions were and she gave a grateful smile.

“A few months after 18.” She said quietly and Violet strained her ears to hear that. She noted it down. Almost 8 years of using. Fuck! There was a lot to be uncovered here and she had all the time in the world to help her. From what she already had, Reba was a few months clean, behavioural therapy was underway and she figured there was more to just taking drugs. People don’t take that for fun. Same goes for alcohol. It’s never for fun, it’s always to escape some sort of fight you have in your head. More like you don’t want to listen to the voices in your head and you drown them out only to use that drowning out method over and over again as they get louder each time.

“Got it. Tell me about you. Anything.” Reba hesitated and Violet noted that.

“I have two sisters.” Violet smiled.

“I have three sisters.” Reba loosened up a bit.

“They are younger than me, one is seven and the other is 23 going onto 24 next year.”

“That’s so nice. Do you have a close relationship with them?” Reba nodded. A bit more confident on this topic. It was a safe topic. A common one.

“It’s Emory, the youngest and Alora. The oldest.” Violet wanted Reba to trust her, it started small and you don’t get trust overnight.

“I love sister bonds. I have close relationships with mine too. I have an older sister and two younger ones.” Reba smiled. She wasn’t the only one exposing herself here.

“Alora has been there for me.” She said softly. Violet smiled. It was so sweet, it gave her Daisy vibes who has been there for all three of them.

“Alora is the smartest and she has been there for me.”

“I like Alora too.” That had Reba laughing and

Violet's eyes lit up. She was laughing.

"I don't think a lot of people like her, you wouldn't if you met her. I love her and understand her but even my brother's wife is scared of her." Violet frowned.

"You would only understand if you meet her. She is just, her and I think she is still surprised that I am able to love her and her boyfriend is able to love her."

"No you're being the therapist." Violet rasped playfully and Reba's eyes widened.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry." Violet took note of that.

"Don't be. I'm not offended, I was saying it playfully. This is a free space okay? Whatever you want to say, say it." Reba nodded slowly.

"I'm more than drugs." Reba said quietly.

"That you are. No one is defined by their weakness and they shouldn't even be." Violet reassured. Reba nodded. It was going to be okay, she told herself as she placed her hands on her lap.

Alora sat at her desk as she googled Austin's mother for the fifth time since he said they had a dinner going on. She closed her eyes remembering all the facts and Austin, someone kill his traitorous soul, refused to tell her about his mother. Minor details and all. She hated him. Theoretically anyway. In actual fact she loved that narcissist and it was just as surprising to hear him say he wants 5 kids when he grew up being the only child and she grew up being the daughter of a side chick. She licked her lips. Even though it happened years ago, she could remember her father's family calling her mother a whore for sleeping with a married man and her being labelled to turn out the exact same way. Of course she read the letters her mother had left and she kind of understood in a way but she vowed to never have kids. Have them in the hands of strangers in case she died. She was lucky Su was a good woman otherwise her life would have been a

living hell and she would have turned out well. She worked till her fingers bled because she wanted to be secure, she wanted to make it and not having kids was a bonus in the sense that she didn't want to be held down or even have her kids have a spiteful mother like her. She leaned back. Was Reba right? Did Austin love her? Reba was the only one who fully loved her as she was. Spiteful, mean, a bitch as many men have called her out at school. Someone as shallow as her who strived for perfection and if she didn't get it she wanted to die every time. Could Austin, a man who was vehemently opposed to the mere idea of love have fallen for her when he could have a woman who would fall at her knees and worship him like the god he was. She wouldn't tell him of course. He had such a big ego. Instead of a woman who opposed and challenged him in everything and didn't even want to sleep with him because she was scared of losing control in the bedroom and she hated having control slip out of her fingers but the same girl couldn't help it that she loved it when he controlled her intimately and figured she wanted him to

dominate her there? She face palmed. She was so complicated and wondered how he didn't get tired. Maybe he would get tired eventually. Maybe he would leave after she finally decided to have sex with him and she would be left picking up the pieces after he got the final prize from his long decade chase. A decade of chasing the ice princess whose words cut like knives and who intimidated men. She was thinking too much. She opened her eyes. She had to focus on the dinner. Just that.

A part of her wished his mother would like him. She did but even that was far fetched considering that she didn't have millions attached to her name. She had a messy childhood. The child of a side chick, whose mother died mysteriously and father died. A father who barely acknowledged her because she could destroy his marriage to a loving wife. She hated herself so bad in this instance. So fucking bad. She touched her cheek and blinked back the tears that wanted to fall but she couldn't stop them and she got up from her desk. She just walked to the door and locked it before she got inside the dark

wardrobe to cry in peace, where no one could see her weakness and use it against her. She picked her coat and screamed into it as the tears fell. Violently at that.

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[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

81

Later that day, Alora stood by her bed as she looked at the dresses on the bed. What should she wear? That was the big question. Her bedroom door opened and she turned to look at Reba who was suddenly enjoying going in and out of her room.

“Date with the mother in law?” Alora rolled her eyes.

“How was therapy?”

“I like my new therapist.”

“That’s good to hear, if you like her there will progress and progress means you are getting better. I’m proud of you.”

Reba smiled.

“Thank you. Pick the red one, it shows your curves more.” Reba said.

“I don’t think it’s appropriate.” Reba folded her arms.

“I have a few dresses I haven’t worn. From my modelling days. I don’t think they’ll fit you though, you’re a little too curvy for them.” Alora shrugged it out and picked out the midnight blue dress.

“I think I’ll go with this one. I have the heels to go along with this.” She held it to inspect it. She has worn it once and never saw it appropriate to wear it again.

“You’re the fashion guru and all here.”

“I will get ready at four.”

“Yes ma’am.” Reba laughed and Alora lightly nodded.

Fred Hudson’s building was so intimidating as Zara walked in. She looked at the receptionist who was so clean and well organised while Zara herself was her husband’s PA. Regardless of the money her father threw at them, she always wanted to make something out of herself even if it was a job that made her earn way less than the monthly cheques that were deposited in her bank account just for having the same DNA as the man who ran all of this.

“Good afternoon. I would like to speak to Mr Hudson.” She said and the PA raised a well trimmed and filled eyebrow, her fake lashes moving up as well.

“Did you make an appointment?”

“Unfortunately not.”

“There is no way I can help you.” The lady looked down at Zara who donned a simple dress and some sandals, her braids tied into a ponytail and her face bare of any makeup.

“It’s really important I speak to him.” The woman shook her head.

“It would be advisable for you to leave the building before I ask security to escort you out.” Zara bit her nail. She didn’t want to expose her identity. No. No. That would be bad but she had to talk to her father. Her husband drove them here and they will be staying at her in-laws house. That would also allow her to ask Reba a few questions about her brother. General questions really. The receptionist picked up her phone.

“Security, there is th-“

“Tell Mr Hudson that Zara has to see him. It’s important.” The receptionist paused as she looked at Zara. Obviously her boss didn’t know her did he? She hung up and dialled her boss’s PA.

“Hello? Tell Mr Hudson that a certain Zara wants to see him.” She hung up and waited. Zara looked at her toes and then breathed in and out. In and out. She was going to be okay. The phone rang, dragging her out of her thoughts as the receptionist looked at her as she spoke over the phone.

“Got it.” The receptionist moved from her desk and looked at Zara.

“Mr Hudson has only ten minutes to see you. I’ll escort you up.” They walked towards the elevator and with every step, Zara’s nerves coiled and she clasped her hands together to stop the anxiety. They stepped inside and it closed, it’s movement now making her queasy. They reached to the top floor after god knew how many floors and the doors slid open. She was shown to the boss’s door and the receptionist turned on her heel. Leaving Zara to fend for herself. Zara knocked on the door.

“Come on.” His gruff voice sounded and she swallowed oh so slightly as she pushed the door open. She came face to face with the man who was her father, even though she was his illegitimate

child.

“Hi father.” She said softly and Fred just huffed.

“What do you want? More money? That can be arranged if the allowance is not enough.” She winced as if he had slapped her. She didn’t want his goddamn money. If it had been up to her, he would keep it and be a father to her. But that was a fairytale and she was old enough to understand that only Disney and children’s books deal with fairytales.

She walked over meekly to a chair and sat down, his eyes on her. Observing her. As if he was a feral cat waiting to prance on her.

“I-I want to meet Hades.” She knew she didn’t exactly need his permission but she had stayed away for so long and he was the reason she and Hades were half siblings. He laughed. A cynical kind of laughter that gave her chills and not the good kind of chills.

“Zara are you still a kid again who wanted a sibling? Do you really think he would accept you?” His eyes

fixate on her. He was a twisted man that's for sure and no wonder Hades was an alcoholic, he was raised by the man while she got glimpses of him showing up when he pleased which was once in a while. Maybe she would have turned out fucked in the head had he raised her but a part of her was grateful he didn't.

“Zara do whatever you want, as long as you don't attract media attention because dare go to the media with any stories that might tarnish my company, girl consider your allowance done for and your mother's treatment cut.” The tiny hairs on her skin raised and goose flesh was all over her skin as she nodded.

“I'm glad we have an understanding. Now disappear and remain there.” He dismissed her. She got up on her feet and said bye, in a fake cheery tone. She walked out and rubbed her arms. She didn't even ask about Hades' whereabouts but she was sure Reba would tell her right?

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[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

82

Agora walked out of her bedroom, looking elegant and regal in her blue dress and matching heels with the clutch bag safely tucked under her arm.

Mooketsi whistled and she scowled at him.

“What? My sister is a stunner.”

She shrugged it off. She didn't even have the nerve to ask why he was home because she figured out it was to visit after that every eventful dinner. In the lounge, Zara was talking to Su and both stopped talking as they took in the sight of her.

Zara breathed out, her body going very still. She was beautiful but she didn't understand why she seemed like she belonged in another universe and had this condescending aura around her. She knew her sister in law was not the nicest person on earth. She didn't say much but every time she opened her mouth, she got chills.

“Rora you look magnificent.”

“Thank you. I have a dinner date with Austin.” Her mother smiled and Zara smiled. Alora's voice was devoid of any emotion and it was interesting that she lived with people who were so expressive and open yet she was closed off.

“You are beautiful.” Alora nodded at Zara's remark. Zara figured it was going to take time for Alora to get used to her. Alora walked to the couch and sat down. The heels and the makeup adorning her beautiful features gave her the confidence she figured she was going to need for today. She was anxious and she hated being out of her depth. She hated it so so much. She sighed and took out her phone from her bag. Reba walked in a minute later

and she folded her arms.

“O n t s e m o n t l e g o r e.”(you are so beautiful)

“Thanks.”

“Are you spending the night?” Reba asked cheekily and Alora glowered at her as Reba laughed out loud.

“It’s a simple question sis.” Reba taunted and Alora had to stop herself from retaliating. Now everyone was looking at her expecting an answer.

“I’m an adult guys.” Was all she managed to say and Susan chuckled while Zara pushed her braids back and continued her conversation with Susan. The intercom sounded and Alora’s nerves spiked. He was here.

Reba did the honors of pressing the button to open the gate. She gave Alora a look and her sister evaded her eyes as she faced the black tv screen. There was a door knock a minute later and Reba opened the door. Austin held a bouquet of flowers as he looked at Reba.

“Hello Reba.”

“Hi Austin, come in. Your prickly girlfriend is inside.” Austin had to try and hide his smile. At least his friend’s girlfriend and girlfriend’s sister wasn’t scared of him anymore. She opened it wider as he walked in. He spotted Susan.

“Ah, just the woman I wanted to see. These are for you.” She looked at the flowers and smiled again. She could get used to receiving flowers like these.

“Thank you Austin. Let me go put them in a vase.” She stood up and Austin nodded at Zara who nodded back. His whole body shifted to Alora’s direction and she nearly knocked the breath out of his lungs. His face didn’t give anything away but his pulse picked up and he licked his lips as he sauntered in her direction. She held her head high like the queen she was. In his books and soon to be in everyone’s books. He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

“Good evening Lora.” He whispered as he looked down at her from hooded eyelids. Hi. She wanted to

say and brush him off but something twisted in her gut. Was it fear? Anxiety or her love for this man? He helped her up her feet and his hand easily slid around her waist. He moved closer and could smell the vanilla scents on her, fuck! If they were already intimate he would fuck her on his car seat immediately after the dinner because he was sure, she would never allow him to touch her before something as important as this.

“You’re fucking breathtaking Lora.” He heard her gasp softly and smiled. Susan walked back in while Reba and Zara kept their eyes on the couple. Reba wished she could tell Hades about the developments. Now he was looking at her as if she was his whole universe. Stars, the moon and galaxies combined. She smiled as Zara frowned. Alora looked rigid in his arms and it was weird. She hadn’t been paying attention at the family dinner because they weren’t in each other’s arms. It seemed too clinical. She looked at Reba who was smiling like a goon.

“Thank you. Can we go now?” And with that she

faced her step mother.

“I’ll be sure to bring her back. Thank you.” He bid them goodbye and walked next to Alora. He lowered his head as they walked to the door.

“I can’t wait for you yo conquer the world my fiery dreamer.” He kissed her forehead after he closed the door.

At the restaurant, Celine sat down and checked the time. Five minutes to eight and they still weren’t here. A waiter made his way to her table and she turned him back. Not yet. She was waiting for her son and his girlfriend. She lifted her eyes and she saw Austin make his way inside holding someone’s hand. Celine paused, taking in Alora’s voluptuous frame in that midnight blue dress and heels that made her taller but still short compared to Austin. She looked like some kind of perfect queen. As if nothing could shock her and that everyone around

her deserved to bow down. It was astonishing how she could see that from just one full look at Alora in person and not from the file she had on the girl. Austin pulled out a chair for her to sit before he pulled out his. Alora looked at her, her face void of any emotion and her eyes full of fire.

“Good evening Ms Mathews.” She extended her hand. Her voice wasn’t even soft. Austin’s mother looked at the hand and extended hers as they shook hands.

“Nice to meet you Alora.” Alora quickly removed her hand from Celine’s grasp and nodded.

“Likewise.”

“Mother my girlfriend Alora and Lora, that’s Celine. My mother.” Alora nodded and placed her hand on her lap. She resisted the urge to tap her heel. This woman was intimidating as fuck.

Austin held her hand from under the table and she looked at him before she faced his mother.

“Let’s order and then we can talk.” Alora didn’t know it was going to be the night that tests her limits as a

waiter made his way to their table and they placed their orders, glasses of wine to be delivered first.

Minutes later, each with a glass in hand Celine came for Alora. Guns blazing.

“So when did you guys meet?” She asked. Something she knew since she read the file.

“High school.” Alora replied as she took a sip. This felt much more like an interview. One she didn’t want to fail.

“Interesting and reconnected while you were in school?” Alora nodded and took another sip of her wine as Austin’s hand squeezed hers under the table. He was here with her.

“Yes. We had met prior during my Stanford interview.”

“You are smart. I give you that but are you wife material?” Alora nearly choked on her wine.

“I don’t strive for that. I’m my own woman Ms Mathews.” Celine raised an eyebrow.

“Men don’t like ambitious women.”

Alora tilted her head.

“Like you perhaps?” Austin’s face didn’t give anything away but he was silently cheering his girlfriend on.

“And your mother of course. It had to take her to sleep with a married man to conceive you so...”
Alora stilled and Celine smiled.

“Now, now it’s in the past. We all have a past even though yours taints you even before you join the corporate world.”

“Mother that’s enough!” Austin’s stern voice said and Celine shrugged.

“I was just getting to know your girlfriend Austin.”

Alora placed the wine down as she licked her lips, her ears ringing. She was already being judged for her mother’s sins. It wouldn’t end would it? Her vision blurred. She shouldn’t break down. She is stronger than that. She is stronger than that. She doesn’t cry. Robotically, she got up on her feet and

excused herself from the table. It took everything in her to walk normally to find the rest rooms. The minute she was inside, she walked over to the faucet as she lathered her hands with soap and scrubbed her palms with her nails. Getting rid of the dirt she has touched. She scrubbed so hard to the point of her palms burning and being red but she still scrubbed, will she ever learn? She has been here before. She has always been taunted about her mother's transgressions and how she came to this world.

Meanwhile in the restaurant Austin looked at his mother.

"I hope you're happy with yourself." He said somberly as he stood up on his feet and held Alora's clutch bag and headed in the direction she had been heading to. His mother breathed in and massaged her breast before she downed her glass of wine.

Austin opened the door and found Alora scrubbing her palms as if her life depended on it, a minute longer, she was going to make herself bleed. He placed the clutch down and held her arms.

“Lora! Lora!”

“I-I’m fine. Don’t fucking touch me, les we Austin!” He held her hands tighter and pulled her back from the sink.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t!” Her voice broke and he pulled her in, holding her tighter as she breathed out.

“I’m here. I’m here. I’m sorry mie cherie.” He whispered against her hair as she breathed out before she tried to wriggled out of his grasp but he kept her there. Iron clad.

“I didn’t tell her to sleep with a married man. I swear to God!” She started before she breathed out heavily.

“Sssh..I know you didn’t. I’m here.”

“If she was alive she would explain herself to people. I-“ he soothed her. Whispering against her hair as she held back her tears. Tears were going to

ruin her makeup.

“Everything happens for a reason but it makes me so mad that she isn’t here to atone for her sins. I’m unwanted everywhere I go.”

“I want you Lora. Baby I want you okay? I’m here.” She nodded and leaned against his back. She swallowed. Her heart beating so loud and her lips quivered.

“I wonder how it would be if she was here.”

“I’m sure you were her world.” Alora nodded. She was. Her letters said so.

“Maybe if she was here, she would want you to live like the world’s on the fire. To never look down when you walk the wire.” Austin assured her. He held her and did say anything more, waiting for her to calm down. To regain her marbles.

“I’m sorry. For the panic. I-“

“You’re human Alora. It’s okay, I’m here.” He reassured and kissed the top of her head. Her hands went limp the moment he let go of her then

turned to pull her to his chest.

“All better?” She nodded. He pecked her lips and gave her a gentle smile. She didn’t return it and looked at his chest, breaking the eye contact.

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We’ll use Saturday and Sunday to make up for the inserts I still owe. Goodnight.

[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

83

Alora with Austin. Y her side, walked out of the restroom. She didn’t want to lean into him but she

couldn't help it as he gave her one of those conceited smiles of his.

“Don't.”

He chuckled. She never stopped did she? He didn't want to spend the rest of the evening with her here in his mother's company. Celine's company upset Alora and he had to admit, he hated seeing his girl upset and her compulsions flaring. It was not a pretty sight and it took time to get her to calm down and be okay. As rigid and cold as she usually was.

They arrived at the table as Celina drank her third glass for the night. She had figured she had made a shitty move but still, no one usually challenged her.

“We'll be leaving.” Austin announced. They did not even take a seat.

“So early?”

“Well, seems like you'll call when you're ready to be nice. Yes? Have a good night mother.” Celine watched her one and only son. The heir to her millions walk away with the girl in tow. Funny thing is Alora seemed off balance and she knew she had

shook her but she didn't say a word as she downed the remainder of the glass, ignoring the pain as her eyelids went heavy. She didn't want her son to go for a woman who was similar to her in more ways than one. Her marriage had failed dismally and she had lost her second born at still birth but she never stopped working. She had never stopped wanting to go up the corporate ladder. She drowned in more work and taught her son to depend more on himself and not any other person. Not even her. She called the waiter to order her fourth glass of wine, her driver will pick her up and she will observe Alora from a distance. Maybe Alora wouldn't turn out to be like her. Maybe Austin made the right choice.

Meanwhile as the couple walked to the parking lot, Alora looked at him.

“We did have dinner, now what?”

“Have you ever been to a club before?” He asked. She paused.

“Yes and no. Usually for thirty minutes and left

before it got too loud.”

“Well, let’s see if we can grab a quick meal and head to the club yes?” Her jaw dropped.

“That’s impulsive as hell Robert.” She half screamed and he laughed.

“I want to be impulsive with you baby.”

“I’m not wearing clothes that are suited for a damn club.” She said and he chuckled.

“We can solve that.”

“How?”

“Let’s head to over to my place for a quick meal and drive to the nearest club.” She didn’t have the opportunity to berate him as he held her hand and led her to the car. Rushing her and complicating her well thought schedule. It didn’t sound so bad. The more she thought about it anyway. Maybe it would be a good idea or not.

At Susan's house, Zara knocked on Reba's door.

"Come in." She pushed the door open and found Reba with a book in her hands. A fictional books. Reba waved it in the air.

"It's all Rora's fault. She got me this last year for Christmas and I feel so guilty for not reading it especially with the holidays near." Zara nodded with a smile.

"Can I see the title?" She walked closer as Reba handed her the novel.

"A Perfect Life by Danielle Steel." Zara read out loud and Reba nodded.

"It sound fun, I'm only on page twenty. It's embarrassing but I'm trying for her, I have the time now..." she let the sentence hang in the air. She had the time was almost done with her exams, she didn't have drugs and Hades wasn't here. It was trying to read and if she didn't read, she got lost in the Marvel Universe though she wished she could watch upcoming movies with Hades. She missed

him. They were two peas in a pod, she mused. Her other half, as broken and messed up like her.

“Can I sit down?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Reba tried to keep up her warm smile as her sister in law sat on the corner of the bed. Awkward silence filled the space and she looked at Zara who placed the book down.

“Uhm I hope I’m not being too much but I have a question.”

“Ask away. I guess.”

“How is Hades like?” Out of all the questions, Reba hadn’t been expecting that one. How was Hades like?

“Hades is like a shot of whiskey, bitter and perfect.” She started off.

“It’s easy to get drunk on him, he’ll if possible alcohol could drunk on him. He was perfection, strong and put together in that strong jaw of his and those eyes of his that are hardened by life.” She said. Now her heart ached. She missed him.

“I see.” Zara could tell that Reba was saying it from

a place of love and it fascinated her, how she was a struggling addict and he was a struggling alcoholic but yet they loved each other. Weird but kind of beautiful.

“He’s in rehab now. He’ll be here by Mid March or the first week of March next year.” The yearning in her voice was clear and Zara didn’t think it was appropriate to tell her about her relation to Hades. She should tell Hades herself. When he comes back.

“You miss him?”

“A lot. I have to be patient though, it gets lonely but I have my sister to be here for me.”

“You and Alora are close?”

Reba chuckled.

“Very. She is the sweetest person ever.” Zara’s eyes widened and Reba laughed.

“Okay she is not sweet but she is a darling, she has always been like this. Hades usually told her to keep her talons to herself or else she might claw someone. They got along pretty well for people who

went off on each other for over a decade without really killing each other.” And Alora cared for Hades for her sake. Because Reba loved Hades, Alora had Austin step in to help Hades with his addiction. Just for Reba’s sake. Alora was a combination of a mean Angel and a sweet devil.

“I guess I’ll get used to her.” Zara concluded.

“Yes. You will. She isn’t all that bad as people tend to think, they just don’t understand her.” Zara nodded.

“Goodnight and thank you.”

“Night and welcome.” Zara got up on her feet and walked out of the bedroom leaving Reba with her thoughts.

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[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

84

At Austin's house, Alora had picked one of his longest shirts and it stopped just over her knees. She wanted to curse this idea to the wind for the millionth time but her boyfriend was not having it. She used his belt and belted around her waist. She stood in front of the mirror and she smoothed her hand over the shirt. It smelled like him and she looked fine.

“Can we leave now darling?”

“We should be back home early.” She countered and he raised an eyebrow. She rolled her eyes at him as she picked her clutch and hit his chest with it.

“I'm planning on making this night an enjoyable one for you.”

“We’ll see about that.” He took her hand and they walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs heading to the She wanted to have the confidence he had, clubs had never been her scene and it wasn’t surprising that her husband could go to a club. He could fake things out to fit in and she was grateful she had the version of him, the real him that no one had to opportunity to see. He opened the car door for her and she sat down. He walked to his side and she looked at her feet in her heels.

“Aren’t you scared of the media?” She asked him and he shrugged. That was them going out to a public space and that would evidently make their relationship public, not that it was a secret. The people who mattered knew. This was new territory but she breathed out. His hand settled on her knee and she cast him a scathing look.

“Calm your nerves darling and have fun.” Their level of fun was sparing and intellectually at that. This kind of fun was weird.

“So we’re seriously going to a club?”

“In Gaborone? Yes baby. Just focus on me. You do have to fear anything when you’re with me.” He squeezed her knee and she placed a hand over his as he smiled. He started the car.

Alora could hear the noise blaring as he parked his car in the parking lot. She looked at him one more time.

“We’re here now darling.” She breathed out as he got out of the car. She opened her own car door and left her clutch in the passenger seat. Was it necessary for her even take it? Not really necessary. This man was going to insist on paying for the drinks and she wouldn’t have a say over it. He slid his hand on her waist as he closed her door and locked the car.

He pushed her forward and she glared at him as he laughed.

“Let’s get going baby.”

“I hate you so much Robert.”

“You are sexy.” She rolled her eyes but her heart soared at that compliment.

“Flattery will get you nowhere Robert.”

“You’re no fun.”

“It won’t be fun with your ear cut off.” He grinned. His girl was something else altogether and he shook his head. He passed the entrance as the bouncer nodded seeing him. He spotted Grey by the top as he looked down. This was his club and well very few people knew that minor detail and what this club entails. Currently they were here for the partying and having fun part of it. He raised two fingers up as Grey acknowledged him as well. Alora wasn’t focused on what he did as her eyes scanned the area.

“How does it feel?”

“Full.” She said and she saw a free chair by the bar.

“I’m going to sit down.”

“Tell the bartender to put it on my tab.”

She removed his hands from her waist and he watched her walk away. She turned to face him and gave him the middle finger. Always such an aggressive little thing. He shook his head with a smile as he made his way to the stairs. Just for a few minutes then he can go down to catch up with his woman who was still a ball full of angry energy.

Alora sat down and she crossed her legs, her shirt rode up exposing her thighs and her legs on those high heels of hers. Her shrewd eyes scanned the area and she watched as people were free as they danced. Her logic asked her how people did it? Be so free and then throw caution to the wind. Her observation was interrupted by the bartender.

“How can I be of service today pretty lady.” His voice said and it irritated her. She found that as much as the male species annoyed her to her very core, her boyfriend’s voice was the only voice she could tolerate, it had the right huskiness, gruffness

and how deep it was. He could make it more deeper and she would get shivers from that. The simple calmness in his eyes always made her smile internally.

“I’ll have a mojito.” She didn’t turn her seat and she watched. As if it was an experiment. At the top, Austin held his tumbler that had whiskey as Grey spoke, his eyes were on Alora as he watched her murderous gaze scrutinise the people dancing. She wasn’t even listening to the songs. He watched her pick her drink and observe it for a few seconds before she used the straw to sip it.

“Austin, are you listening?” He was. He was good at multitasking. He has always been good at doing more than one thing at the same time.

Grey followed his gaze. Ah. New love. He could remember that very well, he had his wife trying to juggle being a mother to three and her recently started med school courses. She was probably reading this exact moment, after putting their youngest to bed.

Austin's gaze snapped to him.

"If I didn't need your company's services.." Grey said and Austin chuckled. Grey had to admit that the boy was a genius. And he had decided to kill two birds with one stone, bring a woman here while discussing business.

"Monday morning. Eight?" Austin finished the whiskey and he looked at Grey, waiting for confirmation.

"Monday. Eight a.m."

"See you then." He walked away and passed one of the waiters as he put his glass on the tray.

Down below, Alora felt eyes on her. She knew that burning feeling. Her heart thumped as she turned her head to face Austin. He didn't avert her gaze and he watched her from the other side of the club, she rolled her eyes and gave him her back as she ordered her second drink. Sultry music started playing and she watched as people coupled each other and danced. She turned her head and he was

still looking at her. Making no attempt to come her way. Her drink came and she drank it to fizzled her nerves. She was in a club and her boyfriend was just watching her like a hawk. When the glass was empty she stood up to her full height and smoothed down the shirt. She was rigid as fuck! What the hell was she doing? She sat down on the chair. Minutes later, Austin sat on the chair next to hers and pulled hers closer.

“I would have loved to see you dance.” He whispered and she placed her hands on his chest.

“I don’t know how.”

He moved his head closer and nipped her ear.

“I want to grind on you Alora.” Her breath hitched and her face flushed and her blood ran not in her veins. Her whole body was burning.

“G-grind?” She asked. He licked her ear and nodded, his light stubble grazing her cheek. He was so assured in his moves and they got the right response from her.

“I want to give you a lap dance as well.” He moved

back and he watched her go hot and use her hands to fan her face. He smirked. She was hot and bothered.

“A-fuck!” She fanned more and he laughed, moving closer to kiss her lips. Thrusting his tongue in her mouth and her opening her mouth for him. She could taste him. Whiskey and man. Everything that made Austin Mathews the man he was, her chest moved up and down as she wrapped her hands around his neck while his hands were placed firmly on her thighs, lightly squeezing. She didn’t stop him as his hands hitched up.

“What’s your answer?” He asked and she let out a heady breath. She looked into his calm eyes, the calm that calmed the volcano that was her.

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[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

85

Alora shook her head. No. Well not in the club.

“Let’s dance rather.” She suggested and that earned her a smile.

“Can you dance?” That was another question, one that proved one of her many failings.

“I’m sure it’s not that hard.” That raised an eyebrow as she ordered another drink. He watched her and how fast the bartender was with her drinks. She had her drink within five minutes and she was chugging it down her throat. She was going to get mad tipsy. He could already see her squinting her eyes and then blinking a couple of times before she spoke.

“Let’s dance.” She got up on her feet and she ignored that fluttery feeling she had in the pit of her

stomach. The alcohol. It was the alcohol alright as Austin held her waist and they walked to the dance floor. Another song started playing as he turned her to look at her, her legs swayed as his moved. He smiled and moved closer till her chest crushed into his and his hand settled on her ass. His eyes full of a lust she had seen a flicker of before he disguised it. This time he didn't hide it as he lowered his down to hers and his whisky tinted breath hit her nostrils and she sucked in a breath, her eyes fixated on him.

“I don't know what you do to me Alora.” She chuckled and got a little ahead of herself as she pecked his lips. He smiled and kissed her back. Her hands moved to his chest and she gripped the white material of the shirt he was wearing. He looked at her fingers crumpling his shirt.

“Well you've bewitched me Austin. Body, mind and soul.” She could hear herself but from a distance. The alcohol was starting to mess with her but maybe she did need the courage to say what she needed to say. She paused and giggled. Austin eyes widened in surprise. Alora never giggled. Ever. He

savoured the sound of her giggles as she threw her head back, he loved the rarities of life and her giggling was a sound he was going to keep in his memory forever. He knew she might never giggle again.

“I-I think I’m ready.” She said and he paused again. She straightened her palm against his shirt to remove the creases.

“Yes. I’m ready.” She giggled again and placed her head on his chest.

“Are you a hundred percent sure?”

“Yes. I always think things through.” A giggle escaped her lips again and he smiled as he looked at her.

“I once had a fantasy. Do you have fantasies Austin?” She asked.

“No sweetheart. I deal with practicalities.” She shrugged.

“If you dare use this against me, I’ll cut your cock off.” He laughed and she moved her head to look at

him, colour seeping onto her cheeks and rising lower down her neck.

“It depends.”

“You’re horrible.” She breathed out.

“At 18, I used to fantasise you fucking me. It’s so odd and you were my rival. I wasn’t supposed to see you like that.” The grin that covered his face annoyed her.

“Really now?” She nodded and he grinned more.

“I can make those fantasies come to life.” He pulled her face to his and their different shades of brown swirled with a common heat and he saw her trying to retreat to her mind but he didn’t let her. Instead he kissed her, he was going to take it slow though. And who knows, she might not remember whatever she said while drunk.

“You want to fuck me now?” Her eyes widened before she laughed and placed her head on his chest. He laughed.

“You’re so cute right now.” She pursed her lips.

“I’ve never been called cute. Cute is fluffy and I’m not fluffy.” He kissed her nose.

“Let’s dance.”

“We are dancing,” They were barely dancing as they talked and she laughed. More freely and those giggles of hers undid his heart as he tried to deny what had been the truth from the very beginning. The Dj changed songs and played Usher’s Love In This Club. He turned her as he held her from behind. She smiled and held his hands as he moved with her. He kept whispering French in her ear, the song wasn’t even making it better. He heard her gasp as she felt his hard-on on her ass. She didn’t move away though as she replied him, ignoring the shivers that ran down her spine and how her heart wanted to burst with the love she had for this man. She faced him and kissed him, touching his jaw and rubbing it as he pulled her in closer to him. She broke the kiss, both their lips parted and breathing into each other.

“I think we should go.” She whispered. Austin swallowed and nodded. She didn’t know how sultry

she sounded right now.

She took his hand and led him out of the club, he followed her knowing that she was still drunk. He knew Alora but he was going to keep these memories tucked somewhere safe. She stopped and looked around.

“Where did we park the car?” She asked. She lightly hit her head.

“I feel dumb right now.” She started in a monologue. He led her to where the car was and opened the door for her. He helped her inside and walked over to his side. She leaned back with a smile and touched his jawline.

“I love you Austin.” She blurted out and he stilled. She tilted her head. It was a bit blurry but her senses were fine. She thought.

“I know you don’t believe in love and fate Austin but I love you and I believe it’s fate that we are still together.” She let go of his cheek. She leaned back and smiled. Of course it was fate, she had driven down different roads. Went to another school, he

graduated a year before her and still here they were. All those roads led her back to him, even miles apart they found their way back to each other. After years of no communication. If that wasn't the universe's fate on them she didn't know what was. She watched him start the car and he took her hand to kiss it. Before he let it go. She fixed her seatbelt and took his hand again. He gave her a smile and off they went.

By the time Austin reached his house, Alora was snoring softly. Her confession hit him right there in the gut. She loved him. He breathed out as the engine stopped and he got out of the car. He walked over to her side to pick her and her clutch. She snuggled into him and he kissed her head. He was sure she won't remember half of what happened tonight. A part of him wished she would though. In the dark, he walked up the stairs to his room and he

placed her on the bed before switching on the lamp. She was beautiful. All brains and woman, his woman. He kissed her head and pecked her lips before he got busy removing her makeup and getting rid of her heels and the belt around her waist. She wasn't wearing a bra so that would be it.

By the time he was done, she was in his arms and snoring softly. A huge contrast to the woman who people see on a daily. He pushed her hair back as he looked at her features, would their kids have her eyes or her sharp mind? Or even his? He shrugged it off. She didn't want kids and he respected that. Any decision she took, he was fully okay with it. Even if they didn't have kids, as long as he had her and was holding her hand at the end of the day. His chest constricted with the emotion he had been avoiding like the plague for so long. He licked his lips before he switched off the bedside lamp and was immersed into total darkness.

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[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

86

In the morning, Alora woke up with the mother of all headaches. Those fucking mojitos. She cursed and cursed like a sailor in her mind before she registered that she was next to hard muscle. She turned and her eyes widened as she took in her boyfriend's half naked frame. Okay, she always deduced that he was muscular every time she held his chest but to see it. She touched the side of her mouth, hoping she didn't drool on him. No drool. She rubbed her face. It was clear of makeup. She

stared at him for a whole minute before she placed her head back on his chest and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep.

“I know you’re awake.” His voice rumbled and just like that, she had to face him after the cringe things she did and said while under the influence. There was an eerie silence before she broke it.

“Good morning Robert.”

“Will you ever let that name go?” She rolled her eyes and he chuckled.

“Never! I will use that name till the day I die.”

“And you are not dying soon.” He smoothed out. He didn’t want to think of her dying even.

“Yesterday...”

“I meant what I said. I’m ready and I love you.” She turned to face him.

He didn’t say it back but she kissed his chest.

“You work out?” She was changing the subject.

“A key to a healthy mind is a healthy body. I do go

to gym at least three times a week.” And months ago he had had a friend. Hades. Who went to the gym with him. He had received an update on Hades’ improvement yesterday. He was doing fine.

“I could never.”

“Why?”

“It’s all gross and yucky and everyone shares everything.” Okay that was Alora the obsessive. He sat up straight and picked her up so that she was on top of him.

“What are you thinking we do for the rest of the day?”

“You’re not taking me home?” He shook his head. She figured that was fine as well. She liked her space and all but she also liked him being in her space.

“I’ll think of something.” He pulled her head lower to kiss her, his hands moving up and down her waist. Now that she gave him the go ahead, she thought he would jump at the opportunity to finally have sex with her but he wasn’t. She broke the kiss. Was she

that unappealing? Austin touched her face, she was in her head again.

“Share your thoughts.” She blinked a couple of times before she got off him.

“I’m going to take a shower.” She got off the bed and he watched her leave. Not so fast. He thought. He waited for a minute till he heard the shower running. That was his chance. He got out of his pyjama pants and boxers before he walked over to the bathroom. He opened the door and he could see her figure inside the steamy shower glass. She was facing the other way and he took note to buy a shower cap.

Alora brought the loofah to her arms as her mind like always, wandered off. The opening of the shower door had her turning and screaming before she realised she was naked and her hands shot up to cover her up as the loofah fell on the tile. Her heart went thump thump in her chest as her throat clogged.

Immediately his hands gently held her shoulders.

“Sorry for scaring you.” He closed off the water and looked at her face.

“There is something called privacy.” He raised an eyebrow.

“Is it?” She glared at him.

She was still trying to cover herself with her hands and he held her hands.

“We aren’t doing anything.” He coerced. Alora didn’t dare look down. She kept her eyes fully on his face.

“A part of intimacy involves getting used to each other’s bodies although I don’t think I’ll ever get used to-“

“Don’t say it!” His laugh filled the shower and she rolled her eyes.

“You’re beautiful Alora. Your mind and body. You’re beautiful.” He kissed her forehead.

“Let’s shower.” He let go of her hands slowly and Alora faced forward. She didn’t face him. It was awkward enough that he saw her completely naked and he was going to watch her scrub herself. Austin

picked up the loofah and he turned on the water. He pulled her naked frame to his body, being careful not to let her feel his ejection. Fuck! She had such an effect on him and he was starting to believe that he too was bewitched body and soul.

“Get out of your head Lora, we are just taking a shower together.” He kissed her neck and placed his chin on the crook of her neck.

“I know you say you’re ready but you’re not fully there baby. Let’s give it time. Right now I want you to turn and face me.” He switched off the water again.

“No!”

“Alora, it wasn’t a request baby. Turn around.” She folded her arms over her breasts and turned. She wasn’t prepared for the lust that was in his gaze and his smile at her. He was going to say good girl and her heart leaped in her chest as she waited for him, instead he smirked and held her hands to remove them. She watched his penetrative and attentive gaze sweep over her features and it

settled on the v between her thighs She had to fight the urge to squeeze her thighs together. She kept her eyes solely on his face as he raked her body once more before he held her gaze.

“Fuck! You’re so beautiful.” Her skin heated and she was sure he saw it when he smirked. She rolled her eyes just as he cupped her breast and she froze, liking the warmth of his hand and how it fit perfect in his. He murmured something she didn’t quite catch. Slowly his thumb circled and rubbed the puckered nipple that was just begging to be sucked and her lips parted softly as she watched him. She bit down her lower lip as he played with both of her boobs. The water was off and she knew the liquid that was pooling between her legs was the ripple effect from the small bouts of pleasure he was giving her. She watched him lower his head to kiss her boobs and she let out the moans she had been holding in. He lifted his head for a second to smile at her before his attention went to her breasts. Her breath caught in her throat as his teeth grazed the taut tits and getting more hard at hearing her moan

for him. Fuck! He sucked the top of her breasts leaving hickeys there, knowing she might chop his head off later but not caring about that now. He stopped and looked at her. Closed eyes and those pink parted lips that released noises that turned him on. He slid his tongue in her mouth, taking control of her sense and not giving her time to slip back in her mind. Her hands settled on his chest and he smiled into the kiss. He had already deduced that he was going to enjoy their sex life even if he knew she had doubts about that. He broke the kiss and placed his thumb on her lower lip. Alora's eyes looked at the thumb then him before she parted her lips to suckle on it as he held her cheek.

“Such a good girl aren't you?” He watched her blush and was tempted to see how much of a slut she was for praise by touching her p*s*s*y. Sometime. He gently removed his thumb and kissed her lips.

“You liked that?” She nodded. Slowly. As if he had asked a trick question and she wasn't sure of her answer. He kissed her forehead.

“Okay baby.” He picked the loofah and squeezed his

body wash on it before he turned on the water. He took her hand and scrubbed it before she glared at him.

“I’m not an invalid Robert.” He chuckled. There was the formidable woman who can barely submit to him outside intimacy. He liked that. A whole lot. She got the loofah and turned her back on him as she started to scrub herself clean. He shook his head with a smile, knowing damn well she barely looked at the cock she always threatened.

Hours later, Alora was back at Susan’s house and she packed the small bag, it was embarrassing that everyone was going to think she does nasty things with that man when she can barely tolerate his ego. Okay she was over-exaggerating she liked what happened in the shower. She felt like she was slow but she liked having his mouth on her teeth. Her nipples tightened as a reflex and she touched the

nipples that were visible on her top. She wasn't even wearing a bra. She shook her head. Her bedroom door swung open and Reba folded her arms.

"Well now you're packing an overnight bag."

"It's not what you're thinking."

"You have such a dirty mind Alora. I'm not thinking of that but yet you are." Alora glowered at her sister before Reba chuckled.

"How did the date with his mother go?"

"She hates me. Like everyone else."

"That bad?" Alora shrugged it off. She picked the bag and her phone.

"I have to go." Reba went on to hug her.

"You're growing up in my eyes, look at you."

"Reba don't start."

"I feel like a proud sister." Reba dramatically dabbed her eyes as if she was crying and Alora shrugged her off.

“Even as grouchy as you are, you are opening up to intimacy.” Alora touched Reba’s shoulder.

“I’ll call tonight.”

“You have time to call in the middle of sex?” Alora groaned.

“Reba fuck you tlhemma!”

“But I’m sure Austin can fuck you sis. Toodles!” And Reba walked out leaving Alora huffing as she followed suit. Luckily her step parents weren’t home. She will explain herself better when she comes back on Monday. She walked out the door and headed to the car where he was waiting for her. She took him in and sighed.

“It means nothing Robert.” She started and he held her chin to kiss her.

“Will be fucking the lies out of your system pretty soon beautiful. I can promise you that.” She squeezed her thighs as she closed her mouth in the middle of the kiss.

“Open your mouth for me.” That single command

had her lips parting for him again and he took as she took from him. His large hand settled on her thigh and she opened her mouth more for him.

“You listen so well.” He murmured against her lips, feeling the light quiver on her lips and the shiver he could have missed if he had not had a hand on her thighs. He moved his head back and leaned against the car seat. He rubbed her thigh as she opened her eyes.

“Where did you say we are heading to next?” She blinked.

“Uhm my mother’s house.” Her voice was low.

“Okay darling. Buckle up sweetheart.” She did so and he started the car as she faced the window. He rubbed slow circles on her thigh as he drove with one hand.

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[06/02, 19:45] : REBORN

87

Alora and Austin made their way past the debris. The house was being renovated and she couldn't wait to move in. Two to three months from now when it was complete.

"I check on them regularly to make sure they are doing a good job. I don't really remember being here." She looked around. It was so dirty and dusty but she knew fixing it was a good investment and it was going to give her privacy. She couldn't imagine being 24 and living with her step parents. She liked her independence.

They moved to the bedrooms. The fact that she was using all of the money in her trust fund and she will be left with close to nothing hurt a bit. She could

only hope her meeting in January with the investors goes well or else she'll be forced to find a job and she doesn't want a damn job. She was her own woman.

"I already asked them to take out the old furniture. There was nothing good left to salvage, I only discovered the house when I was 14 and my mother had long died." Austin observed the way her eyes glazed when she mentioned her mother but Alora blinked and those tears forming in her eyes were gone when she looked at him.

"I see. Do you need any help moving in?" She laughed. She actually did and her eyes crinkled at the corners as she placed a hand on his chest.

"You are going to be Mr Muscle, when it comes to carrying heavy stuff I can't necessarily say fuck the patriarchy!" She leaned against him and he smiled. She was slowly but surely letting her guard down.

"My family history is fucked up. I hope it doesn't embarrass you." He wrapped his arms around her.

"It's not your fault. The people surrounding you

were adults. Grown adults."

"Did I tell you that my father's family reminded me everyday that I was a bastard child and that I might grow up to be like my mother." He smoothed down her hair which was a bit unruly. Not in the sleeked way it always was.

"You were a child." She shrugged.

"An illegitimate child. I bet that I remind Susan of her late husband's infidelity but she kept me around." Alora released a sigh.

"From my mother's letters she seemed like a nice person and she just died like that. Leaving me in this world. Alone."

"You are not alone." She closed her eyes.

"I know but then they don't understand me. Except for you." She added softly before she ejected herself from his arms and wrapped her own arms around herself.

"This house will be complete." She said finally. She wasn't telling him she will be broke after it's done

and she has bought the furniture needed. She will survive. Her hands dropped.

"We can go now."

"Is it why you hate men?" He asked and she chuckled.

"I long despised men. They think the world is theirs and everyone has to kiss their ass. Despicable creatures." He chortled and she rolled her eyes.

"You're one of the people I hate too. Fucking narcissist!" He took a step closer and she moved back before she ran out of the room past the debris on the floor. He ran after her and when he caught her by her waist he lifted her up as she laughed while hurling insults his way.

"Put me down!" He laughed as he threw her over his shoulder and she laughed while hitting him with her fists.

"You're annoying and proving my point. Stop acting like a neanderthal." He walked out of the house with her like that.

"Okay fine, I love you. Put me down!"

"No!" She hit him again.

"It will be my nail scratching your eyes out next time.."

"I'd prefer your nails scratching my back as you beg for more and not your hyperboles coming to existence." He didn't miss the shudder of her body as he put her down on her feet. Alora stopped as his hand slid into her back pocket and he squeezed her ass a little before retrieving the key to lock the house. She folded her arms to glare at him and he gave her a smile then a light kiss on the cheek.

"Let's head home."

"You're cooking?" She quite liked the way he threw in the the term 'home'.

"What do you want to eat?" He asked as he took her hand in his, knowing she wasn't going to do it at her own free will.

"Anything is fine. You can hold your own in the kitchen."

"Unlike someone I know. Just say I'm the best."

"Die Robert!"

"Never darling." He opened the car door for her and she got in before he jogged over to his side. She buckled up and her sharp memory took her back to this morning's events.

"Thinking about your fantasy?" She jumped a bit as he closed the door.

"What fantasy?"

"Me fucking you. Well it has been your fantasy since you were 18 and we would have done a lot of fucking if you didn't choose to attend a rival university." She flushed and folded her arms.

"I don't want to hear anything that comes from your mouth." He laughed and kissed her.

"Ee mma." He started the car and she furrowed her eyebrows before she looked at him.

"What do you mean by your last statement?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"Now you want to hear anything that comes out my

mouth?"

"Answer the question."

"Exactly that Alora." She had no idea how consumed he was with her, his therapist knew about her the minute he attended his therapy sessions post meeting Alora Moremi. He would have made a move if she had been at Stanford University.

"You like me?"

"More like consumed by your existence." She leaned back. She'll translate that to him loving her but not wanting to admit it. She smiled before she stopped smiling.

"How sure were you that I would have agreed to date you?" Thing was he wasn't sure how she agreed to date him now but she was and that's all that matters. He didn't like being sure and throughout those dates at Princeton he had been terrified of starting off at the wrong footing or Alora deciding to damn him then break things off. She was the fire that kept him guessing. Wondering

what was cooking in that raw mind of hers.

"Not sure." He admitted and her brows furrowed more. He doubted himself? When it came to her? Austin had doubts? He wasn't looking at her as he said this and she decided to not question him any further. The drive was silent till the spitfire broke the silence. Austin chuckled. She was such a menace.

"Truth or dare. With shots." She said.

"Tequila?" He asked. She nodded.

"Guess I have to pass by the liquor store then. What do you need the alcohol for this time?" He never knew what she was thinking about. Always thinking. The flames in her eyes stared right back at him.

"You'll see." They broke eye contact and Alora faced the other way. She hoped it worked. Or she could have went with something safe. Like a game of chess or crosswords or even raiding his bookshelf. She should probably raid his bookshelf though and head home with his books. That was a plan. A beautiful one.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

87

At Austin's house, Ne-Yo's Miss Independent played as he forced her up on her feet as she held the glass sipping on wine while she had been watching him cook. She glowered at him while he held her waist. She chuckled into his neck as he whispering the song lyrics in her ear in French. She smiled as he held her waist and she held his waist with one hand.

"Slick!" She said and he pecked her lips. He let go of her waist as he went back to the stove. She knew he

was showing off his physique as he cooked with an apron and no t-shirt on. They had debated and she said she was not eating food cooked by a half naked man. He pointed it out that he was her man and she couldn't even cook to save her life so she was going to eat. She had rolled her eyes at him as he laughed and the pan sizzled. She refilled her glass. This was so domestic, she can get used to this. He grinned watching her unwind as she nursed her glass. Their eyes locked and he winked at her as she gave him the middle finger. He burst out laughing as she smiled. He liked seeing her smile. Her smile lit his world, a world that had been black and white till he met her. Watching her read her French book. There was this pitter patter in his heart, how he responded around her. How she knew the parts of him that were not known by the world and she kept them safe. If he ever lost himself somehow, all he had to look for was Alora to find him. She was the fire that ignited his soul. Set it on fire and didn't stop. The truth he has been running from settled into his chest, caught fire and burned him alive as he watched her. The song he dedicated

to her weeks ago started playing and he watched her blush alone then look into her glass. She lifted those blazing eyes at him and he sang the song to her as she laughed and placed her chin on her hands looking at her.

You're who I'm thinking of.

Girl you ain't my runner up and no matter what,
You're always number one.

My prized possession one and only.

Adore you? Girl I want you.

The one I can't live without

That's you, that's you.

She blushed as he looked at the steak before he got her off her seat to kiss her. He tasted the wine on her lips, he could get drunk on her for sure. His hands moved to her ass, squeezing it before sliding underneath the plain white shirt she wore. She moaned into his mouth and he hoisted her up on

the counter as his finger unbuttoned the shirt to reveal her bouncy tits. He broke the kiss and kissed her chin going down to her neck as she moaned softly in his ear. He looked at the hi keys he had left earlier in the morning. She hadn't screamed his ear off for that and he sucked the top of her breasts as she breathed heavily. He murmured something in between her chest. His ego soared as he thought of her tits growing in size if she ever considered carrying his five future children. Fuck he wanted everything with her. The kids, a wedding and everything. His tongue licked a nipple and she shuddered before she realised a curse in pleasure. That was it baby girl. He wanted her crazy and wild for him, his cock and him inside of her. He straightened up as he looked at her dazed face. He kissed her lips and his hands settled on her thighs. She opened her eyes, love shining through them along with that fire he was attracted to. Her lips closed as they stared at each other.

“We’re forfeiting our truth or dare today.” He said. Licking his lips and hers parted in question.

“There are rules we adhere to when we play our games.” She said.

“I want to play with your body tonight.” He said softly and her eyes widened before they shrank.

“Play?” He nodded before he stepped back to go back to the pots. That sent her anxiety up the rooftop. She downed her wine and got off the counter. She sat on the chair to refill her glass. This was it? She was nervous now. Austin watched her with the corner of his eye. She was going to be surprised with how much she is going to love what he does to her. Luckily he had the foresight a week ago to buy what he needed and custom design it himself under the new company subsidiary he had been working on. He had a proposal written for Mathews Inc. so he can implant it but he had to run it with his mother.

At Susan’s house, Zara talked to Reba and she had

the realisation that Reba was a ray of sunshine. That made her so interested in knowing what happened for her to spiral off the track. Along with her brother, she found out that she liked hearing Thetis bits about Hades. She figured that she knew her father was a shifty person and having Hades grow up under his care full time was just as shitty. Her mother had made it seem like Hades got everything but Hades from Reba's eyes was broken but Reba didn't care about that. She loved her best friend to death. Reba stopped talking.

"I'm talking too much aren't I?"

"You're not." Reba smiled and twisted her hands.

"I'm fascinated." Zara replied. Reba nodded. Her sister in law was not bad and she wished Alora would open herself to more people. She loved fiercely but she was a closed book.

"How you and Hades managed to love each other despite your addictions." Reba chuckled.

"I always say he is the piece of me I wish I didn't need but can't live without. If he by for some reason

decided to not want this life anymore, I would also find a way not to exist without him by my side. I guess that's why we are fighting." She never thought they would live long enough to see past thirty. Their addictions would have been their secret if not for it being on the media, they probably would have died from them. They lived in the now and never made future plans because their future was just muddy water, they couldn't see past their addictions. She wrapped her hands around herself.

"You guys are so strong. I admire that." Reba nodded with a small thanks at her sister in law. Zara said Goodnight as she hugged Reba and walked out. She left Reba alone with her thoughts. She didn't know how she was going to fight her addiction but she was going to fight with everything in her. Dr Carson was such a good therapist and she couldn't wait to go listen to the woman talk to her on Monday during their two hour session. She hoped Hades was making the same progress she was making this side. She still shied away from the media and people because she was still judged

harshly. People understood men more than women and if it was a man who was addicted to drugs, they would feel sorry for the man and yet she was shunned. She now understood why Alora always said 'fuck the patriarchy'

Speak of Alora she got on the bed and dialled her little sister, her phone rang for almost a minute before she answered it.

“Are you okay? Do you need me?”

“Slow down! Don't play hero. I'm okay.” She heard Alora release a relieved sigh.

“What is it?”

“How are you?” Reba asked and she swore she could see Alora roll her eyes.

“Sis, let's agree that you get to call me on Monday or Tuesday.”

“Tuesday? Le busy tlheng!”

“Bathong Rebantle!” She sounded nervous and annoyed.

“Sorry mma. I love you.”

“I love you. Go fitlhela mmu o nkwela.”(till I die.)

“Lora you’re not dying anytime soon” Reba heard Austin say in the background. She chuckled. These two were made for each other. So smart and in tune with each other’s emotions. Guess they connected on an intellectual level. Smartasses.

“Don’t mind him. I have to go. Are you okay? Sure?”

“I’m fine.”

“Bye bye Reba. Tues day.” Alora hung up and Reba smiled. It had not been a man who saved her from herself. It had been her sister. She pulled the blankets up and she hoped she wasn’t going to sleepwalk later into the night. She switched off the lamp and closed her eyes, her dreams taking her to a place she usually tried to escaped everyday and now with no drugs to fight the demons that tormented her sleep, she had to fight it out in her sleep.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

88

Alora focused on her plate as if it was the most interesting ever as she heard his light chuckle.

“Baby, whatever that happens you have nothing to fear when you’re with me.” Those words of reassurance calmed her down. He always said that to reassure her. All the time. She finally lifted her eyes to meet his gaze. His were calculative but warm. She could feel every nerve in her body spring to life as his calm gaze raked her, his lips opening only a fraction so he can take a bite off the steak.

“Good food.” She said casually before she downed a

glass of wine. Austin quietly stood up and she didn't avert her gaze. He walked over to her side and massaged her shoulders.

“Lora?”

“I need you to calm down amour.” He whispered and instead her body did the total opposite. Every nerve in her body came to life and she tried to keep her breathing in check. He placed his arm around her neck and smiled against her cheek.

“I don't want you drunk out of your mind.” That's when he took away her glass of wine and she tried to calm down.

“What if I fail?” She blurted and bit down her lip.

“You can never fail. You have me, we are a team.”

“I'm always number 1 in everything and wh-“

“Sssh...” she leaned against his arm and he whispered in French in her ear, calming her down. It was how smooth it came out. Like dark coffee, well brewed and delicious. She flushed.

“I'm here every step of the way okay?” He assured

her again and she nodded. She didn't even finish her meal when he helped her get up on her feet.

“Now be a good girl and let's get you water to sober up.”

“I'm not even drunk.”

“You have had one drink too many and any chance you get, you drink to avoid stuff.”

“Are you calling me a drunk Robert?”

“If the shoe fits...”

“Fuck you!”

“I might baby.” She shivered and he pushed her forward towards the kitchen. He leaned against the counter and watched her. She mumbled something as she picked a glass and filled it with water. She drank it then faced him.

“See? I'm perfectly okay.” He grinned.

“You're testy.”

“Who wouldn't? I'm about to lose my virginity.” He just nodded. She didn't know did she? He gave her

his hand and she took it as he led her to the bedroom.

“I last tested months ago. I’m negative.” She mentioned casually.

“A week ago. Clean.”

“I’m on the pill.” She said. He raised an eyebrow and she rolled her eyes.

“To regulate my cycle.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I feel like you are judging me.”

“I am.” She groaned as they walked into his bedroom and she stared at the intricate designs on the ceiling as if they were the most interesting thing.

“Baby?” She looked at him.

“Get out of your head okay? Can you try that?” She bit her lower lip and nodded with a pounding heart. He kissed her lips and she responded to the kiss, his hands didn’t touch her body all over and she had questions in her eyes as she broke the kiss.

“Get out of your head.” He said one last time as he led her to the bed. She sat down by the edge and her hands moved to the buttons on the shirt but he held her hand.

“Allow me to do that.”

“I don’t think I-“ he kissed her lips.

“It’s the nerves talking.” She wanted that bottle of tequila they left in the kitchen. How many drinks has she had. She started counting from the time he started cooking till now. Five? She blinked and rubbed her head. She was awake. She was awake. Austin watched her. She was still half drunk. He wasn’t going to take her drunk. He needed her sober to feel everything. He crouched before her and she smiled.

“So we are about to-sex?” He shook her head and she realised she was sad about that. She was sad?

“You’re drunk baby. I want you sober.”

“I’m not drunk..” she quipped.

“We’ll let’s see Hmm?” He unbuttoned her shirt and

he came into view with those gorgeous tits of hers. When he helped her out of the shirt, she was left in her black lace panties and he laid her down on the bed before he got on top of her. Alora looked up at him, she didn't know his weight on top of her would feel so nice. Her hands touched his chest and he allowed her that. They moved over his chest as she moved a bit underneath him. He kissed her lips before he kneeled with her thighs between his. He pulled down her knickers and he saw her throat bob. She was scared and he was still testing how far she can go with him. He placed the panties by the bedside and she took deep breathes.

“You're still coherent?” She nodded.

“Good.” He lifted her legs and placed them around his torso. She was watching him intently as his hands settled on her bare *ss. His large hand started kneading her ass and she closed her eyes enjoying that. His fingers lightly brushed over her opening and she released a moan. She opened her eyes, confused at her train of thoughts. He looked at her. He rarely saw her confused.

“Speak your mind.”

“I-“ it wasn’t her to do that. She looked at him.

“Is it weird that I want you to keep on touching me?”
He laughed and lowered his head to kiss her.

“Touch you where?” He asked and she glared at him.
Even drunk, she wasn’t fully submissive. He loved
the challenge she presented to him.

“You know where..”

“I don’t know.” She rolled her eyes and closed her
eyes. She opened her eyes seconds later.

“Here.” She took his hand and she placed it on top
of the v between her legs. She never thought she
would want to be touched by a man. But he was
different and she loved him. She loved him and his
hand cupping her sent a different kind of whiz to
her receptors. She watched him smile, slowly. He
kissed her mouth, keeping his hand there. J ust
months ago, she didn’t even want him to touch him
but now? His eyes were filled with a different kind of
happiness as he looked at her.

“It took you long enough.” She gave a smile as her eyes threatened to close but she kept them open.

“How long do we have together?” She asked him.

“Infinity.” He said as he kissed her and she smiled before she yawned and closed her eyes. The wine definitely knocked her out. He shifted to the side and he pulled her naked frame to his body. He kissed her neck as she moved closer. He smiled.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

The following morning, Alora woke up alone in bed. She rubbed her head as she tried to sit up right then pull the sheets up to her chest. She slept naked? She closed her eyes as the door opened. Her boyfriend walked in half naked with pills and a glass of water. She smiled at him and he kissed her forehead.

"Morning darling."

"I was alone in bed." He raised an eyebrow and she rolled her eyes. Why was she being needy?

"Take the aspirin and water. How are you feeling?"

"Like I haven't slept in weeks because of preparing for finals."

"Not that bad then." She rolled her eyes as she took the water and downed two pills. She handed him back the glass after taking a few sips.

"Thanks."

"Get your ass up and let's go have breakfast."

He placed the glass by the night stand and he picked her panties before he chuckled. She blushed

and he lowered his head to kiss her. She opened her mouth more to him and he smiled.

"You remember yesterday?" She nodded. He grinned.

"Good." It was a wonderful Sunday morning and he helped her get out of bed, fully naked. His eyes full of lust, raked her body once again. She bit her lower lip as he pulled her closer and squeezed that ass. Fuck! He couldn't wait. He nipped at her neck before he smiled.

"Get dressed. We're making breakfast together."

"I don't want to cook."

"You're spoilt." She punched his chest.

"You don't need a girlfriend who can cook." He shrugged. He didn't need one, he lo-liked her just the way she was. All stubborn and competitive.

"Unless you have other plans for the day.."

"Do you?" She asked. A bit more confident.

"I might." He bit his lip and laughed into her mouth. He smacked her ass and she yelped. He laughed as

he walked out.

"Be down in five baby girl. I'll be counting." He closed the door and she rubbed her behind. It must be red and she frowned as realisation dawned on her. Was she? Fuck! She liked that? She internally screamed at herself. She quickly walked to his wardrobe to pick out a clean shirt before she headed to the bathroom to brush her teeth. He said five minutes right? She washed her face and when she was done she made the bed. She couldn't be okay with the messy bed and the pillows scattered all over. She pushed her hair backwards. She needs to do her hair tomorrow. She walked down the stairs and stopped midway. What was he going to do if she wasn't down in five? She folded her arms and leaned against the wall.

Meanwhile downstairs, Austin took out the ingredients for their breakfast as he smiled. He could definitely get used to mornings like this. Just a Sunday morning of them goofing around. He shook his head. The word 'goofy' wasn't even in his

vocabulary and look at him tossing the word around. He looked around. There was no sign of her. She was stubborn. He walked out of the kitchen barefoot and he didn't get far when he saw her leaning against the wall in his black silk shirt. She saw him and she rolled her eyes and walked back up the stairs as he half ran then she upped her pace. He ran after her, taking two stairs at a time. He caught her by her waist and she laughed as he threw her over her shoulder.

"Stop!" She hit his back laughing as he walked down the stairs with her. His hand cupped her bottom, she wasn't wearing panties underneath that shirt.

"We're cooking?"

"Yes."

"I'm burning you alive in your kitchen."

"I'd like to see you try."

"I hate you."

"You love me."

"And you haven't said it back." He sighed.

"Alora you know how I feel about love."

"I know." She accepted his anti-love ways. Not that she really believed that he didn't love her. Maybe he didn't want to believe it himself. She'll wait for him to say it back.

At the rehabilitation centre, Hades worked up a sweat at the gym as he remembered Austin dragging him out of bed in the morning for gym. Now that he knew the guy and how calm he was, if he hadn't been dating Alora he would have thought Austin was asexual. He had never shown any attraction towards anyone and he laughed as he remembered their banter. It was sort of a bromance brewing and he realised that he never had a brother and friend. Austin didn't judge him harshly like his father and sometimes he riled him up just so he can get angry at him and kick him out. Tell him he wasn't worth anything because he felt he wasn't

worth anything but Austin walked away. He got up from the bench press as he headed to the squat rack. Hell Austin got him to gym to release all the pent up anger he had been holding in. He wanted to try and be a better man to Reba. He was on antabuse drugs and he took the pills religiously while listening to a therapist who wouldn't understand his home situation but nevertheless, he was trying.

At Susan's house, the family said bye to Zara and Mooketsi who were heading back to Francistown. It was nice having them around this weekend. Susan mused. Alora was with her boyfriend and she couldn't even get angry. No one had thought Alora would date, as much as she was a tough cookie to crack Su always suspected that it might be because of her conception and how everyone threw that around. Zara waved back one last time as she got

inside the car and the rest of the family walked back inside.

"Now, how about we get started on Sunday lunch."

"I'll make the salads." Reba volunteered and Emory opted to serve the food. Thabiso just said he will braai the meat and then Susan had to make the pap and chakalaka.

"It's settled." Thabiso chuckled.

"If Rora was here, she wouldn't be lifting a finger."

"She would be telling us to keep the counter clean and to not let it get dirty. Then investigate the cleanliness of the environment." They all laughed. They hoped she would be home today.

"Alora!"

"Don't you dare raise your voice at me. I will claw your eyes out." She looked at the pancake. It was

ugly and her third one yet she didn't get the flip right.

"Baby, the pancake is not your enemy."

"It is. It is not coming out the way I want it to."

He held her shoulders and she shrugged him off.

"I'll never be defeated by a mere pancake. Never!!"

He laughed into his hands and she glared at him.

"It's not funny." She took it out then placed the pan back on the heat. She had to make this one right.

She poured the mixture in the pan and waited.

Hopefully this one turns out right. She picked the spatula and she turned it. It actually turned and was good. She grinned.

"Finally! I never fail! Ever!" She then removed it and looked at the last pancake she made.

"Well done."

"I didn't need you." He just kissed her.

"Let's go eat then get ready for a movie and snacks." She looked up at him.

"I love you autwe?" She kissed him this time. It was

a peck on the lips at first followed by another then a french kiss which she broke.

"Thanks." She breathed against his lips and she moved back to get the plates.

"Dining room?"

"Yes." She took their plates to the dining as he rubbed his lips.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

90

Hades' mother saw the bank notification, reporting

her monthly allowance from her ex-husband. She figured that Hades had told him she leaked the information about their addictions to the media but her ex husband never confronted her. She knew him. He was a snake in the grass and was probably waiting for the right time to strike. She hasn't even seen Hades in the media for the past three months and Reba was still bashed for being a drug addict. She shook her head, Hades had one job. He was useless and his father knew it even though he kept Hades with him, she had needed the money to bail her out of the trouble she got herself into. Was she workkng? She was never going to lift a finger because her ex-husband a multimillionaire was paying alimony to her and she deserved that as compensation for carrying his heir and keeping up with his cheating ways. She soothed her conscience with that.

That late afternoon, Zara arrived with her husband at their small house and she glanced at him.

"I did tell you how my talk with father went."

"That man is a bastard."

"I know and I don't blame Hades for turning out the way he did. Maybe if I lived with him I would have turned out the same." Mooketsi kissed her cheek.

"I'm glad you didn't."

"But I want to form a relationship with my brother. When he gets out of rehab, I want to build our sibling bond. Obviously he might not trust me from everything I have gathered from Reba."

Mooketsi nodded as his jaw ticked.

"What's wrong?"

"I know Hades is your brother but I don't like him for Reba. Look Reba was an addict and he also kept it on the low as they lived together. No one who loves you will do that."

Zara shook her head.

"It seems like that but you know what Reba said? She said if she was given a choice to survive on her own in this earth without Hades, she would find a way to leave the earth because he isn't with her. As much as they are addicts, their love is true."

Mooketsi still shook his head.

"It isn't normal."

"Not all love stories are normal and pretty. Some start out rough and the pressure makes them diamonds. All sparkly and the jitz."

"That's bull. You can't justify that. Maybe once Reba is finally sober, she will see that she was depending on Hades for her sanity and she doesn't need him."

"Have you ever listened to your sister talk? Talked to her calmly instead of bashing her decisions? Their love is beautiful. It's the 'I love you through your worst moments and you don't disgust me' kind of love. I don't even want to fight with you." Zara concluded as she got out of the car and Mooketsi watched her walk to the house. But it had been wrong. Their love had been something that was

going to end once they both got sober. He would bet his last money on it.

Reba sat in front of her laptop as she brought the yoghurt to her lips as she scrolled through their goofy pictures. When they had been sober for a few hours and did things couples do. Walks in the park, icecream and he would call her his little ray of sunshine. She smiled. She will get better, being sober was going to be her new superpower and she will get her degree even if it means asking Alora to tutor her. Tomorrow she was going to try and open up to Dr Carson. She went blurry eyed as she remembered those parties they went to and they would dance on the dsncefloor all high. Soulmates existed and Hades was hers, she has been an addict since she was 18 and she was in her mid twenties. She had to try. She finished the yoghurt and she smiled again. She was a bit alone and she

missed him again. She was the love of his life. They pledged sobriety before he left and she wasn't going to relapse. She was sure he wasn't relapsing at the rehabilitation centre as well. Coming to think of it, her sister kind of saved them both. Making Austin a part of their lives and he helped Hades. Alora did that. She picked her phone and sent a text. 'I love you Alora and you're the casual magic in my life' she placed her phone down and smiled continuing with her reminiscing.

At Austin's house, Alora cuddled up to him on the sofa as they watched a movie she choose. This was what love felt like? Like home? She blinked back her tears as he shifted and his hand idly rubbed her thigh. They didn't even have to leave the house, she had met him at the right time. She admitted it to herself that she needed him sometimes and she missed him some night but they'll be alright. She

fully admitted that she would do whatever he wanted. This was what it felt like? The feeling made her tear up and her heart burst in her chest. She snuffled and he pushed her hair back.

"Is it the movie?" She shook her head. She wasn't overly emotional. She wasn't an overly emotional person but he didn't shun her vulnerable side. He just took it and calmed her flaring compulsions without making her feel weak for breaking down. He figured she didn't want to talk about it and he just rubbed her back. She looked up at him and kissed him, Austin wasn't complaining about that. He kissed her back and shifted her onto his lap. He could taste her tears on her lips and she kissed him back, her tears still rolling down her cheeks. He broke the kiss and he used his thumb to wipe the tears away. She licked her lips and pecked his again before their eyes locked. His hazel browns against hers. His calm soul calling out to the rapid fire in hers. She parted her lips for him and his tongue slipped into her mouth, her blood coursed through her vein, a fire starting in the pit of her stomach as

she moved closer to touch his chest and his hands slid under the t-shirt she was wearing. She gasped in surprise as he got up on his feet with her and the love she had for him shone in her eyes. Austin looked at the girl who had consumed his thoughts a decade ago and she was still consuming his very soul, a complicated equation he always told himself didn't need any solving. An intellect who made love to his mind in so many ways, the girl who wasn't afraid to state her mind and wasn't averse to love but embraced it and did everything for the ones she loved. She glared at him and his lips curved upwards. He got more hard as he walked up the stairs with her in his arms.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

92

Austin chuckled as he kissed her lips before he slid out of her. She was so tight. He looked at her angelic face. She looked nothing angelic when she was awake but she just blacked out from an orgasm. He pushed her hair back, let's see if he won't be able to bring her back. His dick parted her nether lips and was sheathed by their juices as he slid right back in to the hilt.

“Oh fuck!” She was so good. He was surprised he didn't come in less than three minutes. His strokes were rough and fast as he felt her wall clench around him and he groaned. He watched her eyelids flutter open, she was trying to discern her environment as her lips parted to release a moan.

“Welcome back baby.” Then he went on faster as her climax hit her faster and he murmured in her ear, for her to at least stay with him throughout this

second one. His name was like a song on her lips as she screamed it out and he groaned as they reached the peak together this time. He stopped moving and watched her eyes close and he kissed her lips. She weakly kissed him back, her body still shaking slightly. He rolled off her and focused on her, noticing the red spots on her skin, those bite marks over her body and the hickeys. Her chest rising and falling with her legs open. Was he done? Not by a long shot. He pulled her to him and rubbed her back as she moved closer into him. He kissed the top of her head as he laughed. It wasn't the conceited kind of laugh. It sounded like happiness and all good things, Alora thought. She was still a bit tired. Her hands still restrained. His large hands undid the constraints on her wrists and her arms were now free to move. She placed them on his chest as he pushed her hair back. She needed at least ten minutes to be able to form a coherent sentence. She closed her eyes.

“Baby you only have less than five minutes before I take you again.” They opened as she looked at her

wrists. The welts were so red and were probably going to swell up by tomorrow morning. She closed her eyes and his finger traced the outline of her behind before his hand slid between her legs and his fingers found her nub and she mewled. She was still sensitive after her climax and he was touching her again. Her back arched as he kissed her lips.

“You’re beautiful when you come for me.” She whimpered as she lost the contact of his hand between her legs and he smiled. Her wide eyes were on him and she parted her lips then closed them again. He could tell she wanted to say something. Alora felt so dumb. The words were right on her tongue and she couldn’t say them. She ached in between her legs and she decided to kiss his sweaty chest before she looked up at him again.

“You have something to say. Say it.” She opened her mouth and all she managed to say was his name. He did fuck the words out of her right?

“I’m listening.” His large hand started kneading her breast and she moaned again. She couldn’t even think for more than a minute. He grabbed her by the

hair to bring her face to him and she liked it. The force he used on her. Was she sick? Austin just kept his hands on her hair, his other hand on her waist.

“Time is up. Ready for another round?” She nodded as he #EXPLICIT

In the morning, Alora shifted her body and winced in pain. That forced her to open her eyes. Every part of her body hurt but he wasn't in bed with her. She got pushed the blankets back and she frowned as tears welled in her eyes. She tried to get up and he wasn't even in bed with her. She moaned in pain. The door opened before she could even stand on her feet. He had a tray of breakfast with him. Full breakfast and he smiled as he placed the tray down and crouched besides her.

“Morning. How are you feeling?”

“Like I was fighting for my life and liked it.” He chuckled and kissed her cheek.

“Come. Let’s deal with these bruises and then you can eat.” She didn’t know the extent of how bruised she was and she was just about to find out. Austin picked her naked frame into his arms and nuzzled her neck.

“A bath is in order then the bruises.” She just nodded. Alora placed her head against his chest as she smiled. Their intimacy wasn’t the one that made her feel less in control. She loved how he dominated her in the bedroom and found out that she would just let him toss her about in any way he pleased and handle her how he saw fit. They passed by the mirror and she placed a hand on his chest.

“Let me down.” He did so and stood behind her naked frame. Her neck. She flushed thinking about how she liked him choking her, cutting off her oxygen while bringing her close to a climax. She looked at her breasts and how almost every part of her body was bruised including the so called neck.

He breathed down her neck.

“You have to rest today.”

“You have work.” She countered.

“I took a day off.” Her eyes glossed over, he took a day of work for her?

“So we’re in this till the end?” She asked. Her voice not quite there yet after last night’s activities.

“We’re endgame and we still have a long way to go.” She liked that. She didn’t think she was going to go home today. She couldn’t wait to be pampered and babied by Austin Mathews for the rest of the day.

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Morning. Nibble on this morning insert while I

prepare another one for lunch.

[06/03, 03:35] : REBORN

#EXPLICIT

92

her face to him and she liked it. The force he used on her. Was she sick? Austin just kept his hands on her hair, his other hand on her waist.

“Time is up. Ready for another round?” She nodded as he picked her up and she could feel her pussy throbbing. Good God! This man should be taking it easy on her since it’s her first time but no, he was rough and she liked it. She placed her sweaty forehead on his chest as he kissed her forehead.

“You’re doing so good.” He saw the colour on her cheeks. Such a slut for praise. She frowned when he placed her on the mat and his body heat was

away from hers. She looked at him as he walked nude to the wardrobe. She swallowed. What was he going to do now? He came back with his leather belt and her heart started skipping beats. He wasn't going to whip her was he? He just kneeled behind her and she could feel his full erection poking her behind. Good God! Her body was still humming from those orgasms and she had meekly agreed to be fucked again? He took her hand and tied them to her back.

“You look beautiful in that position, arc your back for me.” She tried to turn her head to face him but he held her head. She complied to his demands and felt his lips on her back.

“Beautiful.” Her heart fluttered. She loved him praising her for doing that, it made her feel loved. Her hands were still uncomfortably tied behind her back as he kissed her back before his lips traveled back to her neck and he bit her there. It made her moan. Who was this woman and what had she done to Alora Moremi? She didn't know how to even answer herself as she felt him position himself

behind her, knees on either side of her. He rubbed his length on her sensitive bundle of nerves and a cry choked her. His hands wrapped around her slim waist and he plunged in. So deep and hard that she cried out in pain and pleasure. She was so full of him and he was in much deeper. He groaned and she felt his hot breath on her back as he thrust in and out of her with a force that left her breathless and actually wanting more.

“Aauuus tii-moooo-aaah!”

“You want more?” She nodded and she got more alright, she got so much more as he pulled her by her hair, her hair follicles were going to fall off because what the fuck! And she was kneeling in front of him and one of his hands tightly wrapped around her waist as he slammed so deep inside of her and she cried out his name. His other hand found her neck and she didn’t expect him to choke her off from the oxygen as he thrust in and out in quick succession and she didn’t want to love the sensation of fighting for air and a climax building up in the pit of her stomach. His large hand slightly

let loose of her neck and she sucked in air with tears in her eyes as she screamed his name, feeling the orgasm threaten to make her blackout again. She didn't know she could feel so much and when he roared as he approached his own climax he completely cut her off her oxygen, his hand tight around her neck and she struggled to breath as her body trembled and she could already see stars as she looked up trying to breath but not being able to, he released her and she moaned as she spasmed all over his dick and he released his come inside of her. He pulled her by the hair to kiss her sweaty cheek as he breathed out heavily. He slid out of her and he saw their mixed come drip out of her. She was everything he had dreamed of and more. He untied her hands and he watched her body collapse. He chuckled getting on top of her just as she was about to close her eyes.

“Sweetheart, we’re not done.” He turned her till she was facing him and he kissed her chest.

“I-“

“Mmhm. I’m listening sweetheart.” She blinked and

couldn't quite get her mouth to cooperate and her thoughts were all over as she felt his weight on top of her. She used her hands to touch his chest and he kissed her hand. She was touching him. At long last.

“I'll let you touch me just this once.” She nodded. She just basked in the opportunity of touching him and having a fuzzy feeling that this was going to be a long night.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

Alora leaned back on him as he held her down. The sting between her legs fading into just soreness and the warm water soothed her skin.

"Better?" She nodded. He kissed her cheek as he splashed water on her back. He got the loofah and poured his body wash on it. He lathered her up and she tensed feeling his hard-on on her back.

"Ignore it." He murmured in her ear. He can't necessarily control his erection around her can he?

"But we j-"

"I know. I'm not doing anything today." He kissed her neck.

"My hair is a mess." She said out of the blue.

"I can see that. Do you want to do your hair?"

"I was thinking about it but I never really headed to the salon to do it."

"Okay." He nipped her ear and she smiled. He smiled back as he scrubbed himself clean and her one last time before he helped her. He picked her up and deposited her in front of the mirror and picked

out a clean towel to get her dry. He wrapped a towel around his waist before he looked at her. All vulnerable and wide eyed looking at him. He had never thought he would see that side to her. He opened his cabinet and took out a tube from a sealed box.

Alora picked the box to find out what that was.

"The nice part about putting these bruises on you is that I get to tend to them." Then he started applying ointment to all her bruises while gently massaging them. When he was done, he capped the tube and looked at her.

"No panties for the day or your bra." He emphasized his point by brushing his tips on her nipples and she winced.

"Come." And she was in his arms again, tucked into his hard chest like a baby as they walked into the bedroom. He placed her on the bed and walked to his wardrobe to take out his gown. It looked soft and plush and it was white. He helped her wear it and tied it loosely before he kissed her lips.

"I'll warm up breakfast and serve you. All you have to do is stay put. Do that for me okay?" She nodded. He was fully going to take care of her and she loved this side of him.

That early afternoon, they sat on the couch with her head on his chest and a fleece covering them while she switched between channels before settling for a murder documentary. He had tried to tie her hair up into a puff but her hair follicles hurt from last night. He knew what he did with her hair and she just finger combed it and let it be. She touched his jaw.

"Did anyone call my phone?"

"Your sister and mother." She frowned.

"What did they say?"

"Enquired about you and if you were well.."

"What did you say?"

"I can't exactly tell them you're thoroughly fucked can I? I said you caught a cold from a late night walk." She rolled her eyes at him.

"They believed you?"

"Your mother wanted to tend to you and make you soups and teas for your cold. Reba just snickered and said she'll call later." Alora shook her head. Reba bathong.

He rubbed her arm through the gown and kissed her lips.

"You're cute."

"Stop it!" She wasn't the fuzzy kind of girl but she loved him. Very much so. She was in his arms, in his gown and house after a wild night of rough sex that she enjoyed.

"You want to watch murder documentaries all afternoon?"

"It would be in your best interest that I hate you and I am still devising ways to end your life." He shook his head and she laughed when he almost rolled his

eyes. He was adopting her mannerisms and it was so funny to see.

"I love your laugh. It's like the first sip of water after one's been thirsty for years."

"You love my laugh but not me?" He didn't answer her and just kissed her cheek before facing the tv screen. Alora faced the screen and missed the adoration in his eyes as he looked at her. Austin's phone rang and they both looked at the phone.

"Are you going to answer it?" Austin picked it up. James was probably looking for a solid explanation of why he missed his appointment.

"I'll take this outside."

"Why?" Alora nearly gagged at how clingy she sounded.

"My therapist and I'll just be gloating on the phone call." She shrunk her eyes at him.

"Gloat?" She didn't know did she?

"I've been telling my therapist about you ever since we met at the Science fair." That's all he said as he

got up on his feet to answer the phone. She didn't know whether to think that this man was obsessively in love with her or weird but she went with the former. Who discussed his high school rival? Of course the man who was always in control. Was it that maybe he wasn't in control of his feelings around her that he felt the need to vent out about her? That boosted her ego a bit as she pulled the fleece up and watched tv till he came back five minutes later.

"I'm hungry."

"What do you want to eat Ms Moremi?" She listed the food and he chuckled.

"You have a pretty long list for someone who can't cook."

"See why I watch murder docs? To kill you for saying shit like that."

"Give it your best shot." He laughed as he stood up.

"So you're making the food?"

"One of us has an essential life skill and I'd like to

think that I'm saving you from hunger. Tla ga o swa kana."(you might die.)

"Robert! From the deep depths of my heart, go to hell."

"Why live in hell when demons like you roam the earth and silent devils like me can corrupt you?" See why she loved him? Man was super smart.

"News flash! Demons are already corrupted."

"Not you darling." She wanted to throw a pillow but she didn't want it to land on the floor and get dirty even though his house was sparkling clean.

"I'm still doing you favour."

He stalked closer and closer till his forehead touched hers.

"Aren't we over that?"

"Not by a long shot."

He laughed against her lips before moving back.

"I'll see you in an hour." He headed to the kitchen and she relaxed watching her show.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

94

The day went quite well with Alora being pampered by her boyfriend and him bathing with her again before applying ointment for the second time on her bruises. This was a side of him she loved and cherished. She knew it. No matter how much he didn't want to admit it, he loved her and she was going to wait for him to admit it to himself then her. She smiled into his chest as he tucked her into him, his body warmth warming her heart and body.

“Comfortable?”

“Yes. Thank you.” He kissed her forehead as she closed her eyes, allowing sleep to take over. Austin smiled as he kissed her forehead. She was fast asleep after a very relaxing day. He smiled. He’ll have his driver pick him up in the morning and leave her with the car. She will be able to drive right? If not, his driver can pick her up anytime she wants to leave. He had to admit it to himself that he liked cooking for her and taking care of her needs. Everything she needs, he would give her. He closed his eyes, content with his life and everything so far.

The following morning, Alora woke up in his arms. A yawn escaped her lips and she smiled against his chest. He wasn’t awake yet, was he going to work today? She picked her phone from the bed stand and it was only a few minutes after five. Why was she awake so early? She kissed his chest and then

his lips before she moved away from him. She was careful not to make any noise as she tightly knotted the gown she was wearing which smelled of him. The fact that this man's body wash and lotion was expensive than hers irked her so bad but instead of dwelling on that ugly fact, she walked to the wardrobe to pick a clean pair of socks. Of course the socks were his, her clothes were limited. She wore the socks while she glanced over to the king bed but he was still asleep. She wanted to kiss him again but she might wake him up. If he is still asleep by half six then she'll wake him up. She walked out of the bedroom as quietly as she could. Alora walked down the stairs and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. It took a few minutes to refill the capsules and then she had to wait for the coffee to brew. She didn't want to see if she had the bruises on her body, she was sure they were still there and they were ugly at this point. She touched her neck and smiled. She was weird. Who the hell loves being choked? And how did he know she would love that? Minutes later, she was filling her coffee cup with coffee then walked out of the

kitchen heading to his study that had his library. She never had the time to raid his library so this was the perfect time to pick a book and read. When the world was still silent and her thoughts were silent as well. She walked inside and everything was well arranged. His laptop closed and there was another desk at the end with a monitor and keyboard. Always a plan B for everything. She smiled as she placed her coffee on the desk, his chair looking quite comfortable and plush. She walked over to the aisle of books and her fingertips grazed the spines, sending a thrill only book lovers knew. The smell of the paperbacks giving her a sense of joy that she couldn't compare to anything. He had a wide selection of books, from classic literature to modern fiction but no modern romance book was in sight. Such a prick! She thought as she picked out *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. She last read this book when she was 18 and she surprised herself with the tears. On second thought she better put it back. She wouldn't want to cry again would she? She picked out a Stephen King novel before she settled on his chair and took a sip

of her coffee to start reading.

An hour later, Austin woke up alone in bed. He rubbed his eyes before scanning the bedroom. It took him a few minutes to finally get out of bed. He checked the time and it was a few minutes after six. He had to get ready for work. His girlfriend was still here, her phone was on the stand and she would leave the house without it. He yawned as he padded over to the bathroom for a shower and to fully groom himself before he headed to work.

Alora was consumed by the book as she paged and she gasped, not expecting what happened. She couldn't put the book down as was tempted to annotate the damn book but it wasn't even hers. She picked her empty coffee cup and got up on her feet, her other hand still holding onto her book.

Their morning had turned out to be a pleasant one. She made him coffee as she discussed the plot of

the book she was reading. She picked out his shirt for the day even though she knew he came out half naked to the kitchen to flex his muscles. Egomaniac. She also loved that, she could be the woman who chose his clothes for work and he would choose which position they took in bed at night. By eight he was done and she was still in his gown.

“Do you want to take the car or should my driver drop you off?” She closed the book. Alora stood up to fix his tie for him then folded her arms.

“I think I’ll be dropped off..”

“Good choice, I’ll call him.” Austin pecked her cheek then his hand slid into the gown to hold a warm boob. She slapped his hand away.

“I don’t let boys touch me.” He smirked.

“I’m not a boy darling.” She rolled her eyes at him as he slipped his hand in again, squeezed and smiled. He kissed her jaw and smiled.

“I have to go to work, I’ll call and see you in the evening.” He rubbed her jaw now and she nodded.

“After work?”

“Yes.”

“Are you taking time off for the holidays?”

He never did that but if she wanted him to do that, he would. In a heartbeat.

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes. The holidays are starting next week and maybe we can spend time together. Have dinner with my family if it’s not too much.”

“You’ve got yourself a deal.” She was the one to kiss his cheek and smile.

“Okay. Let me not keep you. Don’t forget to call or else I’m mutilating you then feeding you to the dogs.”

“I’d like to see you try.” They kissed for the next minute before they broke apart and he walked out the door, leaving his girlfriend in his house and Alora saw it fit to pack his gown in her overnight bag along with his shirts. He had so many an he won’t miss them. Time to get ready to go home and

answer Reba's million questions.

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[06/02, 19:46] : REBORN

95

At Susan's house, Alora plopped herself on the bed. Her bruises were visible, she had quickly made her way to the bedroom to at least wear a turtleneck ignoring almost everyone there. She unzipped his jacket and walked to her wardrobe to pick out a turtleneck. It was hot as hell outside but she had to do what she had to do. Perks of living with her family. She wore the turtleneck and she breathed

out. Much better. She was going to wear this for the next two days she presumed. There was a door knock and she knew instantly who it was.

“Come in.” The door opened and she turned to see Reba looking at her with a knowing smile.

“Hello. How is your ‘cold’?” Reba settled on the corner of the bed as Alora hanged Austin’s jacket before she closed the wardrobe.

“I’m much better.”

“You’re still feeling cold? Why the turtleneck?” Alora rolled her eyes.

“I’ll say it before you get on my nerves.” Reba touched her chest.

“I’m offended but spill...”

“We did it.”

“You have to be more clear than that. I’m not following.” Reba’s sing tune voice said. Of course she knew, she just wanted to torture Alora into saying it.

“Reba don’t act dumb.”

“All I know is you had a cold and now you’re cold. What did you do? Nna mma I’m dumb, explain it to me.” Alora groaned as she walked closer.

“We had sex okay! We did it!” Reba screamed and Alora rolled her eyes with a smile. It was enough for Reba to be up in her feet and now inspect her younger sister.

“How was it?”

“Okay.”

“Okay is boring! Give me something more. Did you come?” Alora nodded. There was no way in hell she was telling her sister that she blacked out after an orgasm and that she had weird kinks.

“Did you like it?”

“I loved it!”

“Aaaah! Bathong now you’re so grown up and got over that fear of intimacy, how was it to not have control?”

“It was alright.”

“Now my little sister is having sex. A normal big

sister shouldn't be proud of that but I am because I'm not normal. Now what did you say that other time..that a girl's virginity is like an accolade boys add or something along those lines."

"I still stand by that. In most cases it is that way, not everyone is like Austin."

"You love him..."

"Very much so. We're fated for each other."

"This is cute. Now that we got your first time out of the way, enjoy it and thank you for telling me."

"I promised to tell you after my first time soo..."

"And I am glad. Oui there is so much I want to say tlhe mma but we'll talk about it after months when you're used to it." Reba hugged Alora and Alora hugged her back before she stepped away.

"Now I would like to clean my room."

"It's clean!"

"No it's not." Reba rolled her eyes as she walked over to the door.

“See you at the dinner table. And I assume you’re hiding hickeys. Welcome to the club...” Alora undid the bed so she can make it again.

“I-I have a favour to ask.”

“Ask away.”

“Uhm since you will be moving out, is it okay I live with you? Bo mama won’t allow me to live alone, the addiction and all but they trust you. Please.” Alora older her arms.

“I want my house to be clean and I will be having a regular guest.”

“I will excuse you guys and I can clean.” She rarely cleaned when she was stoned and high. Reba thought. Her house was always a mess and she had usually spent more than hour looking for something.

“Is that a yes?”

“If Su will agree then yes. You can live with me, I will be home most of the time and I would do anything for you. You’re my sister.”

“I love you.”

“Time for you to go now!” Reba laughed as Alora walked to the door.

“I love you too Reba and I’m proud of the progress you made, once I’m done cleaning you can tell me about your new therapist.”

“Of course. Bye!” Reba walked out and Alora closed the door.

At Austin’s office, he leaned back to stretch his fingers before getting back to work. He opened his desk drawer and he picked up the set he designed for her, he saw the diamonds and immediately knew she would love it with the design he had had in mind. She loved diamonds, he had more diamonds for her, well another set and this was part of his proposal and she didn’t even know it. Even his mother. He opened the box and smiled. He closed it

and put the box back in the drawer. His phone rang and he picked it up.

“Mr Mathews speaking.”

“Good afternoon sir, it’s the rehabilitation centre.”

“I’m listening.” The woman went on to explain to him and he nodded.

“So he will be allowed only one visitor in a month’s time?”

“Yes. He is doing progressively well and he is taking his pills well on time.”

“Thank you for the update.”

“Of course. Have a good day.” The call cut and he tapped the desk. One visitor. One person would be ecstatic to visit Hades and he knew who that person was. He dialled Alora and she answered after two rings.

“Robert what do you want?”

“Is that the way you’re supposed to speak to your boyfriend?”

“I hate you. You’re wasting my time what do you want?”

“How are doing? Are you okay?”

“I’m in the middle of cleaning my room and I’m alive. Hot in this damned turtleneck but I have no choice because my neck is not a pretty sight and my body looks like a fucking canvas so I’m spectacular.” He gave a low deep chuckle and he heard her sharp intake of breath.

“Don’t act like you didn’t like it baby, I know you did.”

“Shut up!” He laughed and he swore he could see her rolling her eyes at him and glaring the phone to death because he was speaking at the end of it.

“Can I have Rebantle’s number?”

“Why?”

“It’s in regard to Hades and I’m sure she would love to hear this.”

“Okay. I’ll send it after you hang up.”

“See you later okay?”

“Okay. I love you. Bye.” She hung up on him and he shook his head with a smile. His phone beeped a second later. She had sent the number.

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We’re running later but the next insert will be up in an hour. My apologies.

[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

96

Reba picked up the phone, not recognising the number that was calling her. What if it was those media trolls that called to taunt her and some to get

her side of the story even though her addiction came out months ago. She was even afraid to show face overseas because she had been an international model now the whole world was judging. She took the leap of faith and answered the phone call.

“Hello?”

“Afternoon. Austin here..” she paused. Austin? Why was he calling her?

“Hello again. Oh God! I probably sound dumb..” he chuckled and like Alora, she felt he was judging her but she shrugged it off because she didn’t have the highest IQ.

“I have news that might make your day much brighter.”

“News?”

“So Hades will be allowed visitors in a month’s time and only one visitor. How about you go?” She squealed. He was still asking? She would go in a heartbeat.

“Yes. Yes. I’ll be there. Thank you! Thank you!”

“Welcome. I have to go now.”

“Okay. Okay. Bye.”

“Bye.” He hung up and she picked her pillow to scream into it. She’ll update Violet about it and hear her input but she was so excited. She couldn’t wait.

That evening, Alora walked to the dining room and everyone was just minding their business till Susan spoke up.

“So how is the cold?”

“Much better. A few days and I’ll be okay.” Susan picked at the meat on the plate.

“That’s good. How did the dinner go?”

“She hates me.” Thabiso paused.

“Why would you say that?” Alora shrugged. Her

boyfriend's mother didn't like her because she was going to be a corporate girl, she didn't know how to feel about that.

“She showed it in not so many ways. Anyway let's drop the topic.” Alora started cutting her burger into pieces she can fully digest as her step parents and sisters spoke at the table. She was so happy about Reba's progress. A part of her hated herself for not noticing sooner and finding her help sooner but the now was all that mattered right?

The intercom rang and Alora picked her phone.
Austin.

“Excuse me.” She got up from her chair and walked over to the door to press the button for the gate to open. Susan looked at Alora. She wasn't stupid to believe she had a cold but she didn't want to embarrass her daughter with questions. Who wears a turtle neck in this hot weather? Alora opened the door and walked out of the house. Her children were all grown up and she was left with Emory.

Alora rolled her eyes as she walked outside the yard to his car. He opened the door for her and she got inside. His greeting? A kiss that had her holding the lapels of his suit jacket.

“Hey.” He breathed out against her lips.

“Hi.” She let go and straightened it before she looked at him. He observed her clothes and he burst out into laughter. She shoved him back into his seat, she knew she didn’t possess such strength and he allowed her just to push him down. He was much stronger than he let on and the suits which were tailored for him didn’t exactly show how he was strong in every way. Of course she would never tell her narcissistic boyfriend that.

“Not a turtleneck. You’re smarter than that.”

“If that’s your way of calling me dumb, I will feed you to the dogs.” He chuckled and he placed a hand on her thigh.

“Tell me about your day.” She glared before she folded her arms to tell him about how her day went.

“I see. My gown is missing.” She rolled her eyes.

“It’s not as if you wear it and you’ll buy a new one.”

“Is that your way of telling me that you took it?”

“Yes. I took it and it’s not a secret.” He laughed and kissed her serious face.

“Okay baby. My jacket.”

“Good God! Are you keeping an inventory of everything? Yes I have it with me as well. It’s not as if I will burn it to the ground although I might do that to spite you but I can’t burn designer jackets because they are too precious and expensive..” his girlfriend was crazy. In a genius kind of way and it was fascinating as hell. He slid his hand into her hair and pulled her to him with the hair to get a kiss. Pity he couldn’t kiss her neck because of the turtleneck she was wearing and he had to settle for her face.

“If I wasn’t as ambitious, would your mother like me?”

“Yes she would but I wouldn’t.” She kept quiet.

“I don’t want you to give up any of your dreams. They are yours and one of the reasons I like you is because you challenge me. You keep me on my toes most of the time. The fire to my storm..” she grinned. She actually grinned and it was fucking beautiful.

“You like me? Okay.” She pecked his lips before she took his hand to remove it from her hair.

“I love you to Robert.” He chuckled as she pushed back her hair and he slid his hand in the side compartment on his door. He took out the box. He saw a smile curve on her lips.

“I got you this.” Liar! Liar! You designed it for her. A voice said in his head.

“What is it?”

“Face the other way Alora.” She did as she head the box open and anticipation swirled in her veins. She felt his hands on her neck and she concluded. Another necklace.

“My hands make a better necklace but this will do.” He clasped it and kissed her cheek.

She looked down and looked at the design. She has never seen anything like this and he was spoiling her with diamonds. Actual diamonds and not lookalikes. She touched it and faced him.

“Thank you.”

“They have earrings in the set as well.”

“Thank you.” She patted his shoulder and he chuckled. Now was a great time for him to haul her over her lap and watch her talk while he tried to get into her pants. He couldn't resist it okay? It wasn't his fault that his usually controlled and independent girlfriend was such a submissive to him intimately and he loved it. He was always that dominant but having Alora submit to him was a different kind of excitement.

He hauled her over his lap and he watched her scowl at him as she went on about something. He wasn't really focusing. The way her chest moved up and down as she spoke and her lips well, he could kiss those forever but he wanted to kiss her other lips. He kissed her mid sentence and she kissed

him back before she pushed him back.

“Listen to me. Don’t think with your d*ck.”

“I think with it most of the time when I’m around you.”

“No wonder I have a higher IQ.”

“Don’t kid yourself like that darling.” He smiled. He was content with her but there was a small voice that told him that being content meant that there could be a point where he lost it all.

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ONE MONTH LATER

[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

Reba pushed her braids back just as Violet poured her a glass of juice. There were cookies as well and the past month in therapy with this woman was uplifting. She didn't feel judged and she opened up more. More than she had to her sister because this woman's aura and environment were amazing.

A z"Have a bite and tell me how you expect today to go."

Reba picked the glass and took a sip before she placed it down. She lifted her wrist that had the rubberband. It was some sort of coping mechanism they had come up with, for her to pull at everytime she had the urge to take drugs.

Violet observed how Reba had a bite of the biscuit then put it down as if it was some bad thing.

"Have you thought about what I said?" Reba looked at the cookie. When she was modelling, she rarely ate things with a lot of carbs and that's why she can't eat more than her daily limit or if she was pushing it? She didn't eat and drank water.

"Seeing a doctor?"

"Yes. To get tested on stuff, Reba I will be frank with you."

"It's what you do best." Violet chuckled and folded her hands on her lap.

"Your anoerexia is worrying and it affects more than just you trying to keep to a certain weight." Reba sighed. She had a lot of terms thrown her way to try and help her. She appreciated it but it was so overwhelming to have to label them and it getting too real.

"I'll book an appointment for you okay? I know this good doctor to help and you'll talk to me. There is a lot and as much as you try to ignore it, you have to face the demons."

"What if I don't want to face them since I've been with them for so long?"

"So you can be free. There is not such thing as truly being healed. I won't deceive you and say you will be totally free from your mental woes, the trauma and those sleepless nights where it hurts but I can

assure you that you will find a way to find the sunshine in the darkest of days, you will be able to live and accept everything for what it is." Reba licked her lips.

"How do I accept the sexual assault?" Violet leaned back. Her sister had gone through something similar and it wasn't something that you accepted.

"That's a demon you learn to live with. That it wasn't your fault and it will never be. That the numerous sexual assaults that occurred weren't even your fault." Reba blinked back tears.

"I still wake up kicking from the nightmares and if it isn't that, I sleep walk."

"I know Reba. Trauma does that to us, that's another level of PTSD and after your tests with the doctor, we'll prescribe anti-depressants and discuss medication with you. I have been wary in terms of medicating you because you are still fighting an addiction and I'll be giving you drugs which you might"

Reba nodded. She understood her point. What if

she was dependent on the medically approved drugs?

"That is why we are here in therapy. Behavioural therapy has its perks."

"True."

"I'll let you know once the appointment has been set and then you'll meet the doctor then take it from there. You can't take medication when you also don't have a healthy relationship with food. No one will attack you for eating right, you need the right food to live Reba."

She nodded once again.

"Good. Thank you for opening up to me and see you on Wednesday."

"Ee mma." She got on her feet and she picked her bag. She was still not using public transport. She took out her phone to call Alora. Alora said she will pick her up since their parents were at work and Emory was at school.

"Hello?"

"Hi. I'm done. Can you pick me up?"

"I'll be there in twenty. I'm around town so I'll pick you up. Bye."

"Bye!"

Then at 2pm she was going to see Hades. She was excited about that. One of the good things in her life, she couldn't wait to tell him about the new Marvel movie. Had he watched it? She hasn't watched it yet but there were already a lot of spoilers. She wanted to watch it with him. Two months left and he would be out.

At Susan's workplace she held the phone against her ear as she sighed.

"I still feel left out. The girls never share anything with me except the basics." She told her husband at the end of the line, she had been inconsolable that morning about how she wasn't even that close with

her girls. Reba loved her new therapist yes and Alora had been busy with renovating her mother's house and whatever project she was dealing with. She had hinted at Alora maybe looking for jobs because she knew she qualified even though her results for her final semester were not yet out. Alora had brushed her off by saying she was in no rush.

"Talk to them."

"They are closer to each other than to me and it hurts. It h-hurts..." she sniffed and blinked back her tears. She also wanted to be kept in the loop. It was like she was in the outer circle and it didn't feel okay.

"Su, they are grown ups. Maybe they feel like some things they shouldn't share with their parents."

"Still.." the tears rolled down and she used her hand to wipe them away.

"But I'll be fine. I'll be okay. I have to go." She quickly hung up and placed her head on the desk to cry.

Alora parked Austin's car outside the building and she texted Reba that she was here. She looked at the bag at the back and she leaned back. This week better be good. She couldn't afford to not wow the investors who were willing to hear about Lora Cosmetics. She saw Reba make her way to the car and she opened the door before getting in.

"Hi and thanks."

"Welcome. You're going home?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the salon. Gatwe I need to get my hair done."

"Gatwe?"

"Austin."

"No one commands you to do anything." Alora huffed.

"Exactly but he threatened to take away the necklace." Her hands instantly touched the necklace.

"But you were still going to get your hair done."

"Yes but not with his money." Reba raised an eyebrow.

"He gave me his black card and it has been with me for a whole week."

"What did you buy?"

"Nothing. I don't want to spend his money and now he is forcing me. Might as well buy those white plush couches I thought were too expensive along with the pot set that was way out of my budget."

"You can't cook."

"He can though. You're heading to the salon with me?"

"I have nothing better to do at home so why not kill time."

"Alright." Alora took out the shades he had got for her for Christmas and she wore them.

"You're going to be my kids' rich aunt."

"I'll be spoiling your little monsters."

"Kids. Not monsters Alora."

"Monsters, goblins, gremlins. Those are what they are called."

"You'll have them someday."

"No I won't." Alora shuddered thinking about those little monster like human beings with their screaming and dirty hands. She didn't want that. No! No!

She started the car as she thought about his birthday. It was next week and she had exhausted her ideas. They didn't click and feel right. For the narcissist he was, he wasn't exactly talking about his birthday and she thought it strange. She shrugged it off as she reversed out of the parking spot and Reba buckled up.

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[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

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Reba pressed her phone as Alora sat on the salon chair.

“I’ll take a while.” Alora said to Reba and Reba nodded as she slouched into the chair. She was glad her sister didn’t call out her name out loud. She didn’t want the attention from the people and they might say bad things about her if they really recognise her. Alora looked at the hairdresser. What did she want to be done to her hair? She was a brand even before she even registered the trademark and company. She was about to be the face to her own company and of Reba would agree, she would be her face model as well because her sister was stunning! She should also stick to what makes her as well.

“I’ll get waist length blonde braids.” She told the hairdresser who nodded. Reba played games on her phone. She was going to wait a while. He saw Alora taking out her wipes to wipe the top of the table before she put her hands on top. She shook her head.

Two hours later, Alora was still on the salon chair and Reba looked at her.

“Less than half of your head is left.”

“Hmmm. After this we’ll get food and then go home.”

“So I can get ready?”

“Yes. I think Austin will drop you off. I might get a headache from this.” She indicated to her head and Reba chuckled.

“I am so excited.”

“I am happy for you. I am sure he is doing well, Austin said he got a good review from the staff there so there is a lot of hope in terms of that.” Reba nodded and she smiled. She was really hopeful and it made Alora happy. The hairdresser continued working on Alora’s hair while Reba lowered her head to play games on her phone to pass time. One and a half hours later, Alora was done and she asked to swipe. Hopefully this reports to his phone and he gets off her case. Reba stood up and walked to the door while Alora paid. Lora joined her minutes later and Reba took a picture of her. She was frowning and not looking happy but she had gotten used to her sister’s sour faces.

“Don’t do that.”

“You’re beautiful.”

“Thanks but I feel like my head is on fire right now. Let’s go buy something to eat.”

“I’m touching you.”

“Euw! No! At least sanitise, you didn’t wipe that seat before you sat on it.” Reba laughed and took her

sister's hand laughing as she tried to pull off away but gave up. Alora rolled her eyes.

"I can't believe you're older than me."

"Let's go mma." And they walked to the nearest fast food shop with Reba holding her arm and Alora wanting to bite her sister's head off.

"Don't heels tire you out?"

"They are like my armour and I'm not naturally tall like you."

"Still. I used to take off those things off immediately after shoots or off the runaway but you wear them every time you're out."

"I like them. Plus if a guy tries me, I can take it off and poke his eyes with the heel. Easy self defence."

"Wena wa ntshosa!"(you're scaring me)

Alora chuckled. If Reba was around Hades, Hades would have been calling her some dark terror or a demon and they would fight with harsh words back and forth. It always amazed Alora how Reba loved Hades who was jaded but that man made her sister

happy so she was happy as well.

By the time they got home, Reba was a ball of energy. Her happiness had been radiating in the car and she couldn't wait for the clock to strike 2 so she can see her love. She had so much to tell him and she just couldn't hold it in anymore. After Reba got out of the car, Alora called Robert.

“Hello darling.”

“Don't forget to come here by lunch time.”

“I never forget. Alora wee?” She shivered.

“Rra?” She internally rolled her eyes at herself.

When has she addressed him like that? Screw him for making her feel a thousand little things.

“When I say spend my money, I don't mean spend it on a P400 hairstyle.”

“I don't want your money!”

“That’s a bit tough baby girl, that card will be in your possession for a long time.”

“Please don’t take the diamonds.”

He chuckled.

“Babe, leave the begging for the bedroom. See you at lunch time. I really don’t care if you purchase a new car with the card or buy a Hermes bag but spend the money.” Her jaw dropped. Hermes is expensive as hell and brand new cars which aren’t second hand are expensive and he really doesn’t care?

“Unless you want me to physically drag you out to go shopping with me choosing everything.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“Thought so. Be a good girl for me okay?”

“I will kill you one of these days.” He gave out a choked laugh and she smiled.

“I sleep next to you most nights, it’s a mystery how I’m not dead yet.”

“What if I’m still plotting the perfect murder?”

“Then you’re taking your goddamn time...”

“Nna wa ntena tlherra! Thata le gone.”(you annoy me so much.)

“I have to go baby, I’ll be there. Did you have a good day?”

“Yeah. Uhm bye.” She hung up and stared at her phone then opened her bag to take out the black card. She tapped it on the dashboard. What if she uses the money to buy a plot of land for her offices? Well she will meet the investors as well but with a plot of land already secured everything will be easier. Okay she should get moving and she can’t exactly swipe the land so she will need him to do the transfer and if itks something she can buy Lora Cosmetics a company car? And spend the rest of this week registering it before her meeting with the investors. That sounds good.

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[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

99

Reba sprayed her favourite scent on her skin before she looked at the mirror. Her dark skin glowing from eminent happiness and all she had on her mind was Hades. She turned around as she made sure her mommy jeans and the airforce shoes looked good. Se wore a string top and then zipped up his jumper. It still smelled of Hades and she rarely wore it so as to keep his scent on it. She smiled and tied her braids into a high puff. Perfect. She didn't need makeup at all. She picked her phone and walked out of the room. She dialled her mother and thought of telling her she was meeting Hades but what if she says it will only make her backslide when it comes

to her healing. She ended the call before her mother could pick up. She found Alora in the sitting room, she had changed clothes and she looked so deep in thought, her fingers on the necklace around her neck.

“Alora!”

“Hmm...”even her voice was a bit distant.

“I’m ready. What’s up?”

“Oh okay. Nothing I can’t fix.”

“You do know you never tell people your thoughts.”

“Yet you still love me. Reba?”

“Ma?”

“How do you manage to love me?”

“You’re lovable.” Alora shook her head as she kept her hands on the necklace she was wearing.

“You know that’s not true at all. You don’t have to humour me. Really.”

“But you know the truth.”

“I’m not easy to love. Reba I am spiteful and I can’t soften myself up to be like other women even if someone asked me to,”

“And your boyfriend loves you like that. Alora I find it applaudable that you don’t conform yourself to the standards they set for women. You do you unapologetically and some day some little girl out there will be like, I don’t need to be liked. I am comfortably me and it’s okay.”

Lora smiled before it dropped.

“I just had an idea. That’s it!”

“What’s it?”

“The slogan for Lora Cosmetics. I have been stuck on it for so long. ‘I am comfortably me and that’s okay.’ You’re a genius.” Reba smiled.

“I told you guys I’m smart.”

“Thank you and thank you. I’ll be back.” She quickly stood up and headed to the bedroom for her file and pencil. She’ll be working all week long and will she see Austin? Probably have him work through her

proposal with her as well since he is Mr-Know-It-All. She walked back to the lounge and found Reba on her phone.

“Reba, even if the investors don’t invest which I doubt they won’t. I have a huge favour to ask.” Reba focused on her sister.

“Yes..”

“Will you be one of the faces for Lora Cosmetics? Once everything is finalised which might take six months to almost a year, will you be?” Alora held her breath. She was asking for too much. She knew that. Reba didn’t want the spotlight and she didn’t want to trigger her past experiences with modelling but she was perfect, not many girls had makeup that accommodated their skin tone and Reba’s was a perfect example. She could already see her on the billboards. Plus this can be a wonderful opportunity for her to curb the bad media. That she is not drugs, she is still Reba. The sunshine girl who has her older sister.

“I’ll think about it.” Alora nodded. She’ll live with that.

That will be okay. That means there was hope. The intercom rang and Alora walked to the door to press the button while Reba's phone rang.

Reba was still surprised that her sister would want her to be the face of her brand. Reba's image as already tarnished and she didn't want to tarnish and ruin Alora's company before it even took off but the hope that was in Alora's eyes had her saying she'll think about it. She looked at the caller ID and answered.

"Hello mama."

"Hi. I saw your missed call. Is everything okay?"

"Ee mma. I just wanted to say I'll be back a bit late. I'll be out with Alora." Susan kept quiet. She licked her dry lips before taking out the lipgloss in her bag. This was what has come to be in regards to her older child? That she had to tell her she won't be in?

"Okay. It's okay."

"Thank you. Bye." Reba hung up and Susan still felt

left out. She sighed and blinked back tears yet again.

Reba saw Alora walk out the door and she assumed her boyfriend was here.

Alora rolled her eyes as she hugged Austin.

“Thanks.” He looked at her shiny forehead that popped out more because of the new hairstyle and he pushed the braids back.

“Don’t touch my hair. It’s painful. Why are you this person?” She asked and he chuckled.

“You look beautiful. Gape bona skopo.”(look at your forehead.)

“Don’t you try to bully me Mr, I’ll cut your balls and feed them to the dogs.”

“I’m scared!” He laughed and she punched his chest before he kissed her forehead.

“I hate asking for help but I need your help.”

“Anything.”

“Help me look for commercial plots around

Gaborone.”

“I can do that. Prices?”

“Just help me find the plots and I’ll take it from there.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. We need to go. Reba is so excited. I love seeing her happy.” She said against his chest. He smelled good and his suit looked so good in him. She won’t tell him that. That’s one of her many rants in her own head about him.

“Call her and bring the keys.”

“Did you come with a taxi?”

“Of course not.”

“Mxm!” She got out of his arms and walked to the house. His mother called him and he quickly answered the phone.

“Hello.”

“Austin hi, are you free this evening?”

“I am not sure about that.”

“I won’t take much of your time, I just need an hour.”

“Okay. We’ll meet.” It was still awkward because his mother had knocked at his door a few nights ago when he was fucking his girl in the lounge. She probably heard her screams and all that. Alora had immediately tensed up and he heard his mother at the end of the door announce that it was her and she’ll come some other time. Alora walked inside the house.

“Time to go. Let me get my bag and car keys and we’ll be gone.”

“Finally!”

Reba breathed out. Just an hour or so before she sees her boyfriend, best friend and soulmate.

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[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

100

The drive to the rehab centre was amusing. Reba watched the couple bicker back and forth before they kissed and started speaking in hush tones to each other. Their dynamic was oddly fun. She bounced her leg on the car seat as she stared out the window. She could see them driving to a building and she could tell they were close. Would he be happy to see her? He has to be. Hades loved her so much that he would be ecstatic to see her. Austin looked at Alora who had turned her head to look at her sister. She hoped all went well. She really hoped so.

“Are we close?” Alora asked Austin who nodded and Alora released a deep breath. Whatever that happens, she was here for her sister but she doubted that anything bad can happen. Hades and

Reba loved each other and it was the kind of love that was against all odds. Austin drove into the rehab centre and he parked his car in the parking lot. He stopped the engine and looked at the two ladies in the car.

“I’ll be back, give me a few minutes.” He got out of the car and Reba looked at Alora.

“I’m just so excited.” Lora nodded and she didn’t try to force a smile. Her sister’s happiness was enough for the both of them. Austin walked through the corridors on his way to the office he had last visited when he dropped Hades off at this place, the reviews were okay and he hasn’t seen Hades himself but he wanted to afford Reba the chance to see him. He knocked on the door before he was asked to come in.

“Afternoon, Hades Hudson has to see a visitor today right?”

“Good afternoon Mr Mathews. Yes of course. Only one visitor for 30 minutes and that will be it.” Austin nodded.

“I brought his visitor. I’ll bring her and you’ll take her to him right?”

“Of course.” He took out his phone to dial Alora.

“Can you come to the offices, I’ll direct you. Bring Reba with.” The lady in the office looked at Austin as his smooth tone gave out directions, she looked at the cuff links on his suit jacket and they looked expensive. So expensive. She could see the veins on his hands, she wouldn’t mind being choked by such hands and they were so clean. Everyone knew who he was and since he wasn’t in the media that much, it was a mystery to them who he was dating. Or was he asexual? Saw that he didn’t need a significant other? She let out a dreamy sigh and she noticed and closed her mouth as he spoke over the phone. She hoped he didn’t hear that.

“Knock on the door.” Austin said to Alora.

“I’m not stupid Robert!” She chided as he heard a door knock and the door opened. The lady frowned as she saw Rebantle first. The drug addict ex-model and a face she hasn’t seen before. The girl in blonde

braids just glared at Mr Mathews and gave her a cold hello. Austin stood on his feet as he smiled looking at her while she rolled her eyes. The lady was surprised. Any woman would swoon over this man and she was behaving as if she wasn't in a room with a man who's net worth is over five million? Wow!

Austin faced her.

“You can lead her to where Hades is. We'll wait.” The lady nodded and she looked at Reba as they walked out. She breathed out. Did Reba get help or the media was lying? She sighed as Reba followed her silently.

“Hi.”

“Hello.” Reba replied and then more silence.

“So you're Hades' girlfriend?”

“Yes.” She was responding in one word syllables and the lady kept quiet. Hades was also a catch, also had money and grew up in it. No wonder he got on with a model, she had been a big thing and everyone used to see her on billboards and at

fashion weeks, red carpets and exclusive parties. She got to the other side of the facility where usually the patients and their visitors related.

“He is in there, you have thirty minutes.” She left Reba at the door and Reba sucked in a deep breath.

Meanwhile Austin answered Alora’s questions on his general knowledge and those trivia questions she liked throwing at him expecting him to slip. He was sitting on the chair and she had refused to sit on his lap. Sometimes she was really awful at this submissive thing and he wouldn’t have her any other way. She kept him on his toes and a good challenge always got his blood racing.

“Don’t forget I have a higher IQ.”

“Fuck you and your IQ. Please do go to the nearest hell.” Just that moment the door opened and the lady walked inside. The woman with the blonde braids was weird. How could she just say that?

“Uhm here is a progress report on Hades, the phone call wasn’t clear enough.”

The lady pushed the file towards Austin and Alora in her heels just lowered her head to see what Austin was seeing. Austin just skimmed through the report and got what he needed to see before he gave it back.

“Thank you.” He said and the lady gave him a huge smile. The blondie by his side wasn’t smiling and that lady could scare children away, she didn’t even have to try.

Alora breathed out. She’ll wait in the car, she could feel a headache coming. This braids hurt like hell. She rubbed her temples before she walked out of the office and started her catwalk to the car. Austin watched her walk out.

“Is there anything else I need to know?” Austin asked.

“No Mr Mathews. Thank you for entrusting us with Mr Hudson and I assure you we are doing our best to help him get over his addiction.” Austin nodded and got up on his feet. He left and the woman could still smell his cologne in her office.

Meanwhile Reba finally opened the door. She sucked in a deep breath as she waited for Hades to turn and look at her. When he finally did, it felt like time stopped moving and they were in an alternate universe. She breathed out softly as he straightened up, his full height making the room seem small and she held her breath. He walked closer and the back of his hand caressed her cheek softly. She looked into his eyes.

“Hi love.” She finally hugged him and he hugged her back, it didn’t take a minute for her to be fully engulfed by him in one of his bear hugs.

“God I missed you.” His chest vibrated at his words and she held back tears.

“I missed you.” He had no idea how many tears she had cried. Over their future, over their separation and she missed him so much.

He didn’t let her go and she committed this moment to memory, she didn’t know when she fell in love with him because she has always loved Hades even

when they were children, he had the purest parts of her, the ones which were tainted by her addition and the numerous things that happened during his modelling career. Hades kissed her hair. For his first visitor, his girl came. God he loved her and missed her. Words were not enough to describe how he felt holding her in his arms. She moved her head and wrapped her arms around his waist with a little cute smile on her face. She was the fucking sunshine he sometimes felt like he failed to protect.

“Now you can tell me about everything.”

“I see a future. Us. Together.” She grinned.

“I envisioned one too. For the first time, I don’t know how we are going to do this.”

“We’ll learn?” He chuckled and he removed the hair tie to let her braids fall and he slipped his fingers in her braids.

“Of course. How is rehab?”

“I’m rehabilitating.” He said and she nodded. He saw a future, that means he wanted to live. They both wanted to live. For each other. Together.

“There is a new Marvel film out and I can’t wait to watch it with you.” She said and he smiled at her. She was so pure, he pushed her braids back.

“I can’t wait.”

“I’m counting weeks.” She said and he smiled.

“Reba?”

“Hmmm...”

“No matter what, I’ll love you. In every universe we might find ourselves in, I’ll love you okay? We’ll be together.”

“But now we’re on earth.”

“Earth-616 love and we’ll have to make do with that.” She grinned. Yes. They’ll make do with that. She understood his references because they were both obsessed over Marvel films and comics and now she was so excited to watch the other film with him.

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[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

101

Austin held Alora's head as she laid it on his chest.

"You wanted this hairstyle." Alora rolled her eyes as he placed a hand on her lap.

"Shut up! I know you're enjoying this."

"This means I can't pull your hair later tonight?"

"Geez! I'm not your submissive and no you can't. I have a headache."

He chuckled and kissed her cheek.

"I should tip your hairdresser, look at you all cuddly and shit." She fisted her hand to hit his chest.

"Robert I hate you! Lets ogo la mosadi yole le botlhoko."(her braiding hurts)

"I shouldn't be making fun of you right now but I can't help it."

"You'll be screaming murder when I stab your balls. Be careful."

"Your hyperboles darling."

"Will be a reality soon. Kiss my head." His jaw dropped. What?

"Robert kiss my head." He kissed her forehead as she released a sigh.

"See why we shouldn't have one of those little monsters? Peace and no worries." He smiled. She said 'we' not 'I'. He was sure she wasn't even aware of the pronoun she used.

"Alora they are children. I want five or more but preferably five."

"I want none of those. Zero. Zilch. Nada."

"We'll see."

"I'm not having them."

"Ee mma."

"I don't like how you are casually agreeing with me."

"Alora it's your choice."

"Children are not a deal breaker?" She moved her head to look at him and he shook his head.

"No. I won't leave because you don't want children." She tilted her head. Why did it seem like he knew something she didn't know.

"You should run for the hills."

"But you're the hill I'm willing to die on." Her eyes widened before she smiled. He loved her, he needs time to accept that himself.

"That's oddly romantic." She poked his chest before placing her head back on the warm muscled chest hidden by the crisp white shirt. White looked good on him but Austin in a black silk shirt and those dress pants? She would willingly give him head for the first time and try woman on top. This man was sculpted by the gods and he knew it. No wonder he

had such an ego. She closed her eyes and opened them as it clicked. She was so slow.

"Austin?" He looked down at her.

"I'm listening."

"Those past relationships you had, you were the top right?" She saw his slow smile.

"Bingo! I didn't know you were that slow." She punched his chest again.

"Don't call me stupid. I am not stupid."

"I thought after the first night it was going to click."

"Shut up!" His laugh vibrated his chest and she sighed again. Painkillers and sleep will do her a world of good when she gets home or better yet she should go to her boyfriend's house.

"When Reba comes back we'll drop her off at home right?" He raised an eyebrow. Was that her way of saying she is spending the night?

"As long as my hoodies don't go missing."

"It's not as if you wear them."

“And you do?”

“Don’t be an *ss.” He chuckled and kissed her head then touched her forehead.

“Your temperature.”

“I told you I have a headache.”

“You’ll get better hmm...”

Inside the facility, Reba went on about her new therapist and what they have done so far while Hades listened. Loving the sound of her voice, it brightened all the dark parts of him and made this whole sobriety journey worthwhile. He wanted more moments with her. More Marvel discussions, more goofing around and those cuddles. The sex? He wanted that as well.

“And that’s about it.” She finally breathed. She smiled as she caught his gaze, she adored him. This was Hades, finally being sober after more than a decade of him drinking. He graduated with the lowest GPA because his father never really cared of

Hades had a problem. He had just brushed it off by saying everyone drank the first time Hades had tried talking to him. Reba kissed his cheek. Her time was almost up and she'll be left with a few more weeks till she sees him again.

“We’re fighting these addictions right?” She asked him and he nodded.

“Now we can dream of a future. Together, my time is up. I love you.” She kissed her best friend and he kissed her back.

“I’ll be counting days. Bye. For now.” She got up and walked out as he smiled and touched his lips. She made it all worth it.

Reba smiled and she had to contain herself as she walked along the corridors on the way to the office to tell the lady she was done. She knocked on the door and opened it. She stuck her head inside and the lady looked up from her pile of papers.

“I’m done and thank you so much.” With that Reba left. Austin and Alora were in the car probably. Now

she was going to feel like a third wheel but she was also their biggest cheerleader. They made an adorable couple. She walked to the car and her jaw dropped when she saw Alora on Austin's lap. It was a swoon worthy sight but then this was Alora who always had her guard up and she was never that vulnerable. She opened the back door and Austin turned his head while rubbing Alora's arm.

“You're done?”

“Yes and thank you.”

“You're welcome.” She nodded and sat down as Austin stared down at her sister. Her hands were itching to grab her phone and snap a picture because the moment was priceless and maybe Alora would love the picture. She put her hands under her chin and she watched them. Austin spoke in French to her and she could make out a few words from what he was saying. These two did that just so no one hears their conversations. Cuuuute!

Alora opened her eyes and her hands touched his

cheek. She didn't know if she liked him fully shaved, with that trimmed beard or unshaven. He looked good either way.

"We're leaving?"

"Yes. You'll sleep at home." She yawned and nodded. At home. Yeah! She stretched before she removed her body from his and crossed over to her seat. She turned her head to look at her sister.

"Did aaall go well?" Alora yawned and rubbed her eyes.

"Better than expected." Reba grinned and Alora gave her a smile before he face went all serious and she faced the front, slowly buckling up before her eyes fluttered close. The car started and Reba stared out the window, her head buzzing from the happiness bubble she was in.

An hour later, Reba got out of the car and said bye

before she walked into the yard. Seemed like her sister was spending the night with her boyfriend. Lucky her. The car drove out and she hummed on her way to the door.

At Austin's house, he got out of the car and picked his girlfriend from her seat she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"I have a feeling you wanted to spend the night because I was going to baby you over a headache." He whispered and she nodded.

"You don't want me around?"

"I do. All the time." Alora sighed.

"What is it?"

"Nothing." He didn't know how he was going to unlock the door with her in his arms and he didn't want to put her down. He just looked at her.

“Speak Alora!”

“Don’t command me, I’m not a baby.” She rolled her eyes at him. He finally decided to let her down so he can unlock the door. He was going to see his mother in the evening, for now he had time with his woman.

He took her hand as they walked inside the house.

“I’m listening.”

“I told you it’s nothing. I’m going to sleep.” She let go of his hand and slowly trudged towards the staircase. She looked at them for a few seconds before rubbing her eyes and she took the first stair.

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[06/02, 19:47] : REBORN

102

At Susan's house, Reba in her bubble of happiness had decided to cook and when the door opened, her mother and little sister were arrested by the scents her savoury delights had made.

"It smells good in here."

"I'm still cooking." She half shouted from the kitchen. Susan placed her bag down on the couch and headed to the kitchen where Reba was humming and cooking.

"What's the occasion?"

"Just happy. How was your day?" Susan paused. Her day? Reba never asked about her day. None of her kids did.

"It was bearable." Reba nodded.

"I hope this meal makes it better."

"You said you were going to be late." Her daughter shrugged as something sizzled in the pan and she stepped back a bit before grabbing the wooden spoon to start mixing.

"I thought it was going to take long but it didn't. Alora isn't here."

"Oh.."

"Yes..."

"She only came back yesterday. Has your sister mentioned anything about looking for a job?" Susan asked.

"A job? Rora doesn't want a job she-" Reba paused. Alora didn't mention telling their parents her plans. Only her. Yikes!

"She what?" Reba turned and rubbed her hands down her jeans.

"She'll tell you. It's not my place." Susan released a sad sigh.

"Am I so bad that you guys don't share anything with me? I always feel like a stranger looking

through a glass house, knowing I can't enter and know only what you guys show." Reba's face fell. She could hear the sad tone in her mother's voice and her eyes. She looked ready to cry and that's when she noticed that her eyes were kind of swollen.

"It's not that. We-uh.."

"I feel left out and I don't know."

"We are adults and obviously we might not share everything with you but we still love you." Reba tried to make her mother see reason. Truth is they were scared she might overreact and it was better not to tell her than to her making a big deal out of everything and not listening to reason.

Susan shook her head. She could tell that it wasn't the truth.

"It's okay. I'll learn to live with that." With that, Susan walked out of the kitchen and Reba bit her lower lip.

Alora's lips parted in pleasure before her eyes opened. Oh fuck! She could feel the orgasm so close as he pumped in and out of her, her back arched with her hands pinned above her head.

"Come all over me. Now!" Her body listened and she came, the toe curling and all that her body did everytime she responded to his. He groaned as he came inside of her. His hot breath hit her skin as she breathed heavily. He just woke her from her nap. Their bodies parted and she missed the heat of his body. He pulled her into him and it took minutes before she was able to speak.

"Yo-you fulfilled one of my fantasies." He kissed her forehead. Alora welcomed that soft kiss, she can now say her fantasy was spot on. Being woken up with your person deep inside of you was the nicest feeling ever. Look at her using words such as 'nicest' when she had better vocabulary.

"I get a lot out of drunk you." She flushed as his hand massaged her breast and she pushed his

hand back.

"That hurts. My period."

"Is what?"

"Is near, you did biology and you know what happens."

"Everyone is different. Tell me about yours."

She traced the outline of his chest with her finger.

"I get really sore boobs, don't touch them. They usually feel a cup bigger than they actually are for that time. Cramping for two days. Five days of continuous blood flow and uterine lining shedding. Cravings which I either avoid or give in to, depending on whether they turn into obsessions for the time being."

"You use tampons or pads?" She flushed once more and pulled her hand away.

"I tried inserting a tampon before and it hurt, the intrusion wasn't a particularly pleasing experience so pads."

"Was it maybe because you were a virgin?" She had

thought about that and it might be that, his dick was bigger and longer than a tampon. She laughed. Why was she comparing him with a tampon?

"Maybe. I'll stick to pads, I am not sticking anything into my vagina. Thank you very much." He snickered and she instantly knew what he was thinking.

"How's your headache?"

"I'll live." He just cupped her breasts and she glared at him.

"Don't squeeze, wena o utlwana le go nteka."(you like testing me)

"Your periods used to be irregular?"

"Yes. Hormones and I got on the pill and now they are like clockwork."

"Hmm.."

"I am still taking the pill if you wanted to know."

"Ee mma. I didn't say anything."

"You're suspicious."

"Feel like I might make you pregnant?"

"Yes." She breathed out and waited. For him to say he is because he does want kids.

"I won't. I'll start wearing a condom for your peace of mind. You don't want children and as much as I want children, I respect your stance on the matter okay? We are equals in every aspect except here."

"You'd do that?"

"Yes." he let go of her boobs and kissed her lips.

"Catch up on some sleep, I have to go somewhere."

"Where?" Wasn't he going to cuddle her? He pulled her closer to him and rubbed her bare arm.

"Sleep Lora." She closed her eyes

"I love you." She muttered and he kissed her head.

Half an hour later, he stepped out of the shower and he watched her sleep for a few seconds before proceeding to his wardrobe to pick out clean clothes. He should buy takeout on his way back

from his mother's house. All he had to do was hear what she had to say. That was it. After Austin was fully dressed, he walked over to the bed and kissed her forehead and walked out.

Celine heard the intercom half an hour later as she looked at the file. She had been holding back on this for so long and with the little time left, she was doing the right thing. She pressed the button as the gate opened and his car drove inside the yard. She had worked her behind off for decades now and it was time. Well she never believed in fate but it forced her to get to this very point. A minute later there was a door knock and her son opened the door as he stepped inside the house. He looked around till his eyes zeroed on her and he walked over. He sat down and his mother kept her gaze on her only son.

"I'll cut straight to the chase." Fast and efficient. No

beating round the bush. He liked that.

"I'm proud of you." He was confused. What?

"Of the man you are today and the woman you chose. I-I didn't realise it before but it clicked a few days ago that you and Alora are in a healthy happy relationship because you guys were uhm-" Austin was confused. This woman heard them fucking and she was proud? What the hell?

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[06/02, 19:48] : REBORN

Austin stretched his legs and looked at his mother again. His eyes searching hers to see if she was kidding. She was proud of him? Celine could see that her son didn't believe her but she continued with what she had to say.

"As hard as it is to believe, yes I am proud."

"I still find it hard to believe."

"I know. Uhm A few days ago when uhm yeah that, it sounded like it was a happy relationship. The only time your father and I had sex was to procreate." Even Celine could hear it sounded cold but that was the state of her marriage with her divorced husband.

"Yours and Alora's sound like it has life. I want that for you. It gives me peace that you have that. I taught you to never depend on anyone and you are doing exactly that. You don't even depend on me." Austin was silent as she went on. She released a sigh and brought her hands together.

"And so far as interim CEO you have been doing so well, I don't have to worry about the state and the future of Mathews Inc. I am so proud of you, all

your achievements and I know later this year you are going to excel with your Masters programme as well." Silence filled the room. Austin's mind caught on fast. She is saying all of these as if she is dying. Was she?

"Ever since you graduated till now, you have been doing exceptionally well for the CEO position and I can now retire in a month or so knowing everything is okay."

"Retire? Is this one of your tests?"

"No. I'm retiring because..." she paused and closed her eyes.

"I just want you to be happy. Do what makes you happy, Alora makes you happy and I've seen that even in the way you defended her against me. I have a lot of regrets on how I've lived my life for the past five and a half decades." and if she could turn back the time, would she even recognise herself? How she used to be so optimistic about life before the Corporate life and her dedication into building her own empire sole handily and striving to make it

big. She breathed out. Austin was silent. His eyes and exterior calm. He was always that calm and he never let emotions override him. For the first time, she was using her heart and she had that ache that has been so void for so long, he didn't want him to end up with a wife who mirrored her qualities.

"All I got so far is that you're proud and approve of my relationship with my girlfriend. I am a good CEO, you're retiring. There is something else and I'm waiting to hear what else there is..." he was always so quick to read the room.

"I am retiring because I have less than three months. I have been fighting this cancer for the past year and it has progressed." Austin's eyes widened a fraction before he leaned back.

"And you didn't tell me."

"Austin, you can live without me. You have been doing so for the past two decades of your life. What difference would it make if I'm not here?" Austin's heart almost ripped out of his ribcage. He never had time with his mother. Memories he could cherish.

"You should have told me." Celine's shoulders dropped. She knew but she had to leave the company. In her son's hands. He had everything.

"Austin you never needed me and you won't need me in future as well." She breathed out as her body shook slightly.

Austin closed his eyes for a few minutes not allowing emotions to show on his face. He looked at his mother. All this while he thought he was learning the ropes and was going to take over in five years or so while she knew he was taking over in a matter of months. His chest rose and he willed himself to calm down.

"It's cancer along with other weaknesses it caused. I have been trying and lived each day as it came. I want to die in peace now." Austin chided himself for being so blind. It was like she hit him with an Uno reverse card.

"That's all I wanted to say. Make the most of your life while it is rife, while it is fine." Celine said and waited. Austin slowly nodded. His mother was

dying in less than three months. Life was that fucked up but he knew that. There was a lot of turmoil in his mind and he needed to calm his thoughts.

"I have to go." He got up and Celine nodded. She watched him walk to the door and as soon as the door closed she leaned back. The painkillers were doing a great job of numbing everything so she can work and pretend her life was normal. Although it was a very high dosage of morphine, it helped so much since the cancer had advanced and Chemo could no longer help. She didn't even bother going that route because it was going to be more than two years of treatment when she knew she was going to die eventually. Her cold heart ached, for her boy who had never got enough love from her but he was happy now. That will do for her.

Austin walked to the car and closed the door as his head fell onto the steering wheel. Life was that unpredictable. What if in future it was him, would he be okay with dying without telling the woman he

loved that he loved her and not cherishing their precious moments? Tears filled his eyes and he rarely cried. He never cried as he hit the steering wheel his chest rising and falling. He needs to get a grip on his emotions and drive back home.

At Austin's house, Alora slipped out of bed and walked over to his wardrobe to pick out his shirt to wear or should she shower first? She should shower. She walked over to the bed to make it before she walked to the bathroom to shower. Ten minutes later, she padded into the bedroom and finally wore his shirt and walked out. He was still not back and she didn't know when he left. She walked down the stairs where her handbag was. She just took out her phone and got comfortable on the couch as she went to Motor Dealer pages to look at the cars. He was helping with looking for a plot, now if she can buy a car tomorrow while she

gets the documentation needed to register her company. She released a sigh. Almost an hour later, she heard the gate slide open. He was back and her stomach started rumbling at that exact moment. She chuckled as she placed her phone down and rubbed her stomach. Was he going to cook or did he bring takeout? His car drove in as the garage opened and she picked her phone again to continue with what she was doing. He walked in from the garage and her eyes met his. She instinctively knew that something was wrong or was she able to read his emotions or was it because he let his guard down. She quickly got on her feet and floated towards him as he looked at her. His eyes full of confusion, hurt and an emotion she gasped seeing on his face.

"What is it?" Austin's hand grazed her cheek. He dropped his guard down and he was hoping she could see the emotion he has been fighting himself months on end about accepting.

"Alora all of my life, all I've had is myself. No one has ever loved me. Not my mother or father. No one

has ever shown me love. Only you." He whipped his head to the side and she stood on her tip toes to force him to face her as her heart started a slow beating in her chest.

"I've been fighting this for months, today just proved how easy it is for everything to be dead and buried and all I have will be regrets about what I should have said or done." He paused. His lips moving over hers to drop a kiss which she opened up to but broke in seconds. She touched his neatly shaved jaw, his face looking so tortured as he held her hand on his jaw. He was hoping she was paying attention, for her eyes only he was being unguarded and defenceless. For her eyes only.

"What happened today?" His eyes begged her not to allow him to answer that but she held his gaze, hers softening and tears pricking in his. She moved her thumb over his cheek.

"I'm here always. Austin, always."

"My mother. She is dying." She nodded.

"I-" words failed him.

"It came out of nowhere and I was here thinking I'll take over after years but in a month I have to take the reigns. She never told me and I-" her heart sank seeing her always in control boyfriend struggling with his own thoughts and words. How it must have hit him at the back of the head. She just rubbed his cheek, listening to everything he has to say.

"You never expected." She replied softly and he nodded.

"It made me realise how I've been holding back for so long. Not allowing myself to admit to what's been staring at me from the very first moment I laid my eyes on you." Her lips parted as he held her gaze, his full of the emotion she didn't want to jump into conclusions and name but it was there. In his gaze. In his touch.

"I don't know when, how or from when. All I know is that I'm irrevocably in love with you Lora." The confession she has been waiting for hit her full force to the point of tears welling in her own eyes as well. He loved her? Austin Mathews was a narcissist and he had trampled on the notion of love

so many times and he was saying he loved her. Austin was anything but a liar and her heart soared. His lips brushed hers as she parted hers but he didn't kiss her.

"I am enamoured by your mere existence amour." And her heart couldn't stop racing. He called her love for the first time as well. The tears rolled down her cheeks and both his hands touched her cheek. He loved her. He loved her. She wanted to tell everyone that he loved her. She was the first person he has ever loved and she was the first person to love him. She loved him so much.

"J e t'aime de toute mon âme."(I love with all of my soul) she replied in the barest of whispers. She was barely breathing as he kissed her again. Austin felt the constraints around his heart break as he kissed the only woman who has meant something to him. He broke it and rubbed her cheek. He licked his lips as his lips parted.

"Mon coeur."(my heart) He whispered back and her heart burst in that moment.

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Same time again tomorrow guys Je vous aime.

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Austin rubbed her tears and she chuckled still not saying anything. She kissed him and drew back before her forehead crinkled a bit and his eyes searched hers for any sign of distress.

"Your mother..." she started out and he didn't let her go, just listened.

"You mentioned that she is dying?" He licked his lips

and nodded.

"Cancer." Alora digested that as she watched him start to shut her out and she shook her head.

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"You know what you're doing Austin." He finally let her go and she missed the contact already.

"Let me go shower, you can order in." Then he walked up the stairs. He was shutting her out. Now she was in her head about what was in his head. He didn't get to do that to her now. She wasn't letting him. She folded her arms as she stewed over what she should do next. A few minutes later she was making her way up the stairs. She walked inside the bedroom and his clothes were in the laundry basket. This man cleaned up after himself. A quality she loved as well. She unbuttoned the shirt and another shower won't hurt, she loved being that clean. She opened the bathroom door and she could see the steam fogging the shower glass. She found her shower cap then put it over her painful braids. Buck

naked, she pushed open the shower glass door and he turned to face her.

"Don't mind me. Okay mind me." He turned to face the other direction. She groaned frustrated as she walked to where he was facing.

"Austin talk to me."

"Alora it doesn't change anything. Let me shower." She raised an eyebrow as she folded her arms, the warm water showering over their heads. She watched him pick his loofah and pour his body wash.

"Ae Austin. You're bothered and don't want to talk, it is going to make it worse."

"She is still dying dammit Lora!" She didn't move an inch even though he kind of scared her. She was no quitter. Susan didn't raise a quitter.

"Austin we are not coming out of this shower till we find common ground." He ignored her and she wanted him to talk. And even distract him. She hated it when he shut her out and now he was acting as if it's his shit to figure out all alone when

they are equals. She is not letting this slide. She wanted to take off the weight over his shoulders.

"Keore-" she chuckled and sucked in a deep breath placing her hands over his toned chest.

He didn't even touch her back. She closed her eyes before she opened them then went on her knees in front of him. He looked down at her as she swallowed.

"Alora you don't have to do that. Get up." She shook her head. He knew she wasn't confident in her bedroom skills and he didn't want her trying to be perfect.

"Al-"

"You're not speaking to me Austin." she rolled her eyes at him and he chuckled.

"Will you guide me?"

"Every step of the way." He breathed out and he watched her hands wrap around his d*ck. He closed off the water as a groan escaped his mouth. She was holding it as it was something delicate but she

always threatens to cut it off.

Alora sucked in a breath and she #EXPLICIT

When they got out of the shower, she was wrapped in a clean towel while his hung low on his waist. She looked at him, he was still blocking her out.

"Austin..just let me in!" He breathed out as she said that.

"It's okay to be sad over the fact your mother will be gone. It's okay to feel those emotions. Don't shut me out, I don't want to be a spectator when I'm living with you. Just let me in, we're equals. You don't have to internalize this. I would listen to you for hours. Austin that's what love does, you calm me down and always find ways to stop my compulsions from flaring. We established that you love me but let me in."

"It's not easy. I shouldn't even be having such feelings because she was never a mother."

"Austin you're human. You are also human and not some unfeeling robot. As much as she never loved you, you cared for her to some extent. It's okay to acknowledge that." He paused. She had repeatedly used his second name instead of his first name which she loved using and he had hated it except when she called him with it.

Alora fixed her towel and sighed.

"We're a team. I'll take the world off your shoulders too Austin. Just know that."

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Alora's shoulders dropped. She will have to be okay with what he gave her. After all, he was patient with her and he never questioned her beyond what she was willing to share with him.

"I'll order takeout." She said and he nodded. He watched her slip into one of his shirts before she slid her feet in his slides and walked out of the room. He sighed and sat on the bed, holding his head trying to read his own feelings.

Alora walked in the lounge and she dialed the number of the restaurant they usually order from and she placed an order before she sat on the couch. He'll talk when he is ready but all she knew was that he didn't have enough time with his mother. She sighed. As much as she loved Susan with her flaws and all, she wished she had gotten enough time with her own mother. How would have it felt for her to be raised by Emily? Those were

questions she would never have answers to.

Reba closed her bedroom door and thought about what her mother said. She really felt left out and to think when they were growing up, they were a close knit family of five. She sighed. She should call Alora or was she busy? She called her sister who answered immediately.

“Hello.”

“Hi, I just talked to mom..”

“O-Kay. Is that wrong?”

“She said she felt left out and we don’t share our stuff with her.”

Alora bit her lower lip.

“The main problem is usually her reaction. Some days she is accepting of stuff and some she blows things out of proportion.”

“She was asking about you looking for a job.”

“I don’t want to work for someone and I guess I was waiting for Lora Cosmetics to materialise before sharing anything.”

“I get your point.”

“Yeah! I hope you’re still thinking about my proposition..”

“It’s scary Alora. To be in the media again with all the bad publicity attached to my name.”

“Do you trust me?”

“You would walk through burning flames for me. Of course I trust you.”

“Then this won’t be something the media has a field with. You can work on your terms, things you are comfortable with and set boundaries.” Reba nodded. She never had the chance to set her own boundaries. She was never given that opportunity.

“But think about it over the course of this week and get back to me. I will understand if you still don’t want to do it.”

“Alright. Thank you and are you okay?”

“Yes. Never been better. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Di results di a tswa.”(I’m getting my results.)

“I’m sure you did well. I’ll be home in the morning okay? Bye.”

“Bye.” Reba hung up and she placed her phone down.

Alora paid for the food once it arrived and Austin had not even attempted to come down for the past hour. She just plated the food and took her own plate to the lounge to eat in silence. The food was bland or was it because her man was here and he was still in the room trying to compose himself? She placed the plate down and went to wash her hands before she walked up the stairs to the bedroom. She found him staring at the white wall.

“The white wall is going to drive you insane.” His

head whipped back as he barely acknowledged her presence before staring at the wall again. Alora released another sigh. She wasn't good with comforting people and all. She couldn't comfort Reba properly besides a stiff hug and an 'I love you' before she retreated. She walked closer and sat next to him.

"Will me staring at the wall with you make it all seem better?" Silence. She just followed his gaze and stared at the wall with you.

"As much as she was never there, you still have months to make memories. If that's what you want." Austin just stared at the wall.

"It was wrong of her to tell you all of this when it's already too late but the next two months can be sort of memorable."

"Alora she never loved him." She acknowledged that.

"You don't always have to love someone to care about them, you cared for her because she was your mother regardless of the fact that she didn't play the role that most mothers play in their

children's lives.”

He just nodded.

“It’ll be okay. Maybe in a few days once you’ve gotten over the shock because well you’re human.” She wrapped her arms around him and he chuckled as he touched her hands. Her hug was awkward.

“I love you.” She said and he kissed her cheek.

“Me too Lora. Me too.”

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A FEW DAYS LATER

[06/02, 19:48] : REBORN

Reba walked into Alora's room that early morning as Alora styled her braids. Her facebeat was on point and she loved that cat eye thing she had going on with the eyeliner. Alora in a crisp white shirt and those blue skinny jeans with black heeled boots.

"I thought you were going to wear a power suit or something." Alora turned to face Reba in her full height before she walked over to the mirror. She raised her leg as she balanced on one leg.

"My confidence comes from my heels and makeup." She walked over to her table and sprayed her perfume three times in the air before she walked over the perfume scent. She picked her laptop bag and slid her laptop that had her presentation as well as the cables.

"And you exude confidence very well."

"Well at times you have to be the brand. As you said, 'I'm comfortably me and that's okay.'" Reba chuckled.

"I can't hug you right?"

“No. You’ll crease my shirt and Robert volunteered to pick me up in ten minutes from now.”

“Can I take pictures?”

“Sure.” Reba slid her phone out of her pocket and snapped pictures of a very serious Alora. This woman was beautiful and she didn’t even dwell on her looks, she wanted to be acknowledged for her intelligence and she was more than a pretty face alright. All brains and looks.

“Now go slay!”

“The dragons you mean? With pleasure.” Alora picked her laptop bag and her phone in the other hand.

“All the best tthemma and they will be fools not to run with your idea.”

“It will be their loss. Lora Cosmetics is going to be big, with or without their help.” The intercom rang and that was her queue to get going.

“Bye and I will be back later.”

Reba watched her walk out, the air filled with her

scent. She was hoping Alora won't glare those investors to death.

Alora passed the family in the lounge. This time, she had made the effort to tell them she has an interview which was not a lie. Because as much as this was a proposal it seemed like an interview with people who had loads of money and didn't know what to do with it.

"Are jeans appropriate though?" Susan asked. She had expected slacks and formal pants or a formal pencil skirt. People didn't go to interviews with jeans.

"They are comfortable." And Alora wanted to make a statement. She wanted a makeup brand, she wasn't conforming to the normal corporate culture. She was her own person. If she wanted to wear fully formal she would have went with that.

"I still th-" Alora raised an eyebrow. She didn't remember asking for pointers. Thabiso cleared his throat.

“All the best and I hope you get the job you applied for.”

“Thank you. I have to go.” She walked out and Thabiso looked at Susan.

“See why they don’t tell you stuff, you could have told her she was going to wow them or something.”

“I don’t want her to do badly. Jeans are hardly appropriate for interviews, they are things we wear casually. I couldn’t let her set herself up for failure.”

Alora stood at the closed door as what Susan said sank in. Wow! So much for trying to let people in. She rolled her eyes and walked over to the open gate. Austin was parked outside and he had opened the door for her.

Meanwhile inside Reba walked in and smiled and Susan smiled back. Thabiso shook his head. Will his wife see that at time she is the one ruining her own relationship with these girls, this time he will let her. They should be supportive and it’s not like Alora is stupid and didn’t know. That girl attended

interviews for the most expensive Ivy leagues in America, she has been to more than five business classes and she was more intelligent than her siblings combined. She knew what she was doing and she didn't want to be babied. He ate his food in silence as Reba looked at her plate, her therapist had set the appointment with the doctor for today and Thabiso offered to drop her off at the doctor's then back at her therapist's office. Hopefully nothing was wrong. She looked at the eggs on her plate and she cut through the yolk as it ran in the plate. Poached eggs.

Alora buckled up as Austin kissed her cheek.

“Ready?”

“I was born ready.”

“Are you sure you don't need me walking through the doors with you?” She chuckled.

“I don't need a hero. Thank you for deciding to drop me off.”

“It was either that or my driver drops you off. I found plots for sale.”

She leaned back.

“Okay. I’m listening.” He joined the road as he told her about the plots and their sizes as well as location. She nodded. She could work with some of the places he mentioned and they were in Gaborone.

“They are all commercial?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. I have your black card and I want to purchase one of the plots with the money.” Instead of him frowning and saying it’s expensive he nodded.

“I’ll have the bank draw the paperwork and we’ll go look at the plots together.”

“But the plots are 75k and empty.”

“So?” She rolled her eyes and smiled.

“I also want to buy a car.”

“Have you checked out any dealerships?”

“It’s for the company. I managed to register it this week and I can gladly say Lora Cosmetics exists and all that. If today goes well, I’ll build the offices and of course fund on the production of the actual products then hire a formal team in six months. To work on the launch, marketing and everything.”

He kissed her forehead.

“Okay, use the card the way you see fit.”

She nodded. He was really okay with buying land and the car?

“The land and car would be in my name.”

“Ee mma. It’s all yours Alora, I never said otherwise.” He squeezed her thigh before he winked and she rolled her eyes at him.

“Your eyes on the road. I’m too young to die.”

“Hmmm...” she connected her phone to his Bluetooth speaker, she didn’t even show any signs of nervousness on the outside but her mind was coming up with different scenarios and how the events could turn out. She hoped fate would be kind

to her. She played Taylor Swift's The Man. She closed her eyes and just tried to relax.

Austin's car parked outside Kgosi Investments and she sucked in a deep breath.

"You're not late to work?"

"Not at all baby. Go show those old men how it's done."

"I have no idea who is on the board but I know Mr Kgosi is on the board and a few other investors who decided to remain anonymous."

"I trust you." He kissed her softly and she kissed him back before breaking the kiss and leaning back.

"Bye now." She unbuckled the car seat belt and picked her laptop bag along with the phone. He watched her behind as she walked over to Kgosi Investments. That was their Gaborone branch, it could pass off as their main branch if everyone

didn't know that the main branch was in Francistown.

Alora breathed in, lifted her head high and walked like royalty as the doors opened. She stepped inside the building and walked over to the receptionist who placed her files down slowly taking in the woman. Did people hire professional makeup artists to do their makeup everyday? This woman's cat eye was perfect and she made her feel intimidated just by the way she was looking at her.

"Morning. I'm here for the meeting with the investors." The receptionist went through her schedule for the day.

"Ms Moremi?"

"Yes."

She quickly nodded and moved from her desk.

"I'll take you there."

"Thanks." The receptionist led the way as Ms Moremi followed. She was beautiful and she was surprised that a girl as beautiful as she is, didn't have a

soft voice or attempt to make her voice soft. They took the lift and she pressed the buttons as the lift started going up. Alora's perfume enveloped her and she waited for the elevator doors to open. Once they opened, they both stepped out and she led her to the conference room where the meeting was supposed to take place.

"This is the place." She said and Alora opened the door with her bag, stepping in to what was supposed to be the biggest meeting of her life.

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[06/02, 19:48] : REBORN

Alora stepped inside and she looked at the people gathered around the table. She knew some of them and it was her first time seeing two of the people there.

“Good morning, if you’ll allow me to set up my laptop.” She said briskly and didn’t wait for a response as she got to setting her laptop up for the power point presentation. She had done this countless of times at Princeton so it was not something she wasn’t used to. After she had set it up, she opened her laptop bag wider and she took out the ten files she managed to make yesterday, she personally printed everything and filed it so she knew what was what. She knew the damn proposal by head and each and every page in there. Her heels clicked on the ceramic tile as she placed the files in front of each member. She had overestimated but overestimating is good. Better than underestimating. She walked back to the other side of the large table to place the two extra copies down. Her eyes flickered to her wristwatch. Her

presentation was about to start in a minute. Maduo watched the girl curiously, she was a bit younger than her oldest kids but she could sense she was a force to be reckoned with. She could feel it.

“Good morning once again. Let’s get this shows started yes?” The power point slide started and Grey leaned back in his chair. That was Austin’s girl right? The man never even mentioned his girl had a presentation and he knew Austin could afford to sponsor everything she wanted. He made the conclusion that she was very independent.

“Lora Cosmetics. We’ll say the number 1 makeup brand for the future.” She continued. She was always, always number 1. They investors listened to her, how she had structured everything and she had basically commanded them to open which pages and she didn’t even look at the booklet she had given them. She was smart and the funny thing is she never mentioned her qualifications.

“I have a question.” Her glare moved to the person who spoke. Well she was a spitfire and she never stuttered.

“Okay.” She replied Maduo.

“Your qualifications. This is a great idea, I personally would invest my money into it and the thought and the clear structure given. It’s not just a makeup brand as you said but your qualifications Ms Moremi.”

“I’m graduating with the highest honours for my business degree at Princeton University this May. I was an honours student and took courses from cosmetology as part of my degree.” Their eyes widened and one of the men smiled. She was smart alright.

Maduo breathed a wow under her breath. Princeton? That was an Ivy League school and not everyone made it there let alone into the honours programme. She could have her money. Every bit of her money, she could have it.

“Any more questions about Lora Cosmetics? Well, moving on I have currently managed to secure a plot as well and the business is registered. May I add that whether I get the cash injection or not, the

brand is going to exist.” Her eyes didn’t waver. There was murmuring among the investors as they looked at each other. This was a good opportunity and investing meant they were going to get their money’s worth in two to three years from now. Not investing would mean they lost out on a great opportunity.

“Ms Moremi is it okay if we call you after an hour?” She nodded and started to pack her stuff in her laptop bag, leaving them with the files.

She walked out and she looked at the time. She had an hour to go. She might as well eat something and go through car pictures one last time.

With her bag in hand, she walked over to the lift and got inside. An hour. She will be back in fifty minutes. She took out her phone and browsed for Mathews Inc’s landline number from the net. She copied the number before she called. It rang just as the elevator started moving down.

“Hello Mathews Incorporated how can we help

you?”

“Hello. I would like to set up a lunch appointment with Ms Mathews.”

“Uhm she has a busy schedule.”

“Place me on her schedule and thank you. Ms Moremi will be there by lunchtime.” She hung up and breathed out. She wasn’t nervous. Not at all. Not. She was not nervous. She put her phone back as the elevator stopped and she gave the receptionist a brief nod before she walked away. The receptionist watched her leave, how do other women do that? Manage to make everyone stare without saying a word because at this exact moment everyone was staring at her and she just didn’t give a damn.

Alora released her braids from their misery and she started walking to the nearest restaurant. When she got there ten minutes later, she sat down and relaxed. She got this, God knew she got this. She took out her phone and texted her boyfriend.

Alora: you're at work?

A waiter came to her table and handed her the menu. She sent him off as she quickly browsed through it. Her phone pinged.

Mr Alora: I'm with James.

Ah! His therapist. He had those sessions two days a week and she let him be.

Alora: We'll talk later then.

She called the waiter back and placed her order.

Reba answered the doctor's questions and she loved that her therapist didn't book her in with a male doctor. She was female and asking all the right questions.

"And you can call me Tessa. Doctor sounds too formal. You're like my younger sister."

Reba nodded.

“So, I’ll do a scan, this might take hours because I am checking for everything and if the lab works fast enough your results will be here by Monday if not Tuesday.”

“Thank you.”

“And you’re in safe hands. Everything we just discussed is private.”

“Including about the sex and all?” Tessa chuckled.

“Yes. Well I think it’s to do with the PTSD but psychology is not my forte so I can’t say much but the low sex drive has to do with that. You’re dealing with a lot and there are also a lot of side effects to anorexia, including infertility.” Reba nodded. Now that she was sobering up, she had been thinking about children but now that the doctor had mentioned infertility, she threw that idea out the window.

“Let’s get to scanning now. Follow me.” Tessa stood up on her feet and she iced her stethoscope as her name tag gleamed. She was beautiful. Reba mused. Everyone was beautiful. She got up and

followed the beautiful doctor to God knows where.

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Alora walked into the building fifty minutes later and made her way to the elevator. She breathed in and out and tried not to focus on her surroundings and how everyone had touched the elevator buttons and they were probably contaminated. She breathed in and out, she can't afford to let her mind drift in that direction. She couldn't help it as she took out a wipe and wiped the buttons before she

pressed and she stepped inside. She wiped those ones too and pressed the button. She closed her eyes. She needs to calm down. She needs to calm down. She was still going to make her brand a success regardless of their decision. A minute later it stopped and the doors opened. She looked around for a trash can but she could spot any. Her hair wasn't bound by the pins and they were the least of her worries at this exact moment. She groaned as her heels clicked towards the conference room and she wiped the door handle as well. Her nerves were starting and she was conscious of every ick in her environment. She opened the door and she spotted the trash can in the corner. She threw the wipe inside and she breathed out before she raised her head, her braids falling back, her eyes a blaze of fire and confidence. She placed her laptop bag on the table and sat on a free chair. The investors turned to look at her, a very somber expression on their faces.

That didn't waver her, she held their gaze and even tilted her head. Someone might say she should

show humility and even beg for their cash injection but that was not her, this was also a one in a million chance for them and she wasn't going to let them think otherwise. In simpler terms she was doing them a favour.

“The greetings have been observed more than two hours ago, what is the final decision?”

“Damn! Straight to the point. I like that.” Reba said and Maduo chuckled. One thinks for sure. The girl had guts and was unapologetic. What was that phrase she used to represent her cosmetics line? Aha! ‘I'm comfortably me and that's okay.’ She was hers and she didn't cower. Pity she didn't want to be part of the corporate field fully because she was a whole tornado. She was more than a force.

“Thank you. So what is it going to be? Will Lora Cosmetics be a brand without your help? Or otherwise?” Her perfectly shaped and trimmed eyebrow raised and the cat eye like makeup made her seem feral. How come she had never made headlines? The room went silent as Maduo cleared her throat.

“Ms Moremi, we don’t doubt your capabilities to run this brand. We don’t...” Alora waited for her to continue.

“We looked at this from all angles. The positives and negatives as well as everything you have laid on the table for this huge brand.” Alora’s heart pounded in her chest but she didn’t let it show that she was nervous and that they may reject her idea. Makeup? Why that? She had already explained it in depth, hell her CEO boyfriend went over her proposal and they spent nights correcting it and him adding his input on the final things although 90% of the work was purely her brain.

“The image you gave us, well it’s way above our expectations and can I also say you might be smarter than all of us in this room.”

“Maduo, wa go re bolaisa ngwana.”(the child is going to feel superior than us.) Hayden said and Maduo chuckled.

“It is true. None of you made it into an Ivy League school...” she rolled her eyes and smiled.

“Well, Alora the question is would you do the honours of allowing us to invest in Lora Cosmetics?” Alora’s lips parted slightly. Wait what?

“To clarify things, we have never invested in anything like this. People usually go for the easier stuff like Construction and publishing.”

“If that is a dig at me...” Hayden said as he raised an eyebrow at Dan who shrugged.

“What we’re saying is, it is up to you to let us invest, this is too good and it is going to be big. You know it too, you studied the market as well, hell you’re smarter than all of us.”

“Exclude me from the ‘all of us’ statement.” Reba grunted and Alora was still awed. The universe was working in her favour. God it was happening and she wanted to cry and hug her favourite people right now. From the time she discovered Aleut at 13 and now a decade later, she was making her younger self proud. A smile threatened at her lips but she didn’t let it. She cleared her throat and sat upright, her hands landing on the table and her eyes moved

across the room. Every face in here wanted to invest. She had just asked for a small small three million and they were willing to throw that her way. God!

“I’ll honour you guys by letting you invest in Lora Cosmetics.” She finally said. Trying so hard to keep her voice even. Her heart was pounding so hard and she didn’t want to cry. God she didn’t want to cry in front of people.

“Well, that makes us partners.” She nodded. Her throat closing in as tears filled her eyes. She breathed out and raised her head.

“Well mamacita, I can see the devil in your eyes so I know the world is in for a one hell of a shock.” Grey added and Maduo smiled.

“Well, they won’t know what hit them.”

“Because devils are always in the form of angels. Thank you so much.” Alora concluded.

“On Monday we’ll go over the nitty gritty of the contract and what should be added but for now you can celebrate. This brand is becoming a reality.”

Hayden concocted and she nodded. She wasn't sure she was able to stand without falling on her heels. That was how excited and shocked she was.

"I have a question." Everyone looked at Maduo. Even after decades she was still talkative. No wonder her grandkids loved her.

"Who did your makeup?"

"I did it myself." Her eyes widened and her lips parted.

"This morning?" She nodded and Maduo nodded slowly. Wow! It was wow!

"It's beautiful and you're beautiful."

"Thank you."

"Ladies and gentlemen, the meeting is over and we'll meet on Monday morning. Same time, same place."

"Thank you." Alora said one again as she stood up. She held onto the desk. It was still new. They agreed? Just like that? Her day couldn't get any brighter.

Inside Tessa's office, Reba finally stood up. The tests were done.

"I'll call and let you know once the results come out. I'll analyse some of the scans as well."

"Thank you."

"No thank you for trusting me with your health."

Reba gave her a smile as she said her goodbyes and walked out. Tessa sighed. How was she going to tell her what she saw from those scans? She pushed her weave back contemplating her existence as a doctor.

Alora sat down calmly at the restaurant as she breathed in and out. She just needed to get her

bearings. It wasn't everyday one gets funding just like that. Next stop was to see Celine. She hoped she was going to be civil. She better be. She just ordered juice and checked her phone. No message from her boyfriend and his birthday was on Sunday. She had fully planned to spend his birthday with him and all.

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[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

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At Mathews Inc, Austin finalised his flight details one last time before he placed the receiver down.

He leaned back in his chair and clicked his pen. He wanted to know how it went with the investors. Was she successful? He trusted her but investors were a tricky bunch of people. He breathed out, straightened up and opened the file that he had been working on ever since he arrived at the office. An hour till lunch time, not that he uses his lunch time though.

Meanwhile Alora walked inside the building for the first time. Of course she had said lunchtime and maybe that woman might be unavailable by lunch just to avoid her since she hated her. So she had the element of surprise on her side and she was banking on her intelligence to find Celine's office. She passed by reception and the receptionist raised an eyebrow. Who was that woman and why was she here? Did she make an appointment? She left what she was doing to follow her before she got inside the elevator.

“Ms do you have an appointment?”

“Yes.” Alora pressed the buttons and the doors opened for her. She stepped inside and the receptionist walked over to the desk to call security. She has never seen that woman before and if she made an appointment, she was supposed to give her name. The doors closed and the receptionist placed the receiver against her cheek.

“Security? There is a woman in a white shirt, blonde braids and jeans who just took the lift. Not sure if she made an appointment because she didn’t give her name. She just took the lift and not sure which floor she is going to end up on.” She listened at the other end.

“Okay. Thank you so much.”

She placed the receiver down and resumed with her duties. Meanwhile in the elevator Alora wiped her hands clean with her wet wipe and she wiped the buttons once more. She was going to the very last floor. When the elevator stopped, she stepped out and the hallway was empty and cold. She walked past two offices with name tags on the doors. She passed by Austin’s office. The glass

walls were tinted so she was sure he couldn't see her. She stopped by his door and touched the name tag. Maybe she should see him now? She shook her head and continued walking and was surprised that that was how big his office was. She finally stopped by Celine's door and she knocked once. There was no response. She knocked the second time around before she opened the door and walked inside the office. She frowned seeing Celine with her head on the desk.

"Celine?" She walked closer and she patted her back.

"Celine? Wake up! The woman you detest is here for lunch." Alora said in an attempt to get her to wake up but she wasn't. Sh*t! She shook the woman and she was unresponsive. She placed her bag down and walked out of the office only to be met by security.

"Who are you and what do you want?" The security men tried to touch her and she moved back.

"I made an appointment and instead of trying to

question me you should be helping her. Tshiboga mo tseleng.”(get out of the way)

“Ms we are trying to be nice and to escort you out.” One of the buff guys said.

Alora ignored him as she tried to walk past but he held her hand and twisted her arm. What the f*ck? She let out a scream. He was hurting her.

“It would be in your best interest to cooperate with us.”

“Let go of my hand. I can report you for assault. I made an appointment.”

“You’ll solve this in the reception, please leave with us.” Some of the security men were by Celine’s side and one was holding a phone.

“No! Let go of my hand.” Alora didn’t want to use the fact that her boyfriend was on the same floor. Of course once he let go she was still going to report, she wasn’t even fighting him and he twisted her hand, it was starting to ache where he held her wrist.

“Ma’am cooperate.” She groaned.

“Let go of my hand!” She raised her voice a bit and the man shoved her out of the office still holding her hand in that tight vice grip.

“Let me go!!” Her voice went a pitch higher.

In his office, Austin paused hearing voices on the hall. That voice was too familiar for him not stand up and see what was happening. He was by the door in seconds and he opened it to find the security team, well in particular one of the security team members fighting with what he recognised as his girlfriend.

“What’s going on?” His voice boomed and Alora turned to face him. Her face was red and she was angry at the buff man holding her.

“He is assaulting and I swear Robert, I’m opening a case.” She spat out and the man was confused at the way she addressed their boss.

“Sir, she was intruding and wasn’t supposed to be

here.” The security guy said without letting Alora go.

“Let her go.” He did and he watched Alora rub her wrist. She glared at the man and rolled her eyes.

“You’ll be reported. I wasn’t even fighting you for fuck’s sake.” Alora retorted before she faced Austin.

“Your mother is unresponsive in her office.” She said and Austin’s heart nearly stopped on his chest. Alora shot glares at the man who had manhandled her.

“Instead of fighting me they should be helping Celine but no, they chose to want to bully me because of my size. Men are disgusting.” Alora went on as Austin walked to his mother’s office while Alora and the security team followed. Austin looked at the men inside and they straightened up.

“Sir, we called an ambulance and it’s on it’s way.” One of the men said.

Alora walked closer to Austin who was by his mother’s desk checking her pulse and it was faint but there. This wasn’t it right? It better not be the end. She said she has less than three months and

that means she at least has over 70 days to live. Alora ignored her bruising wrist and she placed a hand on his back.

“She’ll be ok.” She said quietly and he sucked in a deep breath. The security team was confused by the presence of this woman who was comfortable with the boss. Austin straightened up and his eyes looked at them and landed on the guy who had manhandled Alora. His features were calm and composed like always but there was something about the way he looked at the man that unsettled him more. Austin picked up Alora’s hand and he pushed the shirt back, her skin was bruising. Of course he knew she bruised easily and that was a bruise he didn’t put there on her wrists.

“I’ll be okay.” She said as she tried to pull her hand away.

“I’ll massage you later.” He assured her under his breath and she nodded before she finally pulled her hand away.

“I’ll talk to you after lunch.” The buff man nodded

and Austin looked at the desk, the ambulance might take it's sweet time and he didn't have time.

“Get my car keys in the office and my phone. I'm taking her to the hospital.” He said and Alora picked her laptop bag before she walked out, being intentional on her giving that man an angry glare as she walked to Austin's office. She looked at it and she walked over to the desk to pick his phone and car keys. That was it right? She breathed out and quickly walked out. Austin was already heading to the elevator with his mother in his arms. She hoped Celine was going to be okay.

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[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

By the parking lot, Austin got in the driver's seat and placed his hands on the steering wheel. He could feel his hands shaking and he leaned back covering his face.

“Lora, can you drive to the hospital?” He asked in a whisper. Alora nodded and he got out of the car as he briskly walked over to her side while she jumped to the driver's seat. She breathed in and out as she settled on the seat. She glanced over to the back where Celine was unconscious and she placed her hands on the steering wheel as Austin rubbed his face. She didn't know whether to tell him she'll be okay or what because e what if it was serious? She started the car and reversed out of the parking spot as Austin glanced over to the back. She had never seen him that anxious and he was eerily quiet. She didn't say anything as she finally drove off.

Reba sat on the couch as she thought about Alora's offer and what her therapist had said as well. Violet had put things in perspective for her and it made sense. Everyday she always said she was more than drugs but she always used the excuse that she used to be a user to put off things. Maybe it won't be that bad because she will be working with her sister and only her face is photographed not her body and she won't be touched indecently. She breathed out, Hades better come out and she'll tell him about the changes and everything that has been happening. She'll wait for Alora and they'll talk.

Twenty minutes later, Austin was out of the car first and he opened the back door to pick his mother out. Alora watched silently. As much as this man had said life will still be the same without his mother, a

part of him cared about her but he didn't want to acknowledge it. She licked her lips as he walked to the door and she blinked back tears. Breathing out, she got out of the car and locked it before she followed his steps. Inside, she found Celine being out on a stretcher and the nurses and doctor whisked off with her while Austin finally sat down on a bench and took a moment to breath. She sat next to him and he placed a hand on her thighs, his fingers rubbing small circles there.

“She'll be okay. Let's have hope.”

He didn't answer her and just silently rubbed her thigh. Alora let him be. He was so used to touching her even when she had told him she didn't like to be touched. His touch didn't revolt her, she loved it and him. She placed her head on his shoulder. It seemed kind of selfish to tell him about how the meeting went especially this kind of setting. They were both worried about his mother and she was waiting for a barrage of questions about why she was in the building but she figured they'll deal with that later. He took her hand and held it while she

breathed out softly.

“Are you okay?” It was a stupid question she knew that.

“Yeah.” She wasn’t convinced but just nodded.

“She’ll be okay.” But the truth was she wasn’t going to be okay because in a few months Celine is dying and leaving this earth and her only son still hasn’t found a way to accept that and has been telling himself he never needed his mother, he will be fine. Deep down knowing he wasn’t. Austin looked at their joint hands, he didn’t understand why he was that affected about the woman. They weren’t even close and the woman whose death should affect him like that was his girlfriend’s. He hated to admit it to himself that always touching her, even in the smallest of ways kind of compensated for the childhood he had. He was never hugged or comforted or anything physical that showed that his mother had loved him. Once Celine got the go ahead, he was still leaving tomorrow.

“I love you okay?” His fiery dreamer reminded him

before she kissed his cheek for a brief moment and retracted. She didn't like PDA so the kiss didn't last and he was counting the minutes till she moved her head and just looked at him. She was the reason he even believed he was capable of loving another.

“Love you.” And she moved her head and let go of his hand. She folded her arms.

“Love you ke eng yaanong? Wena o nale go tena motho.”(what's love you? You have this tendency of annoying me.) he chuckled and he saw a smile break out from her lips before she shook her head and composed her features.

“Say it properly or don't say it.” She went on and he smiled.

“J e't aime mon cheriè.” She looked down and smiled before she lifted her head.

“Better.”He took her hand back from her and held it as he breathed out.

“But we'll wait to hear what the doctor has to say.”

“Does it make any difference? She is dying in less

than three months.”

“Still. She is your mother.”

“I know that fact darling.”

“And you care.”

“I don’t.”

“For someone with a fucking high IQ you know how to lie to yourself.” He shrugged off that comment.

“There is still time.”

“Time for what?”

“Anything. Go on dates with her, as awful as she is.” She shook her head and Austin smiled.

“You’re pretty awful too.”

“Oh I know, I’m the better kind of awful while Celine is the awful awful. I was scared when I was at her desk and mo pelong ke ha ke re tsoga moloi ke wena tlhe ke go chekile.”(in my heart I was like, wake up you witch, I have come to check up on you.)

Austin laughed and she smiled.

“Between her and I, I’m most likely to kill you in your sleep.”

“Empty threats Alora.”

“One day is one day. I’ll crush your balls and all that.” He moved his lips to her ear.

“Those balls that you held delicately as if they would crack if you let them go? Yeah right.” Her face flushed and she pushed him back.

“I take back my words, I hate you. Get away from me satan!”

“You’re stuck with me for life.”

“I don’t know what sin I committed to be stuck with you for life. God hear me out.”

“God isn’t here, I am.” She rolled her eyes and he stole a kiss. They are going to be okay, she was going to convince him to spend time with his mother. He broke it and she touched his jaw before she retracted her hand.

“Anyways, let’s wait to hear what the doctor has to say.”

“Why were you at the office?” The questions came earlier than expected.

“To see your mother. She’s a witch, I’m a little devil. I was sure we would get along.” He smiled and kissed her. She was sweet. Why would she want to see the woman who made her cry when they first met? His girl made a combination of a mean Angel and a sweet devil.

“You were sure?”

“Pretty sure. Throw in a bunch of words about how she is dying and all that...”

He chuckled. He wasn’t offended.

“And now she has to be nice, heaven is the goal or else she is going to hell. I am sure we were going to get along just fine.”

“I’ll have to see this for myself.”

“You’ll see.”

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Fours hours and two takeaways later, Alora and Austin were still sitting by the bench together. Austin lost in thought and Alora sleepy. She fought to keep her eyes open because for crying out loud it was only 4pm in the afternoon and she shouldn't be this sleepy. She should be fully supporting her boyfriend and giving him emotional support.

“You should rest. Should I call my driver to take you home?”

“You're not getting rid of me that easily. I'd rather poke you instead.” He chuckled and pushed her

braids back.

“How did today go?” She yawned, fighting hard not to let her head rest on his shoulder.

“It was good.”

“I need more than that.”

“You don’t have to worry about that now.”

“I’m listening. Today was your day.” She lost the fight against her fatigued body and placed her head on his shoulder. He kissed her forehead and she pushed him back.

“Don’t do that. It’s distracting.” She yawned again. He kissed her and his lips lingered on her head.

“I got the cash injection. Monday I’m signing.”

“Say it with a little more enthusiasm love.” Her heart fluttered.

“I’m tired. I’m lethargic at the moment but I was jumping for joy. I swear I was singing with the angels. I was elated.”

“Sweetheart?”

“Hmm?”

“I’m proud of you. So proud of you.”

Tears glistened in her eyes as another kiss landed on her forehead.

“You make me proud each day.”

“And you’re so glad you’re mine?”

“It should be the other way round but we should celebrate.”

“I’m not in the mood for people.” She concluded and closed her eyes.

“When the witch wakes up, let me know.” He couldn’t help but smile.

An hour later, Alora’s senses slowly came back to reality but only this time she wasn’t sitting on the bench. She could feel his chest and his cologne was all around her. She opened her eyes slowly before she moved her head. A yawn escaping her lips.

“She is awake.”

“Me?”

“No dummy. Her.” Alora rolled her eyes and weakly hit his chest, the sleepy fog over her clearing up.

“I’m not dumb. I will feed you silver and you’ll die a slow death. Don’t test me Robert.” He shook his head and she pushed her braids back. She realised she was sitting on top of him and she quickly got up on her feet. Alora looked at Celine who was hooked onto machines and she was just looking at them. Lora looked at mother and son more than once before she rubbed her eyes.

“Glad you’re not in the land of the dead as of yet.” She stated out and Celine wheezed.

“I guess that is a good sign, you laughed.” Austin shook his head. Alora was seriously casually throwing in jokes about his mother’s death and she wasn’t offended?

“Robert, can you excuse us for a second?” He raised an eyebrow and she fully turned to look at him. Her eyes begging him and promising him at

the same time. He didn't move an inch and she groaned frustrated. Did he want her on her knees begging him? It was like he read her mind and he nodded and she gave him a hot glare. All she saw was the tent in his pants rising and she face palmed. What the hell was wrong with this man? He finally stood up.

"I'll be back in thirty minutes." He walked out and Alora sat down on the war, chair looking at Celine.

"How are you feeling?" She asked and Celine wheezed. She was really struggling and it was painful to watch. This woman was a force to be reckoned with in business and her own body was failing her. It kind of made Alora sad, was this how her mother's weak health had failed her before she died? In the letter she had said she was really sick but the doctors found nothing. She sighed and pushed those thoughts away. She got up and filled a glass with water before she walked over to the bed.

"This doesn't make us friends, you still hate me okay?" Alora said as she removed the oxygen mask

and helped her drink the water. Slowly. She wasn't used to being that delicate to people. When she was sure Celine had enough she moved the glass away and put the mask back on. She sat down and breathed out.

"It's okay if you can't talk, I am not sure why you hate me but people always do so it's not surprising but Austin? At least in your last few days show him you care in some way." Alora paused as Celine listened, breathing heavily.

"He deserves that little bit of care even that glimpse of love from you." Alora stood up and walked across the room, her heels clicking on the floor. How can she tell her that her own heart broke when Austin said Alora was the only person who loved him. God, she loved him so much and she would jump off a cliff for that man.

"Just that." Celine nodded and tried to remove her mask.

"Please don't. Tla ga gotwe ke ego bolaile e se nako."(they'll say I killed you.) Celine wheezed and

Alora rolled her eyes.

“Bathong, stop wheezing. It’s not cute.” Celine wheezed again, in an attempt to laugh.

“Molwetsi ke yoo!” (this patient though) Celine removed the mask and gasped for air while Lora shook her head.

“Die ee! Akere o batla gone?”(die. You want that right?)

“Th-than-thank you.” She croaked out and Alora nodded.

“For what?”

Celine looked at the door and Alora understood. Austin.

“Wi-with you he-he’ll be oook.” She continued and Lora licked her lips. She hoped so. She really hoped so.

She sat down and Celine was still gathering more strength to speak.

“H-he l-loves you n-not me.” Alora didn’t react to that. Austin had love in him, he had a lot of love in

him. If he was able to love himself in that way, he could love. He was just not shown that growing up, he covered it up with smart, wit, narcissism and manipulation.

“Celine you can make the next few months enjoyable. You can try.”

“I-I’m so-sorry.” Her voice was getting more faint and Alora leaned back. She should probably be enjoying this but she wasn’t. Celine was struggling and it showed that at the end of the day we were all human.

“For th-tha-that night.” She finally said and put back on her mask.

“Your impending death cancels out that night.” Celine wheezed more, her body was in pain but this girl’s humour was supposed to make her mad but it made her laugh.

“Themma ae.” She wheezed out more and Alora rolled her eyes.

“His 25th birthday is on Sunday...” Celine removed the mask. She put it back on. Maybe this time

Austin won't be taking the first flight out of the country to spend his birthday alone. Maybe she was wrong.

"Austin is self conceited but I have ideas for his birthday on Sunday. If the doctor clears you, will you spend the day with him? Then dinner with us?" Celine looked at this girl whom she thought was similar to her and would be cold to her son.

"I hate begging but your death should be enough motivation to agree. We'll assume you said yes because you care about your son. Thank you and do you need anything to eat? I won't poison the food." Celine wheezed and Alora folded her arms.

"I'll bring whatever and call Austin." Alora was out in seconds. She looked around and couldn't find Austin anyway.

Meanwhile in the doctor's office, Austin leaned back in the chair. It seemed as if her days were getting shorter and now that the doctor was saying her mother had took too many pain pills, her body was

used to it and already her body was failing her but now it's worse.

“She is in the last stage, there is nothing that can be done. We’ll have to wait.” That was it. Wait for death to take her and that would be it? The end? He understood but he wasn’t sure his heart did.

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Austin walked out of the doctor’s office. He needed a moment to gather his bearings.

Meanwhile in Celine's room, the woman looked around. She wasn't sure how much time she had but maybe a month or two? She closed her eyes, her body was in pain and she really needed the morphine or whatever pain killer they can give to her in high dosages so she could at least function. Sleep got to her and she was out like a light bulb. Alora sat on the bench waiting for Austin so they can go buy food for his mother. He could use the fresh air as well. She looked at her nails then her shoes as she released a sigh. She prayed that Celine is strong enough to be here for at least three months. She looked around and pushed her braids back. Where was Austin? He couldn't leave without her right? She had the car keys unless he called his driver but he would never. Just as she debated with her mind, a very somber Austin made his way to him.

"You're done?"

"I was waiting for you. Let's go get food." He raised an eyebrow.

“You could use the fresh air, you look like you need it.” She got up on her feet and walked ahead of him.

“Robert, me walking means you should follow as well.” She said and he turned on his heels and followed her. Their walk was silent and Austin sank into his thoughts once again.

At Susan’s house, Susan knocked on Alora’s bedroom door and opened when there was no answer.

“Alo-“ there was no one inside. Of course Alora was clean and all but she wasn’t in here. She breathed out. She didn’t mention that she wouldn’t be coming home. She walked over to Reba’s bedroom door and knocked.

“Come in.”

She opened the door.

“Has Alora passed by?” Straight to the point.

“She hasn’t. I’m sure she is on her way.”

“Have you called her?” Susan asked and Reba shook her head. She trusted her sister was okay and if anything was wrong she would have told her.

“She is okay. She is probably with Austin.”

Susan nodded.

“I wanted to know how the interview went.”

“She’ll tell us once she gets here.”

“How did the doctor’s appointment go?”

“It was okay. I think. She’ll call me once she gets the results for most of the tests we conducted but so far so good.”

“Glad to hear that. Dinner will be ready in two hours.”

“Alright.” Susan closed the door and Reba paged through magazines looking at makeup models whilst simultaneously searching up on the web as well.

Susan leaned against the wall, she wasn’t going to

feel left out. Alora will tell them, Alora was an adult capable of making her decisions and if she decided to be with her boyfriend it was okay. She assured herself. She sucked in a breath before she composed herself and walked away.

Alora drove to the shops as Austin closed his eyes. His birthday was near and she had been surprised that he wasn't pestering her about it. She was sure he would be telling her to worship the ground he walked on because he was that narcissistic but he didn't. It was like the day didn't even exist in his calendar.

"Austin?" He opened his eyes just as she parked the car and stopped the engine.

"What's bothering you?" She asked him. She didn't want to push him though.

"Nothing. We've arrived?" She nodded and she

didn't push further on the topic as she got out of the car while he got out as well. She locked it and walked over to his side. His hand found the small of her back as they walked side by side, the mood gloomy and dark. Alora still didn't say anything. Their quick shopping was a quiet one with him holding the basket as Alora picked out the items. He was too silent for her liking and she hated that he didn't want to open up to her but she had to be patient with him. It all took less than thirty minutes and then they were on their way to the hospital. She drove again as he closed his eyes. Tears filled her eyes but she blinked them away and focused on the road.

At the hospital, they made their way to Celine's room and she was asleep as Alora placed the plastic by her table. She didn't wanted to wake Celine up but what if she wakes up tomorrow? She had to eat.

"I'm waking her up okay?" Austin just nodded as he sat down. Alora gently shook Celine.

“Hey, wake up. I brought the food and it’s not poisoned.” Austin couldn’t help the smile that pulled at his lips. Celine opened her eyes and Alora shook her head. She helped her sit upright as Celine groaned in pain. She looked at Austin who was observing silently. Not a single emotion on his face and she thought maybe just maybe Alora was wrong, Austin didn’t need her and she was wasting his time.

“Robert, pass me the yoghurts and the banana. But wait, let me wash my hands.” She walked out and Austin looked at Celine. He didn’t know what to say, he didn’t want to acknowledge the part of him that was hurt that she was dying. There was no hope of her getting better soon because from here it was going to go from bad to worse and he should brace himself.

“How are you feeling?” That was his feeble attempt at starting a conversation with her. He has never known how to care or even love her when she never showed her those things as a boy till now. It was foreign to associate such concepts with his mother.

Celine removed the oxygen mask.

“B-better.” She was lying. She was in so much pain and she wanted to rest. She wanted to close her eyes and escape the pain, why weren’t they giving her pain medication?

Austin stop up and fixed her pillow so she could be comfortable. He took the mask from her hand and placed it on her face. She wasn’t okay. He was in new territory and he didn’t know how to act. Luckily Alora came back. Her shirt rolled back and her arms all pink. He gave her a look and she shrugged.

“Now pass me the yoghurt le banana.” He passed them to her and watched her peel the banana. She used the spoon to cut it into pieces and threw them on the yoghurt before she removed Celine’s mask.

“Will this be enough?” She asked her and she nodded. Austin tilted his head, no harsh words were exchanged and now he was starting to believe that they are getting along. Alora fed Celine two spoonfuls before she took a two minute break then fed her again.

“Tota if you weren’t dying, I was going to hold this moment over your head forever.” Celine wheezed and Alora shook her head hiding a smile.

“Eat. It’s almost finished. A few spoonfuls to go.” Alora coerced and once the yoghurt was finished she placed the empty container on the table and she didn’t know what to use to wipe her mouth. Her wipes were in the car. She took the handkerchief in Austin’s pocket and wiped Celine’s mouth.

“You can sleep now. And no, not forever yet. You still have months to go.” Celine wheezed once again and closed her eyes as her oxygen mask was placed back on her face.

Alora looked at Austin, she could read him better now.

“We should probably go.” He stood up and they walked out.

“We should go back to the office and get her stuff and pack her an overnight bag right? What did the doctor say?” She asked him as he took her hand.

“She is going to get worse from here.” Alora

released a sigh. Damn!

“Let’s get her stuff from the office and pack her bag. Do you have keys to her house?” He nodded but he never really needed them that much because he rarely went there.

An hour later, inside Celine’s house Alora was showed Celine’s bedroom to pack while Austin walked up the stairs to his bedroom. Tears stung in his eyes as his steps got slower and slower, his heart beating slowly. He finally got to his bedroom and pushed open the door but didn’t quite close it as he caught his breath. Fighting the tears, the hollow ache in his heart. His knees gave out as he held onto the study desk for balance. He had a feeling so peculiar that this pain would be forevermore. What if it had been different? What if she really loved him as a mother should but it still wouldn’t change the multiple stabs in his heart, the

way he wanted to scream and cry, something that was foreign to him. His tears blinded him as he sucked in a deep breath. The tears rolled down his cheeks on their own and they kept on coming as he locked his jaw trying not to let out a sound.

Alora finished packing and she walked out of the bedroom to place the bag in the living room. Now to find Austin, she thought she heard him taking the stairs. She slowly took the stairs and she didn't have to look further, she saw the open door and stepped inside. He was hunched over the desk and she walked closer.

“Austin?” He didn't answer her as she tentatively placed her hands on his back. He was so stiff. Then hunched down as best as she could to look at his face. Her heart nearly stopped. She saw tears, as if he was fighting with himself. She let go of his back, she didn't know how to comfort people but this was the love of her life and he needed her. She held his shoulders.

“I’m here okay?” She tried to get him to straighten up which he did, probably knowing if he refused she was going to force him. She wrapped an arm around his torso.

“I’m here for everything and anything.” She softened her voice and used her other hand to wipe his tears. He was only human and he couldn’t pretend otherwise. She licked her lips as more tears rolled down his cheeks.

“You can let it go.” He blinked as he sniffed.

“It’s nothing.” She shook her head. He was talking about the pain as if it was alright but she suspected it was taking his energy and his happiness that his mother was dying.

“She is really dying?” He started out, voice trembling with emotion and her heart cracked. There was no getting around this, she was dying and as hard as it was to swallow, Celine was dying. She nodded and he removed her hand as he covered his face. She followed him and held him.

“Yo-you shouldn’t be dealing with this.” He stuttered.

He actually stuttered and Alora held back tears. This was eating him alive and she wanted to shield him from the pain of heartbreak so bad.

“Austin, we are a team. Equals. Together.”

“Alora it’s not your mountain to carry!”

“You are right. It’s not mine. It’s ours. Babe this is a safe space. I’m your safe space...” she blinked back the tears while looking up at him.

“I shouldn’t be feeling like this..”

“It’s normal. She’s your mother.” He held her tight as he cried and Alora let her own tears fall.

“Why couldn’t she l-love me like other kids?” His chest vibrated and his voice shook so bad. Alora couldn’t answer that. She wasn’t Celine.

“How were you able to love me?”

“Because you are you.” She whispered.

He breathed into her neck, his tears wetting her neck and shirt collar.

“We’ll get through it.” He never got enough love.

That was why he was crying and it broke her heart. God if her love was enough to fill that hollow ache his mother left in his heart, she would give it in abundance. She rubbed the back of his head as his sobs broke her each second as he cried.

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[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

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Alora cradled his head on her lap as he sniffed. She used her other hand to wipe her own tears.

“I love you okay? Everyday and all the time.” She

softly said and kissed his head.

“We’re together in this okay?” She reassured him as he went silent. The sun had already set and it was getting dark outside. Alora thought it best that she spends the weekend with him, she was still going to do that but now? He needed her. Even if it’s just to hold him while he cries. She didn’t want him to hurt under the surface. She kissed his head again and held him.

“This life thing has no balance my love okay? Sometimes we lose people we never expected to lose. It hurts like hell but darling nobody said that it will last forever, in another life we’ll see them again and be reunited as different individuals. If it does happen which I’m not promising it will, our loved ones’ characteristics may be evident in our children.” She kissed him again.

“But now, the time we have... Whether it’s a week or maybe more than the months that the doctor gave, we have to make the best out of it. It may be awkward at first but memories last a lifetime, she may be gone but she’ll always be in your heart and

mind. Death is inevitable but memories will always carry you through the day.” Austin nodded as she kissed him again.

“I’m always here.” She said one last time and she let silence envelope them as she smiled sadly. Austin didn’t move his head and she rubbed his head.

“Should I play music?” She asked and she heard him chuckle. It was kind of sad. He finally lifted his head and his eyes were red and were starting to swell. She held his jaw and kissed his cheek then nose and forehead like he always does to her.

“Let’s drop off her clothes then we can go home.” He nodded and she stood up before taking his hand. She was surprisingly still in her boot heels, she didn’t care about how her makeup probably looked after the crying session.

“Can we freshen up first?” He croaked. His voice coarse and didn’t sound like him at all.

“Okay. I’ll drive, I like driving you around. If I wasn’t a brand owner I wouldn’t mind driving you around.” He chuckled as he got on his feet while holding her

hand. In some way it was kind of sweet that a big man like him was leaning on her. He held her hand tight as they walked out of his childhood bedroom and made their way down the stairs. She picked the bag she packed for Celine as they walked out of the house. He locked the house as she walked to the car. She placed the bag in the backseat and opened her laptop bag to take out her phone. She then opened the driver's door to get inside while she waited for him to get in the car. The minute he got in she started the car and connected her phone to the car Bluetooth.

“I'm playing music autwe?” He buckled up as she picked the night's playlist.

She breathed out and reversed out of the yard as the song started playing. Austin allowed himself to concentrate on the song instead on his racing mind. He pressed the button on the keys to close the gate the minute Alora had safely reversed. She then buckled up and she looked at him.

“I love you for infinity.” He gave her a smile.

“Endgame.” She smiled back as he watched her drive. Her makeup was all ruined and today was her day but she was here with him. Helping him with his mother and she wasn’t complaining. She was the sweetest and she didn’t even know. Alora’s favourite part of the song started playing.

I’ve been in the dark, I’ve been counting stars
You’ve been in my heart, through the heavy parts
When it’s all too much to feel
Heal me oh sweet chamomile
I’ve been in the dark with a racing mind
You’ve been in my thoughts almost every night
When it’s all too much to feel
Heal me oh sweet chamomile

She sang along and he shook his head.

“You have a terrible voice.”

“Do I look like I care?” He chuckled as she sang the whole drive home and he appreciated her cheering him up in her weird way. She had replayed that song the whole journey he was sure he knew the lyrics and some parts of him related to the lyrics but he didn’t want to think much about it.

Once they were home thirty minutes later, they had one long shower before they got ready to go drop off Celine’s things. Alora picked her phone after she got dressed and dialed Susan.

“Rora hi.”

“Hi, I won’t be home this weekend unless it’s to pick some of my clothes.” She heard Susan sigh.

“There is nothing I can do? You rarely spend time with us Alora. We do understand that you are dating and all but now you are rarely home and you still live with your parents. If he breaks your heart we’ll be here picking up the pieces.” Alora looked at Austin who slid the t-shirt over his head, he smiled at her and she smiled back.

“He won’t. And if staying with you guys is a problem I can move out, I’m left with picking out a few furniture pieces.” She replied with an even voice.

“You need family Alora. Right now we all want to know how the interview went and at this hour you decided you aren’t coming home. We wanted to celebrate with you.”

“Su I know. I’m not sure why you’re making a big deal out of me staying with him for the weekend.” Austin raised an eyebrow as she pushed her braids back.

“You are almost with him 24/7 and you act as if we don’t exist in your world. As I said Rora, you do need us. Your family. Boyfriends come and go. Is that how you’re going to behave every time you get a new boyfriend?” She huffed. Now Susan was starting to annoy her.

“I don’t know why you’re being negative out of the blue. This is one of the reasons why I never share anything happening in my life, I always tell you if I’m spending the night. Right now it’s important and it’s

something I can't share unless he tells me to share it but tota I don't know where the negativity comes from. Now it's 'he's going to break your heart.' Fine! He'll break it akere ke pelo yame and when have I ever cried in your presence Susan?" Susan went silent.

"Exactly! Ever since I was six, you have never seen me shed a tear and it surely won't start now. I'm stronger than that. Have a good night," she hung up and Austin slid his feet in his slides.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Sometimes that woman frustrates the hell out of me. Are you done? I'm almost done just need to wear my shoes." She walked to his closet and picked her slides. She looked at her bruised wrist. Damn that security guard. Now it is going to take days to heal. She slid her feet inside as Austin hugged her from behind.

"Thank you."

"I'd do it a thousand times over." He kissed her neck and she leaned against him. She inhaled his raw

masculine scent with a smile on her lips. They were going to be okay.

The following day at Austin's house, Alora was the first one up in the morning and she traced his jaw with her fingers before she touched his chest. Tomorrow was going to be his day with his mother and they were going to pick her from the hospital to take her to her house this afternoon. With a private nurse and all. People who had money could make anything happen. He opened one eye and she removed her hand.

"Don't stop on my account." His morning voice had her squealing internally. She placed her head back on the pillow and looked at him.

"I love you." He smiled and kissed her lips slowly and gently before he got on top of her and she rolled her eyes.

“It wasn’t an invitation for you to mount me.” He chuckled.

“Shut up!” He French kissed her and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

Alora felt the tears leak onto the pillow as she came and he shot his seed into her fertile womb. He slid out as her body had slight tremors from that gentle orgasm and the slow love making. For the first time he was slow with her and took his time and he didn’t have to say a word, he showed her how much he loved her. He used his thumb to wipe her tears and she cried more.

“mon coeur.”(my heart) he kissed her lips and she placed her hands on his chest.

“What were you saying about babies yesterday?” She gave a humourless laugh as he wiped her tears.

“I am not birthing your monsters. I would rather choke on spit.” He chuckled.

“You said something about characteristics of our

loved ones on our children.”

“I was consoling you.” He smiled and kissed her. The next time he shouldn’t get caught in the moment and should make use of the box of condoms in his drawer. He promised her he would take caution.

“I see.” He smiled and she couldn’t help but smile back.

“You’re making me breakfast?” She asked and he moved his head lower to kiss her abdomen and looked up at her.

“I spoil you too much.” She shrugged and he looked at her shaven p*ssy. He wanted to take her again but he controlled himself.

“I’m a useless cook.”

“Learn.”

“My boyfriend knows how to and cooking is not a gender role, so you keep cooking and I’ll stick to making everything spotless.” He moved up her body and kissed her. He opened his drawer and broke the

kiss. Still on top of her, he picked out a condom and handed it to her.

“Put it on.” She blinked and just held it. She didn’t know how. This was their first time using one and well she has never used one ever since he broke her virginity.

“I’ll guide you. You know I always do sweetheart.” She sucked in a breath and nodded.

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Next inserts will follow after 4pm.

[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

Alora spoke over the phone with her sister as Austin drove them to the hospital.

“What did the doctor say? How was the therapy session?”

“I get the results on Monday and therapy with Violet is always insightful. Don’t you want to try therapy?”

“I’m fine.”

“I can’t wait for you to tell me how it went yesterday.”

“I’ll tell you everything on Monday. But are you okay?”

“I see a future.” Alora leaned back.

“For the first time in years, I’m thinking of the future, Rora I always thought I would be dead before I reach my thirties but now I see a life beyond that and it’s beautiful.”

“You are beautiful and I can’t and won’t even try to imagine a life without you.” Alora said in all seriousness. Her sister was powered by the sun.

She was the colour yellow without even trying. All so bright and making everyone happy.

“Thank you. What did you do?” Alora paused.

“What do you mean?”

“Mother was sad throughout dinner yesterday after she called you.” Alora pushed her braids back.

“She was being negative and all.”

“Was she?” Alora paused as Austin stopped at the red light and she stared out the window.

“Mom has her faults but she does try mme. I know she never approaches things the right way and father does that on her behalf but she does try. Alora you keep forgetting that I do know you and you have a sharp tongue, you probably hurt her feelings.” Alora didn’t like the guilt that settled in her heart.

“Anyway, we’ll talk. Bye.” Reba hung up and Alora chewed on her bottom lip. Austin glanced at her.

“Talk to me.”

“Can you make a U-turn?” She pushed her braids

back with a sigh.

“Why?” She didn’t want to answer the question.

“Alora I’m not turning unless I know the reason.”

“Now you’re angry at me?” He just raised an eyebrow and she pushed her braids back once again. She removed the hair tie on her wrist and tied her braids to stop herself from pushing them back.

“Alora just speak.”

“I-I kind of fucked up okay...”

“And?”

“Okay don’t turn then.” The lights went green and he drove off. Alora picked her phone but placed it down on her lap again. He swerved off the road and parked under a tree before looking at her.

“I’m listening.” She released a sigh before she told him and he leaned back in the driver’s seat.

“Okay.” Was all he said before he started the car. She had thought he was going to say something insightful or profound but he said that and joined the road. She closed her eyes. Thirty minutes later

he woke her up.

“We’ve arrived.” She opened her eyes and was expecting the hospital parking lot but he was parking right outside her parents house.

“You can’t be a hypocrite and tell me to spend time with my mother but you don’t spend time with your family plus from the way you explained it, you were being rude.” He kissed her cheek.

“You’re smart and you know your priorities my fiery dreamer.” He went on.

“But tomo-“

“You’ll call then.” He extended his arm to open the door for her from the inside.

“Austin..but y-“

“Go or I’ll carry you out of the car myself.” Her eyes begged him but he didn’t waver. She unbuckled and she got her phone then got out of the car. He smiled as she held the door.

“My laptop is at your place.”

“I’ll have my driver deliver it. Bye sweetheart.” She

closed the door and he drove off. She looked at the house and she leaned against the high wall. Isdima sakhe wanted her to thug it out but the guilt said otherwise and she licked her lips again. No makeup or heels to give her that boost. She was in slides and her face was bare of any makeup. She sucked in a deep breath.

Meanwhile in the car, Austin checked the time. He should pick Celine up and leave her with her nurse, maybe after he comes back on Wednesday his mind will be clear. He was so used to spending his birthdays alone and in a secluded area, different places every year. By 6pm he should be out of the country. The driver will drop off some of Alora's things in the afternoon.

At Susan's house, Alora finally pressed the intercom. She waited for the gate to open. The gate

slid open very slowly and she stepped inside the yard. She closed her eyes. She didn't even have her purse on her. Just her phone and herself. Should she knock on the door and pretend to be speaking to the phone then head to her bedroom? She walked to the door and knocked. She could hear talking in the house and footsteps heading towards the door.

"As I—" the door opened and Susan stopped talking as she looked at Alora who faced her. Great! She was going to be disrespected by the daughter of a side chick. Just great!

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Let's pretend it's 4pm cause ke, ke rata drama shem!

[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

“Good morning...”Alora started off. Susan just looked at her.

“Mmhm..” Alora licked her lips.

“I’d like to apologise for how I got my point across yesterday. It was rude and out of line. I’m sorry.”Susan chuckled.

“No it’s okay. You are still going to disrespect me Alora. I have been nothing but a good mother and I was being concerned. I get that you are an adult but that was uncalled for.”

“I know and I’m sorry.”

“Wa its e ke eng I’ve had it up to here with you.” She placed a hand over her own throat.

“Everyday you make it out as if we don’t exist. Alora I raised you when I wasn’t even obligated to when your mother died and your father barely spent time with you because you were the one thing that was

going to destroy our marriage. In fact your mother did and I had no business raising the daughter of a side chick because bona now, you are disrespecting me because you think you made it in life because you have a rich boyfriend and where was he? Where was he when I paid those expensive school fees for that private school? Alora you are a child and you should behave like one. Everyday we have to understand you. Alora doesn't do this, Alora cleans too much, Alora likes her space, Alora is this and that. You don't see me as your mother and I guess it's okay for me not to see you as my child because you are not. You really are not biologically related to me in any way and I was doing you a favour."

Alora's throat bobbed as something stuck there and she held herself rigid.

"My own children don't disrespect me like you and it's enough. For years I have tried Alora. Ke lekile. At this point I don't even want to know whether you did well at your interview, you can move in to your mother's house. You can go Alora akere that's all you want. Go! No one will bother you and be weird

there. With your weird tendencies, maybe your mother died because she knew you would turn out to be this spiteful little brat. Waitse as much as I hate my former in-laws they warned me. Taking in the trash never is a good idea and I should have let an orphanage take you instead of burdening myself with an ungrateful little twat. So ungrateful and spiteful. Maybe this time, you would be poor and maybe like your mother destroying other people's marriages and birthing little bastards."

"your mother never loved you enough to stay and your father didn't love you. Alora if it wasn't for me you would be nothing. Nothing! Just because we tolerate you doesn't mean you are loved because you are the very object that could have destroyed this family."By the other side of the door Reba's eyes filled with tears while Thabiso's eyes widened as he listened. Alora wasn't replying or saying anything. Alora forced herself not to let tears fill her eyes. She was stronger than that. She was stronger than that. God she was stronger than that. That was a label she grew up with her whole life. It wasn't a

secret, it really wasn't.

Susan's nose flared. As all the hurt from the past came back in full force, knowing that she had cried for so long that she had been cheated on by her husband and there was proof. The proof was standing in front of her and she had tolerated her for so long, she was tired.

Alora cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry and I understand. I'll pack."

Alora said quietly but she was sure Susan heard her. Susan folded her arms.

"Ntlo ya mang? Go Alora!" And the door closed on her face. Alora's hands shook as she walked out of the yard. The gate closed and she leaned against the brick wall. She sucked in a deep breath. She was a strong girl. She was a strong girl. This was nothing. She tried to unlock her phone but it fell and she didn't want to crack. She was a strong girl. She was a strong girl. She picked her phone and wiped the screen and thought of calling Austin but he was probably helping his mother and his mother needed

him more than anything. This was nothing. She didn't have her purse on her as she sucked in a deep breath. Her composure was hanging on by a thread. She needed to go. She balanced against the wall and blinked. She was a strong girl yes, this was nothing. She dialled the cab she used sometimes and tried to keep her voice even.

“Hello. Can you pick me up? Thanks.” She hung up. She'll pay2cell him after he drops her at his mother's house. She remembered that she didn't have the house keys on her and her stuff was at Austin's house. Would she be able to pick the lock? Her throat closed in on her and she looked up at the sky. She was a strong girl. Resilient and this was nothing. Everyone had a right to their own opinion and that was hers. At least the rose coloured glass was out of the way now and she will be okay. Can she asked the cab man to pick the lock so she can get inside?

Meanwhile inside the house Reba just walked to her was shaking and she could imagine how Alora felt

being told that. She covered her mouth with her hands as she broke down crying. In the lounge Thabiso shook his head.

“Susan that was unnecessary.”

“It was. Alora has been getting away with everything for far too long. She needed to be out in her place and she isn’t anything special.” Susan walked to the kitchen leaving Thabiso standing there shell shocked.

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Another 4pm insert guys!

[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

The cab picked Alora up and she stared out the window. She repeated her mantra. She was okay. This was nothing, she had once expected this when she was ten and it only came 13 and a half years later. She was okay. She'll repay Susan. Hell, she'll beg for a loan to repay her and stay away. She'll stay away. In some context Austin's mother was better, she never showed love and here she had been tolerated and not loved. She breathed out. She was a strong girl. An okay girl. She would never have kids. Ever! She chuckled in disbelief but why was she shocked? She looked at her hands. She needs to wash her hands. She needs to do something to escape her thoughts. She needs to clean or anything. She faced the driver and tried to keep her voice even.

"Can you pick locks?" The cab driver was shocked at her question but slowly nodded.

"Good." She stared out the window. She was okay.

She was okay. She was okay. She was okay. She repeated that till she believed it.

The drive felt so long and she was almost overjoyed when they arrived.

"Can you pick the lock for me? I'll pay you extra." The cab man looked at her strangely. She didn't behave like the woman he usually picked up. It wasn't because she didn't have makeup, she looked the same. Still beautiful and definitely not because she wasn't wearing heels that helped her short height. It was definitely in her behavior and voice. He nodded and she got out of the car holding her phone as she opened the gate. He followed her to the door and she took a step back so he can pick whatever wire that was around to pick the lock. It took him five minutes and she made a mental note to find better security but for now she was grateful. She unlocked her phone and asked him to give her his number. She paid him and got inside the house before she closed the door. Her breaths slowing down and her heart breaking. In silence. She heard

the car drive off and she took that chance to head to the bedroom, fighting the tears she had been fighting for the past hour. She was right. No one could fully love her. She was spiteful and weird. Her mother' daughter. She opened the door and she knew she'll be okay. It was nothing. Just because sge couldn't call Susan mother was that it? Or was it because of what she said on the phonecall yesterday? She shook her head. It was okay, Susan wasn't obliged to take care of her. She will repay her for her troubles. Hell she never bothered them with her emotional baggage and kept a safe distance. But maybe Susan truly hated her, she didn't even stutter. She opened the wardrobe and closed herself inside. She screamed into her hands. So loud and no one heard a thing, just like she used to do when she was younger. She screamed as more tears rolled down her cheeks. Hot and burning. She will be okay after this, she has to be.

At the hospital, Austin with the help of a nurse put Celine in the car. She still had a drip attached to her and they made sure she was comfortable.

"Th-thank you." Austin tried to be closed off but it was like Alora was in his head telling him to cherish the last days he had with his mother regardless of the fact that she never loved him. Maybe he should cancel that flight. What if he goes and when he comes back, his mother might be gone? The doctors were no longer sure how long she was going to last.

"I'll take you home." Celine nodded and Austin got into the driver's seat.

"T-tell me more ab-about Alora." He smiled.

"She is a little spitfire but she can tolerate you." Celine wheezed.

"Her sense of humour rub-rubbed off on you." He smiled. He'll see her on Monday.

"I guess so. Don't overexert yourself." He said and started the car.

An hour later, when her face was hot and pink and puffy the tears stopped and the headache started. Her eyes were so heavy and she wanted to block everything out but her mind accurately replayed all the words. Word for word and it frustrated her because it brought more tears to her eyes. She had long switched off her phone when Reba and Thabiso called. The trash had walked away without any fighting and she will let it be like that. A sob escaped her lips and she cried again for the next thirty minutes in that dark closet before her exhaustion took over and she closed her eyes. Knees to face. She was okay. She didn't even bother anyone or tax with anyone's emotions. She was a strong girl. Those were her last thoughts before she dosed off.

At Susan's house, Reba bit her lower lip. Alora wasn't answering her phone. She rubbed her face. She could still feel those words in her heart and maybe her mother had been pretending. She didn't know the full details of the phonecall but for them to elicit such a response? When Alora was home she was in her room or she eating with them and calling Emory a little goblin. She has done worse things and she had never been called trash or a brat or twat. She swallowed.

Meanwhile Thabiso walked over to his car and got inside. The woman he married. Was she more like Lina? They were sisters for crying out loud and how would Emily feel knowing her daughter was being called such over her own sins? He tried her phone again but she wasn't answering. Maybe she was fine wherever she was and he was worrying over nothing.

In the house, Susan passed by Alora's bedroom. She walked back and opened the door. All her anger. She shouldn't have been kind to the little home wrecker. It was her fault. If she hadn't been born maubr she could have known peace. She picked up the chair and slammed it against the mirror. All about she is being neat and everything should be in order. Alora deserved nothing. The anger from all these years rose to the surface as she trashed the room. She bought most of these with her money. She bought everything. She didn't even call her mother and why didn't she cry earlier on like other kids? She was weird and she has had enough of tolerating Emily's trash. Enough. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she destroyed the bedroom, the iPad broke at the corner and Alora's stuff was messily thrown around the room.

"Moremi it's your fault that she is here. Acting like she is special and smarter and has needs. In my own damn house!! I hate you so much and your daughter! I hate you!" She cried out as she stopped destroying and sat down on the floor to cry.

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[06/02, 19:49] : REBORN

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Susan breathed out, exhausted from the tears. She needed to get that anger out of her heart. She wiped her face and chuckled. For years, years seeing her and knowing her husband cheated with someone who looked like her. She rubbed her eyes. She'll be fine. Alora was a child and children always go back home. She won't be angry forever, she just needed to get the anger out. That was that. She looked at the messed up room and sighed. She'll

clean it and replace everything.

Outside, Thabiso got out of his car as the intercom rang. He had heard the breaking of mirrors and just sat in his car. He pressed the button on his car keys and the gate opened. The person walked in and he greeted the person.

“Good afternoon. Mr Mathews sent me to bring Ms Moremi’s items.” Thabiso looked at the laptop bag and he took it from him. So Alora wasn’t with Austin. He would have thought she was with him.

“Thank you. I’ll give them to her.” The man walked away and Thabiso walked to the house with Alora’s laptop bag. He made his way to her bedroom and the state of the room made him pause in his tracks. Susan was on the floor amid the mess.

“What have you done?” Susan looked at him as he held Alora’s laptop bag.

“She’s here? She came back?” She asked, her heart beat going to normal and that steam blown off. She didn’t mean it. She was angry and he never got

angry to that extent.

“No. Austin’s driver brought her stuff back.” Susan held herself against the bed and stood up. She looked at the mess and the way Thabiso looked at her.

“I didn’t mean it. I just let my emotions get the better of me. I’ll clean it up and replace the broken stuff.”

He shook his head.

“I can’t recognise you anymore.” Susan wiped her tears.

“I didn’t mean that. I was angry.”

“Just because of that one phone call? She came back for crying out loud to apologise and you bamboozled her with those words. She didn’t even fight you.”

“I know and I didn’t mean it. I didn’t think it all through.”

“You meant it Susan, you said that with your whole chest and didn’t regret it after you closed the door on her. If she was such a burden, it would have

been better if you sent her to an orphanage. She was too young to even recognise you as her guardian. You used everything you did for her against her, how is that a mistake and something you didn't think through?"

"Thabiso she is always with her boyfriend and we are her family. We raised her."

"And yet again I say, have you asked yourself why she is like that? Does Mooketsi call often? Does Bokamoso call often? Reba is always locked up in her room and even when she stopped modelling she never wanted to move in. Till this day we didn't know why she took drugs. You didn't know she needed a better therapist if Alora hadn't mentioned it and Reba never said a word. Have you asked yourself why? Just why are your kids as you have pointed out in so many words that they aren't mine, are alienating you from their lives. A few days ago you were crying that they girls are excluding you but now you see why? I don't think your relationship or whatever you had with Alora will come back from this. I can still hear what you said to her and I a, not

even Alora. Reba heard you and I am sure Emory did because she headed to her bedroom silently when she thought we weren't looking." Susan wiped her tears.

"It was anger. I love Alora like my child."

"I'm not even convinced. Get help because you are bleeding on the wrong person and I feel like I'm competing with a ghost but then again you rarely listen to me as well." He walked out with Alora's laptop. What if she breaks it to. Susan fell to her knees and cried yet again.

Austin made sure his mother was comfortable as she slept and he walked out. He took his phone to try and call Alora to ask her how it went. He knew she loved her family, the girl taught him to love and he was sure they were celebrating her wins as they should. They should be proud because she was going to go places and that investment was just the

beginning. He tried to call her but her phone wasn't going through. He tried again but it still wasn't going through. He placed his phone down. Maybe she was busy and she'll call back later tonight. He dialled the airport to tell them he was cancelling his flight. He hoped he was doing the right thing here.

Reba sat on the mattress and tried calling Alora again but it wasn't going through. She pushed her windows back and Alora had long left with the cab but she didn't know where. She crashing and breaks at Alora's room where something she didn't even want to talk about. She sucked in a deep breath. She hoped Alora was okay but her nerves didn't let her assume. She had Austin's number. Maybe she's with him and here she is worried while she is with her boyfriend. She knows Hades has always been her safe place. Hades and Alora. She called Austin. He answered on the third ring.

“Hello Rebantle. Hades is well and I got an update from the rehab centre.” She smiled but it didn’t last?

“I’m glad he is hanging on. Is Alora there?”

“No, I dropped her off at home in the morning. I thought you guys were celebrating.” Reba paused.

“Celebrating?”

“Her clinching the deal and after she apologised for her rude behaviour, your sister has no filter but she loves her family.” Reba’s jaw dropped. Alora got the investment? Lora Cosmetics was actually going to happen?

“Reba, if she was there you wouldn’t be asking me if she’s with me. Where is she?”

“I-I her phone isn’t going through.” Austin cursed under his breath. Did Alora change her mind about apologising and walked away as soon as he drove off? He face palmed. He had a stubborn woman in his hands.

“She was never there?”

“Sh-she was and something happened and she

went away.” Austin didn’t bother asking what happened.

“Okay. I’ll try to find her.”

“Thank you. Tell her that I’m sorry. I am so sorry for everything.” He frowned. Was he missing something?

“Okay. Will do so.” He hung up and picked his car keys. He walked to his mother’s room first.

She was asleep and out like a light bulb. He told the nurse that he will be back and she should call him in case she wakes up.

In the dark closet, Alora slept peacefully. Her body exhausted from today’s happenings. She was out of it as the front door opened. Men in balaclavas walked inside the house. The door was unlocked and they looked around for any proof of residence.

It was the newly renovated house they have been targeting. Their van was outside and they whispered among themselves. Most of the items in this house were new and they would make a lot of money from selling the stuff inside. Today was their lucky day because the door locked picked and they didn't have to do a thing. The other one with a knife walked through all the rooms to check if there was anyone inside but there was no sign of life inside the house. It was dead quiet. If there was any sign of life, the person would be silenced immediately. It was easy. All they had to do was make it look like they were moving out.

“It's clear, we can start taking the stuff.” One said and the other got the signal as they removed their masks and whistled and talked as if this was their house.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

118

Reba sighed exhausted. She didn't want to get out of the room but when she does later on today she is going to apologise for everything. Everything even for breaking a vase when she was a pre-teen. She didn't want to be hurt with words, words have hurt her all her life which was part of the reason she was here. A recovering addict. Her and Hades. She breathed out as a gentle door knock sounded.

“Come in.” The door opened and Emory walked in holding her giant teddy bear. She smiled.

“Hey Em. What's up?” Emory walked to the bed and placed the teddy bear on the floor before she jumped on the bed. She was careful not to let her shoes touch the bedsheets. Alora never liked that

and she usually had her sit on the bed without the shoes. Always said ladies have to be clean. Which brought her here. Her child like mind failed to process why her mother has angry at Alora and said harsh words to her. She could understand most of the words but didn't know why.

“Reba why was mama angry at Alora?” Rebantle’s eyes widened. Emory heard that?

“They had a misunderstanding.” Emory tilted her head.

“But she was being mean to Alora. Will mama be that mean to me?” Reba quickly shook her head.

“Never. She will never say those words to you.” Reba knew why. Alora was not her mother’s child biologically. She only said that to Alora. No matter how angry her other kids make her, she has never had an outburst like that. Mooketsi had been pretty disrespectful to ignore culture and marry Zara without the uncles and the whole charade but she didn’t say that to him. She had been cohabiting with Hades and rarely went home unless her mother

asked her to but she never said that and it broke her heart. Alora took it and she didn't even hear a sob or anything. Just an 'I'm sorry and can I pack?' With an even voice. She never had that strength and she had a feeling she lost her sister for good.

"Sure?"

"100% sure. Mama loves us okay? She was just angry."

Emory nodded and Reba hugged her.

"Where is Rora?"

"You miss being called a goblin?" Emory giggled.

"It sounds funny and she makes me feel like the villains from Disney. She said villains are the most not understood characters and that's why she likes them." Reba kissed her sister's forehead. Maybe Alora has been feeling like a villain all along. She used to ask over and over again if she really loved her as she was. She understood why now. Had she perhaps sensed something like this? She didn't know.

“I miss her. She said one day she’ll take me to DisneyWorld.”

“She did? When?” Reba asked and Emory gasped as she covered her mouth.

“It was supposed to be our secret.”

Reba chuckled as she held her sister.

“Out with it.”

“She brings me cookies and milk when I can’t sleep and reads me bedtime stories.”

“Why don’t I know of this?”

“Because it was supposed to be a secret and she made me swear it.” Reba chuckled. Alora was so dramatic. Who makes an 8 year old swear?

“She’ll be back. And mama loves us okay? Very much.”

“Okay. I hope I never make her that angry. I’ll be a good girl.”

“Me too sweetie, me too.” She kissed her again as Emory started telling her about this girl she didn’t

like in class.

In Alora's room, Susan looked at the mess once again and she sighed. She pushed her weave back as she asked herself how she was going to clean that, Alora always knew how she placed stuff and she packed her clothes. Herbed was made in a certain way and she mopped her floors till they were spotless. Some of the books were ruined and the iPad was destroyed. She covered her face, near tears. She was just angry and she didn't mean any of those words she said. She was human got angry. Alora wasn't that offended was she? She didn't even cry and she said sorry and that was okay. She accepted that apology, Alora was coming back right? This was the only time she lost it. She has always knew Alora might have OCD, she just said that out of anger. Tears burned her eyes.

“Good God! God knows I didn't mean any of that.” If she did, she wouldn't have taken her in in the first place. She loves her, people get angry all the time and say things out of anger. Just that the anger

from the past just overshadowed the current issue. She would never intentionally hurt Alora. For God's sake she has never said that to any of her children regardless of what they did, it was just anger speaking. She'll be back home. Her stuff is here. She looked at the mess. Even though she has to sort everything out and replace stuff, home is always where the heart is.

Austin drove to her mother's house. Was it that she was there because her phone wasn't going through. He took the turn that led to the street and he parked his car next to a van that was loaded with some of the furniture he had helped put in the house. He frowned and the door was opened. Alora liked this house and worked hard on it, she wasn't around. He looked at the men as one of them paused and he could see the panic in the man's eyes. That alarmed him that this was wrong. He took out his phone and

dialled the police. Just being cautious.

“Hi, I would like to report a robbery.” He spoke over the phone for over a minute before he hung up and took a picture of the license plate.

One of the robbers noticed and they looked at each other.

“Let’s leave, this guy might bring trouble.”

“What if we kill him?”

“Then we will be charged with murder? He isn’t attacking us and he is not coming out of his car. Let’s make a run for it.” They wore their hoodies and casually closed the door as they talked to each other about moving to Maun.

“Mona, I can’t wait to start my new job at Maun and rent out this house.”

“O re tlele tswii tlhemona.”(bring us tswii) they first bumped as they got in their van and the other got in the back casually chatting. Austin chuckled. Alora’s house was robbed in daylight. She is going to burst

and it was going to be a huge setback. The car drove off and he sat in his car till the car was far gone and he was sure they wouldn't turn back. He picked his handkerchief from the compartment and he finally got out of his car. He walked over to the house and opened the door with the handkerchief. Man if he hadn't showed up her eon time, they would have wiped her clean. He took pictures just in case even though he was not going to touch anything. He walked to the bedrooms. The bed was there and he walked out. He walked into the room that had her study desk and it was still there. They probably wanted to start with the more valuable stuff like fridges and the television. If she wasn't here where was she? He walked into the bedroom once more and looked around. Everything seemed to be in place, the wardrobe closed like the last time they were here. He tried calling her again but it wasn't going through. He should walk to his car and wait for her to switch on her phone and for the police to come before he could leave. He walked out of the bedroom and the house. He settled in his car and he called his mother's nurse.

“Hello? Is she still asleep?”

“Yes Mr Mathews.”

“Okay. Keep checking on her. Bye.” He hung up and covered his face. Where was she? He called Reba who answered immediately.

“Hi. I’m at her house and she isn’t here. She isn’t there?”

“No. She hasn’t come back home.”

“I’ll keep trying her and if she does show up at home, let me know.”

“Okay. Thank you so much.” Reba said bye and hung up while Austin looked around. Where could she be? He was so sure she was here but if she was, the robbers wouldn’t have gotten into the house. There was no sign of a key being used as well. Alora was going to throw a fit but where was she?

In the dark closet, Alora was still out with insufficient air inside the closed closet. She didn’t hear anything that happened and in her dreams she

swore she was peaceful and floating. Peace.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

119

Austin saw the police van arrive and he got out of his car. The police man got out and they greeted each other before he told them what he saw. He has been trying Alora's phone for the past hour and it hasn't been going through. If Reba says she hasn't shown up, maybe he will open a missing person's case because he had no idea where she could be. This was his only bet but it turned out she wasn't

here.

“We’ll check the rest of the house. Thank you for your statement.” He nodded and slid his hands in his pockets. Maybe he should wait till the police left so he can leave with them. The two policemen walked inside the house, they took out their gloves from their pockets and started going through everything in the house. They will put a tape once they leave so that people must know that this house was under police investigation. Twenty minutes later, one of the policemen called Austin over. He walked to the door.

“There is someone in the house.” He frowned. How?

“Maybe she is homeless or has nowhere to go, we found her in the closet.” Now that was new. He followed the police officer to the bedroom and the closet door was open. There she was. Someone they had been looking for.

“Thank you. We have been looking for her.”

The police officer looked at Austin.

“She’s the owner of the house, that’s how I knew it

was being robbed. The robbers must have not noticed she was in here.”

“Her ancestors are working overtime.” One of the policemen said and Austin crouched to pick her up. He checked her pulse and it was still there. Her phone was off on the floor. The policeman picked it and handed it to him.

“She probably doesn’t know she was robbed.” Austin agreed. Her face was swollen and all red. Her eyes were puffy. He could see that and it was too warm. A headache maybe?

“Let me take her to the hospital okay? Let me know how it goes with the investigation.” He walked out with her.

“Sweetheart? Lora?” He called her and kissed her forehead. She was burning. Fuck! He had a nurse at home, he should take her home. Now what he wanted to know was why was she in a closet for crying out loud. She could have suffocated in there. She had so much to live for and if he hadn’t been here, she could have suffocated to death. He

couldn't lose her.

He opened the car and placed her at the back seat. He didn't have an extra blanket or anything. She was really out. He closed the door and got in the driver's seat. He dialled Reba.

“Hello?”

“I found her.”

“Thank God! Is she okay? Tell her I'm so sorry for everything, can she speak to me?”

“I have no idea why you are apologising but she is asleep. Once she wakes up, I'll hand you the phone.”

“Thank you so much. Thank you. Bye.” He hung up and started the car. He buckled up and joined the road while switching on the air conditioning.

Reba breathed in a sigh of relief. Alora was okay. She can go eat something or else her therapist will be on her case about her eating habits. She wasn't sure she could stomach anything but she had to try. She walked out of her bedroom and the house was so quiet. She sucked in a breath and headed to the kitchen. She opened the microwave for her food and took out the plate. She turned just as her mother walked inside the kitchen. She said hi and quickly walked out.

“Reba wait...” Reba paused in her tracks.

“You know I love Alora right?” Reba thought about her answer. Her answer to leave just as fast would be to say yes but today proved that her mother didn't love Alora. She was doing her a favour. Her mother had never called her trash even though the media had said that to her, her mother never called her ungrateful even though she should be happy that she had been a model and got opportunities other children never got.

“I realised you don't.”

“I took care of Alora.”

“You said you didn’t have to. Mama I love you but those words hurt even though you didn’t say them to me because I know you would never say that to me. Emory asked if you would lose your temper on her like that. Mother it is okay to admit that you have been secretly hating Alora because she reminded you of dad’s transgressions, hate is normal. People hate and they won’t die. You didn’t have to secretly hate her and make her think you cared just to say that. I’m not sure why you took her in, you wouldn’t be breaking your own heart by looking at ‘a side chick’s ‘ child. I am not fighting and I am sorry if I ever pushed you or seemed ungrateful. I am grateful for every opportunity I got and I am something because of you.” Reba sucked in a breath and walked out. Her mother didn’t lose her temper on her. Susan realised that Reba was saying the opposite of what she had told Alora. That Alora was nothing if not because of her and that she was ungrateful. She licked her lips as her heart broke. She was angry, she didn’t mean that.

Why couldn't anyone understand that? Tears filled her eyes again and she walked out of the kitchen. She passed Reba on the way as she walked into the bedroom. She picked her phone as Thabiso slept. She dialled Alora's number but it wasn't going through. She opted to text.

'Alora hi. Can we talk? I am sorry about everything I said, I was out of line. I love you okay Rora? I love you so much and I am sorry.'

She placed the phone down and bit her nails. People say things in anger and they apologise shortly afterwards. Alora was as good as her own child and she loved her like her own. She knew that right? She sighed. She should calm down.

At Austin's house, Alora finally woke up hours later with someone hovering over her. Her head was

heavy and she barely opened her swollen eyes. She took a moment to try to adjust to her surroundings. She knew this room.

“She’s awake?” Austin’s voice came up. The nurse nodded and excused herself to check on a resting Celine.

Austin pushed the blankets back and got inside besides her.

“Hey, why were you in a closet?” She chuckled but her throat was dry. He had removed her hair tie and he pushed her braids back.

“Lora I’m here.” She didn’t want to cry. She was a strong girl. He was already dealing with his mother’s sickness.

“Baby talk to me...” he lowered his voice and held her face. She was seeing him through the slits her swollen eyes allowed her to see. Tears filled her eyes and she shook her head.

“I’m okay. How is Celine?”

“Don’t change subjects Alora. Ke bua le wena.”(I’m

talking to you.) the tears rolled on their own accord. He rubbed them.

“Lora...”

“I’m my mother’s child. She rues the day I was conceived. I know I have a sharp tongue and even though I wanted to not apologise, my conscience and you of course didn’t let me. I apologised for how I spoke over the phone yesterday...” her voice shook and a sob tore through her lips. He held her. He was here for here, it was weird that just yesterday she was comforting him and now he was comforting her. She was in the arms of the man who loved her, the only person who she hasn’t screwed up with her weirdness and her ungratefulness and her spoilt tendencies. She was too much for them and she understood them. It must’ve been hard to pretend to love her, everything said in anger is always true because you don’t have to think much about something that has been dwelling in your heart and Susan was one her of a pretender. One hell of a good actress and she didn’t blame her. She would hate her too if she lived with a

reminder of her husband's infidelity.

"And then what happened babe?"

"She said a lot." She closed her eyes. Her mind replayed everything word for word. She found herself uttering everything to Austin word for word just the way it happened. She didn't even miss a word or stutter as she repeated Susan's words. Austin watched her repeat that as if it was some mantra with tears rolling down her cheek. She stopped and barely opened her eyes.

"I was a hypocrite, you don't have to make peace. I hate that I loved her in my own 'weird way' but she hates me. I'll find a way to be without her. I knew this might happen. It was over what I said over the phone yesterday. I am hypocrite. I won't make peace. I will never make peace. I am not going there. It's not my house and I am trash, I am nothing without her and I would be breaking other people's marriages and birthing bastards. I spoke of forgiveness yesterday, I take it back. I am not forgiving anything." He pulled her to him as she cried.

“I understand.” He kissed her forehead as he picked her to place her on his lap. He rocked her as she cried.

“I’ll pay back everything. God I swear I’ll pay back the money she used to take me to private schools since it was a favour. God I will repay every cent and calculate how much it is to pay for school. I’ll repay every cent.”

“Baby you’re still hurt. Don’t think.”

“My heart hurts Austin. It hurts and it feels like it’s being stabbed a thousand times over. My eyes are burning. I think I’m burning alive and nobody sees the fire.”

“I’m here. I’m sorry.” He soothed.

“Go bothooooo!” She rubbed her chest and he placed his hand there as she cried some more. He blinked back his tears as he kissed her head.

“I know my words shoot to kill when I’m mad, I have a lot of regrets about that but I never said she is a shitty mother, everyone has faults. I never I-“

“Sweetheart breath, baby breath...” her chest rose and fell and he held her as she cried while talking in between tears.

“I never bothered anyone with my emotions, I didn’t want to bother them because they did so much for me and a child who didn’t cry was okay right?”

“Baby shhh...”

“I-I-“

She didn’t say why she was in the closet because she almost suffocated to death.

“Maybe you secretly hate me and everything I am...”

“I don’t. I can never hate you, you annoy me at times but I can never hate you okay? You’re my little fiery dreamer and even though your attitude should have pushed me away it didn’t. I love you Alora. Everyday.”

She cried into his chest as he rubbed her back in an attempt to soothe her. She must be really hurt because she was straight in crying with no breaks in between. How long has she been trying not to

break and now she was letting out every emotion.

“I’m here. We’ll figure it all out.” He rubbed her back as she wailed.

“She cou-“

“Lora breath baby. Baby I need you to breath.” He said and she blubbered. Her eyes were barely open.

“She could...she could have reprimanded me in another way instead of what she said. What she did was just dark...” he rubbed her back.

“I can’t hate her...” she cried more and he shushed her. She was exhausting herself. Her voice was fading.

“Go bothokoooo! Pelo yame ekete ya ema...”

“Sweetheart don’t speak. I’ll call the doctor..” her cries swallowed her next words as she touched her chest. Was she having a heart attack? Was it a panic attack? She hoped not but it hurt so bad and her breathing was no longer it. He picked his phone and called his driver.

“Hi. Can you come here as soon as possible? Thank

you.” He hung up and watched her gasp for her air amid tears.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

120

Austin sat down as the doctor assessed her. She was okay. Once the doctor walked out he smiled.

“You scared me for a second.” She tried smiling with closed eyelids.

“I still h-have a lot I need to say.”

“You’re going to raise your blood pressure. I just

need you to sleep.”

“And funny thing is that was the only time I was rude an-“

“Alora...” she shut up and breathed out. She is over it now, it’s in the past and it has no power to hurt her because she cried over it.

“I’m taking you home and you are going to sleep.’ She didn’t argue and she kept quiet. She couldn’t see now. Her eyes couldn’t even open and she was tired. She wanted to sleep. She’ll be okay. She is a strong girl. She breathed out. Austin held her cheek.

“Are you eyes that heavy?” She nodded and he chuckled.

“Wa tshosa!”(you’re scary) she shook her head.

“I’m okay.”

“You’re not. If anything bothers you speak up.”

“I don’t think anything will be bothering me..” he raised an eyebrow then remembered she can’t see him.

“Do you think I’ll be okay by Monday?” She asked

him and he chuckled at how quickly she wanted to dismiss everything that happened.

“We can only hope.” She sighed. Maybe by tomorrow the swelling would have gone down. She’ll force the rest of the process with ice all over her face. She ruined his birthday already with her issues. She sighed. The only time she was defensive against her and all of her parents’ sins fell on her. She’ll deal with the cards she has been dealt with. Life goes on and she has company to be building from the ground up.

“I no longer want to go there.”

She said as he rubbed her hand.

“It was a clear indication that I am not welcome and I don’t bother people.”

“Your stuff...”

“She didn’t want me to take it, where’s my laptop?”

“I had my driver send it back.” She squeezed his hand and she chuckled.

“I’ll g-“

“No. I backed my stuff on my iCloud. I’ll see what to do.”

“Alora y-“

“I’m closing the past. The chapter is dead and gone now. I cried over it and mourned it and look at me at the hospital with swollen eyes. I’m okay and done.”

“Alora you love your family an-“

“And some words can’t be taken back. My throat is dry. Kopa metsi.” He handed her a glass of water and when she was done she handed it back to him.

“I’m letting go. I’m not going back there.”

“What if she apologises?”

“Then I can forgive her and that doesn’t mean I let her back into my life. Austin what I said over the phone wasn’t enough to warrant those words. I swear to God and maybe she is justified and it’s okay. I’m okay if the only mistake I did brings back all these issues that hurt me even though I will never admit that it hurt me.”

“You have siblings Alora.”

“I’ll see them on occasion and anywhere that’s not her house. I’m almost 24 I’ll be okay. If these words had been said to me at ten I would have left still. I know it would’ve have been a harsh world for me but it would have been better living with people who didn’t hide their hate than with someone who hid it for years and was waiting for one slight mistake to take it on you.p and show you her true colours. I feel like a blind person tthe! Your mother never pretended to love you so it was easier in a way than someone who pretended to love you and then it turns out they hated you.”

“I hate that I hear your point.”

“So that is that. I’ll be okay. What she said wasn’t anything new, gatwe there is nothing new under the sun. I think in Ecclesiastes it says that.”

“Are you quoting the Bible?”

She shrugged.

“I shouldn’t be afraid of doing it on my own now. I’ll be fine. The future is bright. Has been and always will be, regardless of what happens.” He kissed her

forehead.

“If you do decide to forgive I’ll be here.”

“You’re always here. I love you okay?”

“I love you my fiery dreamer.”

He kissed her again and she pushed him back.

“We’re in a hospital.” He chuckled.

“Why did you close yourself in the closet?” She went quiet.

“It was where I could cry without anyone using it as a weakness or seeing me hurt or my pain. No one walks into closets. My conception on it’s own is something that hurts me day in and out and I didn’t need anyone seeing my weaknesses.”

“For how long?”

“For years. For as long as I could remember after I was ridiculed for what my mother did.” He kissed her hand.

“You almost suffocated in the closet.” She sighed. It had been so peaceful in there. She felt like she was

floating and she wanted that feeling again.

“I’ll be okay.”

“Your sister wanted to talk to you..”

“I’ll call her tomorrow. I’ll do that tomorrow. Let’s go home yeah?” He helped her off the bed and pulled her into him.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m okay. I purged it out. I’m okay. I’m okay. I’m a strong girl. I can only be broken for a short while but once the sun rises I have to rise with it and take on new challenges yeah?”

“There is still a lot you need to know.”

“I am sure I don’t like it but go ahead and annoy me Austin.” He laughed and she smiled as they walked out of the hospital room.

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TWO MONTHS LATER

[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

121

Alora pushed her hair back trying to concentrate on her files but she was feeling sleepy. It midday and she had papers to push through, contracts to go over before handing them to the lawyer. She yawned and leaned back on the chair. She picked her phone and dialled Reba.

“Hey Reba, how did your appointment with the doctor go? It’s not cancerous right?” She waited. Reba mentioned that the doctor said she had ovarian cysts and they were going to observe it in the next two months or so how they progressed. To see if they grew, gave her problems and all that medical vocabulary she didn’t like.

“Reba say something. You’re scaring me.”

“Ding ding! Nope. But I will have to go through surgery to remove the cysts but they aren’t cancerous. Besides the cysts are on one ovary so it won’t ruin all of my chances of having kids well minus the infertility that comes with an eating disorder but there is still hope.”

“You want kids that bad?”

“I do. I still have hope.”

“Ok. I hope it works out, I really do but if it doesn’t which I’m sure it won’t come to that, you can borrow my womb.”

Reba paused.

“Wait what?”

“I don’t want kids and the child I’ll be birthing won’t be disturbing me once it’s out but I can be your surrogate. Maybe it will happen after years but you’ll have that option open with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Hundred percent sure but as I said it might happen

after years and the time you do decide to try for child you might fall pregnant on your first try but yeah. I'll discuss it with Austin though."

"You would do that for me?"

"Yes. Now enough about that, are you okay?"

"You are seriously not stepping foot here?"

"Reba we talked about this. I don't want to discuss that. Next topic please.." she yawned.

"I'm boring you?"

"No. Ke a otsela."(I'm sleepy.)

"You're overworking yourself."

"I have a year to get things done. I have no choice."

"I'll see you tomorrow but rest."

"Bye." Alora hung up and yawned into her hand.
Another cup of coffee?

Reba thought about what Violet said. Both Alora and her mother need help. She was right about that but Violet mentioned something that had Reba thinking. She said Alora must've always anticipated such hence she wasn't attached while Susan wanted Alora to be attached to show that she accepted the love which was two different actions that were heading in the wrong direction. She could go with that but still what her mother said was uncalled for but she was still her mother and she loved her. She didn't have the option of leaving when Susan paid her therapy fees and everything, besides she had never lashed out on her that way. She sighed as she got off the bed and headed to her desk. She had an accounting test coming up and she wanted to ace it.

Alora headed to Celine's room with a cup of coffee in her hand. Celine was awake and she sat on the chair next to the bed.

“Hello.” Celine looked at her. She was waiting for Alora to say a dark joke before she started wheezing. She liked her jokes even though they made her tummy hurt.

Alora looked at her coffee mug then at Celine. She had lost weight in less than two months but she was alive and was in a much better space with Austin. They had memories, she was just the camera lady as they made memories together.

“Wh-what is it?”

“I’m just thinking. Anyway, you’re almost an ancestor now.” Celine wheezed and Alora sipped her coffee, this was the break she needed before delving into work again. Tomorrow was a busy and long day, she had to check the labs and the construction workers.

“You don’t have to reply. Save your energy.”

“A-Alora how are you?” That question caught her off guard. How was she? She was alive, chasing her dreams, learning to live life without her family and loving every moment she spent with Austin. She

didn't have to be sorry for doing it on her own. She didn't have to go home, time won't change her mind and she won't be hurt by her anymore as long as she lets her go.

"I'm navigating my twenties. I'm okay Celine. Now rest, I have work to do." She stood with a plain face as Celine smiled at her and Alora waved her hand, not smiling back as she held the coffee mug.

Zara and Mooketsi put their bags at the boot as Zara smiled. She was nervous. No one knew she was Hades' sister and Reba had mentioned in passing that he was coming back tomorrow. Well Zara called first so yeah.

"You're telling him when he comes back?"

"The longer I prolong it the harder it will be to tell him. I have known about it for a while now so I have to tell him."

“We’ll let’s get going. We’ll stop along the way for food.”

“And I miss your family sometimes.” Mooketsi chuckled.

“All of them?”

“Reba mostly. She is older than me but she is just sunshine. Best sister-in-law ever that one. Maybe it’s because she tells me about my brother unknowingly but yes.”

“Well we will be back at my mother’s house in April for Easter holidays and did I tell you around May Alora is graduating from Princeton University?”

“Yoh! So how does it work? Everyone is going to America?”

“That was the plan when she mentioned her results second week of January. But we’ll discuss it further.”

“Now we should really go.”

Austin looked at the framed picture on his desk, her hair was in her face and she looked so irritated as he snapped the picture. A door knock sounded on his door. His PA opened the door and stood there.

“Afternoon Mr Mathews, there is a lady here who wants to see you about Alora.” She turned back then face him after confirming.

“Let her in.” Susan walked in and sat down on the chair as Austin leaned back.

“Good afternoon.” Susan greeted him back as she placed her bag down then looked around the office. She breathed in and she was sure this young gentleman would understand her point of view.

“The reason I’m here is because of Alora.” Austin nodded. He got that part from his PA.

“Alora hasn’t been home for the past two months and I-I apologised and she said okay before she blocked me.”

“Alora makes up her own mind. I can never force

her to do anything.”

“She needs family. We are the only family she grew up with, we all make mistakes and sometimes we fight but that doesn’t mean we don’t love her any less.” Austin kept silent. Alora had repeated a few words that hurt her, that girl was not a liar and if she was lying he would have known. She had no reason to lie and cry like that.

“I see. There is nothing I can do, it is up to her.” Susan breathed out.

“Can’t you at least break up with her then? Just temporarily so she can go back home?” To say he was shocked was an understatement.

“I would have to say no. I’m not going to intentionally hurt Alora. She has a lot on her plate and she doesn’t need stress and pain added to that.”

“Please! It won’t be for too long.”

“Try talking to her. Words cannot be taken back but try and what she decides on will be on her.” Susan sighed. She said the wrong things at the wrong time.

She even started seeing a shrink a month ago, she was trying. Alora had to meet her halfway.

“Okay. Thank you.” She stood up and Austin straightened up. He watched her leave his office then continued with work. Susan turned back.

“Where does she live?” She asked. He gave her his home address and Susan nodded before she walked out. He leaned back.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

Alora yawned. Coffee was not working at all. Her stomach grumbled and she placed her head on a file.

“Good God. I can’t cook.” she wanted to cry now. When was he coming home? She was hungry and sleepy and she can’t cook. We’re there any leftovers in the fridge? Last night he mentioned making more food than usual because she had started eating more. She blamed it on her work ethic. Long hours meant more food but long hours were useless when she was sleepy. She picked up her phone to call him. It was lunchtime.

“Hello.”

“Hi. On your way home, buy bio-plus.”

“Still fatigued?”

“I’m on my third cup of coffee and it’s not helping.”

“I see.”

“See what?”

“Nothing.” She rolled her eyes.

“Wh-forget it.”

“Kante?”

“Sleep, maybe it will be better.”

“I have been sleeping all week and I have to get things done. Buy an energy drink as well because sleepy or not I have to push.”

“Sleep, you’re exhausting yourself further.”

“No. Goodbye Robert.” She hung up and she walked out of his study for the second time that day. She pushed her hair back. Why can’t she wake up feeling refreshed like always. What was wrong with her? She passed by the patient’s room and the nurse was sitting by her side paging a magazine. The nurse looked up and smiled. She was already used to Alora who just waved back but didn’t smile back. The nurse chuckled. She has never met a grumpy woman before. It was weird.

She walked inside the kitchen and she opened the fridge. Leftovers. He was such a good man. She took out three Tupperwares. She opened them all and she walked to the cabinet for a plate. She

started dishing the macaroni and cheese first then the chicken wings and that steak. He was a good man that's for sure. She put the plate in the microwave and she washed the Tupperwares. The microwave dinged and she took out her plate. She walked to the lounge with a fork and the plate. Her stomach grumbled more and she rolled her eyes. She is about to eat for crying out loud.

She had the first forkful and she wanted wine. Pasta and wine went well together. But she doesn't day drink and it's a work week. She has ethics. She'll see the wine on Saturday then. The intercom rang and she groaned. She went to the door to press the buttons then she sat down to continue her meal. She should be done in twenty minutes tops then work again. The door knock finally came and she walked to the door to open it. Her eyes widened a fraction as she saw Susan standing there. Alora sucked in a breath. Lessons in common courtesy 101 as Austin had put it days after the security guy incident.

“Hi. Can I help you?” She forced herself to keep her

voice even. She was staying away from her, she should be happy that the ungrateful little twat is not in her home and she shouldn't even be here.

“Can we talk?” Alora rubbed her temples. She didn't need this. God she didn't need this right now. Nothing can undo those words said. Nothing.

“I have nothing to say but-“ she paused. Everything she said will be disrespectful so she might as well say it.

“But go ahead.” Susan clasped her hands as she looked at Alora. She looked like she gained a kilo or two these past few months and she was happy. Without family. Alora opened the door wider, a courtesy she hadn't been shown when she came to apologise and she allowed her to come inside. She hoped whatever she came to say didn't taint her memories of this place, she didn't want that. Susan sat down and she saw the plate on the table. That's an awful amount of food but she wasn't here for that.

“How are you doing?”

“Happy.” She replied in one word and Susan sighed.

“I came to apologise. You blocked me and I realised that what I said was wrong and out of line.”

“Okay.”

“I’m trying Alora.”

“Great. I’m also getting my life together so where is the issue here?”

“What I said was wrong.”

“You established that. I accept your apology.”

Susan smiled.

“Really? You’re going to come back home?”

“No. I’m not going there. I’ll stay here or wherever I move to ‘if he breaks my heart’ because I don’t want to be called trash, I don’t want to birth little bastards nor do I want to bother anyone with my weird tendencies. But I’m sorry for the way I spoke over the phone even though you never accepted that apology as well but I’m sorry okay? Thank you for taking a side chick’s child and making her something so she doesn’t birth little bastards and

ruin other people's marriages. Thank you for taking me to private schools and I will repay the money used as well and add extra. Thank you for the roof over my head even though you could have taken me to the orphanage and thank you so much for taking in trash that people warned you against. I am sorry you had to go through the pains of raising a child her mother never loved enough to stay, thank you for tolerating me as well. I sure was a handful to get such a mouthful. Thank you." She ended that with an even voice and she didn't divert her eyes from Susan's as she looked down.

"I didn't mean that." Susan whispered. She finally looked up and Alora was looking at her, the fire in her eyes gone and replaced only by stone.

"Okay. But I'll never forget that. I understood the apology and I accept it but I found way to be without you. You meant every word and as much as you would have reprimanded me in a better way, you showed me how you never loved me and that's okay. It still doesn't change my perception on love, just that I know people are good pretenders. I hope I

am not overstepping the line, I wouldn't want to be called names yet again."

"Alora..."

"Are we done? I have work to get through." Susan looked at her. There was no way for her to convince her she was sorry was there? She loved her. She and one outburst and she let the past pain overrule her. She didn't hate Alora at all. Alora was just her and it's not like she wanted her to change herself. She loved her.

"I hope one day you find it in your heart to truly forgive me. I can only hope. And you look beautiful." Susan said as she stood up, her heart being heavier with every movement.

"To forgive doesn't mean you go back to what hurt you. It doesn't mean that you have to let yourself be hurt. To forgive means you love from a distance because it's safer. Thank you and I hope you have a good life as well." Susan walked out and Alora walked her out. Susan looked at her one time. She swore she saw tears gleaming in Alora's eyes and

she didn't blink the tears away. She really hurt her that everything she said overruled everything they had been building for almost her whole life.

“Alora I am really sorry. I really am.”

“I am sorry it had to come to this but it is what it is, goodbye.” She closed the door and Alora rubbed her eyes. She sucked in a deep breath. She was okay. The past was past.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

Once again as the hours ticked by, Reba was a whole ball of energy. Hades was finally coming back and she didn't have to miss him like she did. Just a few more hours. Unfortunately she wasn't going to pick him up but she was going to spend the afternoon with him. She hoped he still wanted and didn't think she was toxic or anything like that. She was also getting help, they weren't going to enable each other into the habits that destroyed them. She sucked in a deep breath and logged out of her fake Facebook account. She decided to reactivate her real social media account. It's been more than six months of her not using that account. If she was going to be the face of a brand, she had to do it. She wasn't going to let her past break her, it was a small step but the one in the right direction. She reactivated that one as well as her Instagram and Twitter accounts. She started deleting pictures of her past, modeling broke her and she wanted no reminder of that. She deleted all the pictures from her modeling career from all her accounts and she breathed in. She went through her camera roll to scroll through her pictures the past few months.

She smiled, she was going to be okay. They couldn't touch her anymore, they weren't going to put their hands all over her, their words won't be like bullets shot to her chest. She picked the one where she was taking a walk with Alora and had her taking sunset pictures of her. She had loved them and Alora had grumbled as she took those pictures. She picked that one and updated her profile pictures on all her social media platforms. She placed her phone down. She was going to filter all the negative comments if they flooded her Facebook comment section.

Austin walked inside the house and he found her fast asleep on the couch. Her empty plate on the table and he placed his case down as he picked her up to take her upstairs to their bedroom. She murmured something in her sleep and he shook his head. Could his suspicions be correct? Well he had been asking himself that for the past week. If so, she was going to claw his eyes out for sure. For

now he placed her on the bed and covered her with the fleece, in case she was cold. He loosed her forehead and walked out. He made his way downstairs to his mother's room. It was surprising how much things had changed between them in the last two months. She would sit there and they wouldn't talk about business and he tried opening up a little. It was by 'fate' as Alora said that Celine was still alive. They were holding on by the thread because she might depart any moment from now.

He found her awake and the nurse fixing her pillow with the plate of soft porridge on the bedside table. He greeted her and asked her to excuse them.

Celine smiled a bit as Austin removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves.

"Hi mother. How was your day?" She looked at him. It was the same. She was still stuck in this bed and couldn't go anyway. Alora had passed by and went. She was weak but her mind was sharp enough to notice the changes in Alora but she didn't say anything in case it turned out to be just your regular weight gain.

Austin sat by the corner and picked the plate of porridge.

“After this, a walk would be good?” She nodded as he stirred the porridge and she was grateful. She had limited time but the last two months were memorable. Something she will remember as a ghost or an ancestor.

“Th-thank you.” He smiled as he fed her and she had a few spoonfuls before she decided she was full. Austin sighed and placed the plate down. He was going to walk her around with the drip still attached. He did that once a week and she was grateful to even see the outside. Austin got the wheelchair and he made sure it was okay. Austin helped her off the bed and placed her on the wheelchair. He fixed the drip.

“Comfortable?”

She nodded and he pushed it then pauses. His eyes landing on the paper stuck on the door. He didn't notice it when he walked in.

“What's that?”

“A bucket list.” He moved closer to be able to read the list.

‘Celine’s bucket list

1. Get flowers.
2. Go to a fun amusement park
3. climb a mountain.
4. Grandchild
5. My only son is finally happy.’

He paused and stuck on point number 4. He breathed out.

“It-it doesn’t have to come true. I asked Gao to write it for me.” He faced her.

“We’ll start with number 1 and when you feel stronger even if it’s for an hour we can go to Lion’s park, you can’t travel outside the country. The nicest amusement parks are in America.” Celine’s eyes welled with tears. She extended her bony hand to

try and touch his face and he smiled taking it in his.

“Now we should get going before it gets late.” He pushed her out of the room.

Ten minutes later once he was pushing her wheelchair along the street they lived in, she coughed.

“I think it’s ti-“

“I still want to be outside. I’m okkkay.” He nodded and continued with their walk.

“Is sh-she pregnant?” Austin licked his lips.

“I don’t know mother. I can’t say I’m sure and I don’t know how she will react. She didn’t want kids and she hasn’t changed her mind about that.” He wasn’t even sure when it happened because they have been safe these past two months using condoms and she was already on the pill. Of course he wanted kids but if she didn’t want kids he had to respect that.

“If she is, would she a-abort?” He swallowed. Maybe.

Alora hadn't opened her heart to having kids. He can't lie and say she wouldn't. She would and she can do just that.

"She would mother." Celine looked down on the road as he pushed the wheelchair. Alora was wonderful but she would? Even Celine herself wasn't cruel like that to kill a foetus. The other heartbreak she forced herself to move on from was when she gave birth to a stillborn child. Hours of pushing only for the child to be dead on birth. She breathed out. That was the final nail to her marriage, the dead child. Her marriage was already dead but that buried it six feet under. It boiled down to her working herself till the last minute of her pregnancy and how it was her fault that the child died. She shook her head.

"It's her choice. Our relationship dealbreaker isn't kids. It would hurt like a motherf*cker but I got thick skin and I would eventually move on from it." Now he was praying she wasn't pregnant just so she doesn't decide to abort. A lot has happened and she might decide a child she didn't want or plan for was

an obstacle. Alora was her own woman and at the end of the day she made her own decisions. He knew that and that was a quality he love about her even if it might come back to bite him in the *ss if she is pregnant and kills the child. Their walk was silent from there on.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

124

Alora woke up to the sound of the shower. She pushed herself back as a yawn escaped her lips. She was just taking a nap, she wasn't meant to

sleep as long as she did. Her phone wasn't next to the bedside . She pushed the blankets off and yawned as she made the bed again. She should eat and continue with work. She headed to the bathroom and stood by the door. The shower door was steaming and she was tempted to take a bath. She should but she fought against that.

"Hi."

"Hey sweetheart, you can join me if you want."

"I'll pass. Did you bring the bio-plus and energy drink?"

"It slipped my mind." She shook her head and stepped inside the bathroom to stop by the shower door.

"Nothing slips your mind Robert. You didn't want to buy it. Is that it? Ke eng ne o sa bue?"(why didn't you tell me?) He closed off the water and opened the door, the steam hit her in the face and she stepped back.

"Alora..."

"Ae! You could have told me you didn't want to so I can buy those items myself. But I figured since you pass by town everyday, you'll buy them on your way home." She folded her arms and huffed. His naked body gleaming with water drops and fairly sculpted by working out in gym shouldn't distract her, she saw this body almost every night and it was always on top of her, behind her and inside of her.

"I didn't want to buy those then."

"It was simple as that. Why didn't you buy them then?" She pushed her unruly hair back, she should straighten it in the morning before heading out.

"You already consumed too much caffeine for the day Alora."

"My caffeine intake has never been a problem." She raised an eyebrow. He got out of the shower and she stepped back. He chuckled and picked his towel, wrapping it around his waist.

"I'm not going to bite."

"You want to distract me and I won't let you."

"I'm distracting?" He grinned in that egotistic way.

"Get off your high horse Robert." She rolled her eyes.

"What's wrong with my caffeine intake?"

"Have you seen a doctor recently?"

"I'm fine Robert. I got my pills a few weeks ago. Why would I need a doctor when I'm not sick?" He stalked closer and she moved back till her back hit the wall and he trapped her there.

"See a doctor first then we'll have no reason to argue about your caffeine intake."

"Robert you're not m-" he lifted her chin before she could say anything.

"Alora." She shut up.

"Be a good girl and this once do as you're told. I don't want to argue with you sweetheart. Take a shower and I'll make something for you to eat. Don't overwork yourself. If you want to sleep just sleep." He dropped her chin and walked out as she released the breath she had been holding in.

Susan knocked on Reba's bedroom door.

"Come in." Reba looked up from her laptop as her mother walked in.

"Hi Reba. I come in peace." She said. Reba looked at her, she looked defeated as she sat by the corner of her bed. Reba closed her laptop to listen.

"Am I that intolerable?" She saw Reba suck in a breath. That was enough to answer her.

"What I say won't be used against me?" Susan shook her head.

"You're not. J u-just that you overreact and sometimes say the wrong things that kind of hurt and seem discouraging." Susan nodded.

"Is that why you are all alienating yourselves from me?" Reba hated to admit it but she nodded. Susan breathed in and out. Okay. She can try.

"What I said really pushed your sister away?"

"I don't know the extent of her hurt but the words were pretty hurtful not to. Mama we didn't know you can say that to her, you never said any of that to my brothers and I no matter what he did. I am not taking sides but your words hurt." Susan nodded again.

"I didn't mean that. I really love all of you guys equally." Reba nodded. Skeptical about that equally. Mooketsi got away with a lot of stuff and Bokamoso could never do any wrong in her mother's eyes but okay.

"You don't believe me?"

"I'll have to."

"I-I gave her space. I really didn't mean to hurt her."

"Ee mma."

"Mooketsi and his wife will be here in an hour."

"That's a pleasant surprise."

"Yeah. You can continue what you were doing." She stood up and walked to the door and turned.

"Thank you for your honesty." Reba nodded. Should

she tell her?

"Mom wait..."

Susan paused.

"Hades is coming out of rehab tomorrow and I'm going to see him." Susan breathed in and she held back from telling Reba she had been doing good without that boy. She had thought Hades was good for Reba but ever since the drug addiction saga and Hades alcohol addiction, she had then established he was a bad influence. Why would Reba take drugs? Reba was a happy child and it had been out of her character to take drugs. That dinner she had only tolerated him because her husband had asked her, otherwise he wouldn't have been there to begin with.

"Don't you think it's too soon? You are doing so well without him and him being here might take you back to drugs." Reba sucked in a breath. Why did she even try?

"He isn't the reason I take drugs and I love him."
Susan shook her head.

"You're an adult but do you think once he is sober

he will still love you? You guys grew up together but sometimes it is for the best for you to move on."

"I love him!"

"Maybe it was a dependency on him and not love. It is too soon. I don't want you to relapse. Reba I care about you, I love you and sometimes some people are not good for you."

Reba didn't want to fight. She just nodded and Susan smiled.

"Bye now." She walked out and Reba pushed her locs back. Even after all these months her mother thought the same thing. Wow! She took out her phone wanting to text Alora but her mother and Alora were not on good terms. Since Zara was coming back, can they say they are going out for lunch so she can see Hades? She wanted to see him.

In the bedroom, Susan walked inside. Her marriage had taken a drastic turn ever since the incident with Alora.

"I managed to apologise to her, she still doesn't want to come home."

"Okay." He replied and Susan sighed.

"Am I boring you?"

"It's always the same thing with you Susan. Nothing different so there is nothing I can say."

"I'm trying. I'm seeing a therapist to deal with everything that had happened. I'm really trying. Reba told me why they don't share anything with me, I'm trying."

"Trying is not just in words, it's actions."

"She told me Hades is coming out tomorrow and she wanted to see him. I managed to convince her not to without fighting and she agreed. That is effort."

"She loves him and she agreed because she didn't want to fight. Let her get heartbroken and find new love if she wants. It's not easy to just do what you asked her to."

"He is not good for her. Rehabilitated or not."

"And you're not Reba. She can make her own decisions."

"At some point she lost that right when she took drugs. I just want what's best for my kids. It's not that hard."

"And in wanting best you keeo pushing them away, you have no proof he is not good for her. She never told us why she did drugs even six months later, she is almost 26 and she is an adult. An addiction doesn't define her and take away her rights to make her own decisions. You are supporting them in the wrongest of ways and you can't see beyond that. Let me check on Emory." He walked out and Susan held back tears. She was trying.

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[06/02, 19:50] : REBORN

125

At Susan's house, Mooketsi and Zara arrived and the house was silent. It usually was but it felt different. Mooketsi shrugged it off as Susan walked to the lounge.

“Finally. I have been waiting for you guys. Dinner will be ready in twenty. You can freshen up.”

“Hello and thank you.” Zara said and Susan smiled as she walked back to the kitchen. Mooketsi took their luggage to the bedroom while Zara headed to Reba's room. She knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

Zara stepped in and Reba grinned.

“Hiii...”

“Hi yourself. How are you? I've missed you.” Reba stood up and Zara went in for a hug as she hugged

her sister-in-law.

“You call sometimes and I’ve been doing good. Better than I ever was.”

“Glad to hear that. I’m rarely on my phone. Call me old fashioned.” Reba rolled her eyes playfully.

“Old fashioned? You’re literally younger than me.”

“Guess I’ll be seeing Alora at dinner! She’s always in her room.”

“Uhm it’s a long story but you won’t be seeing her today. Maybe tomorrow.” Zara tilted her head.

“Why tomorrow?”

“Sit down. I have a favour to ask ebile.” Zara sat on the carpet and Reba sat by the edge of the bed.

“We’ll Hades is coming out tomorrow.”

“I know that. You told me and you have been waiting for this day ever since he left,”

“Exactly. I am happy that he’ll be out of rehab and can you tell mom gore we are going for a lunch together so I can go see him?” Zara frowned.

“I thought your mom liked Hades. Why would...”

“She doesn’t like him anymore, would you do that for me?”

Zara saw that as the perfect opportunity to meet her brother. She wasn’t sure if she was going to tell him immediately when she sees him but she was telling him tomorrow. He will do what he wants with that information but she really wanted to be part of his life and him being part of hers. Have a brother-sister relationship. It wasn’t too late right?

“Of course. I’ll use Mooketsi’s car and we’ll go.”

Reba got off the bed and hugged Zara.

“You’re an Angel and my brother is lucky he got a loving and open hearted woman like you. He is the lucky one.”

Mooketsi knocked on the door and opened it when there was no answer.

“Hi sis, I can for my wife.”

“I am catching up with her, you spend the day with her.” He chuckled. He loved the fact that Zara was

welcome in his parents house and his sisters loved her. Okay his sister. He wasn't sure about Alora. Speaking of her, he heard Bokamoso tell him what happened and how Bokamoso heard about it was a mystery.

"Alora is still not home?" Reba shook her head.

"I talked to her last week and she sounded fine. Just plain old Alora."

"She is always fine." Mooketsi chuckled and left the ladies.

"Are you excited?"

"Excited doesn't even begin to describe it. I feel like I'm floating. You won't get the reference but in another universe, I hope Hades and I are still together minus the bad stuff that happened."

"I always say your love is unique and rare. People don't love like that these days."

"Don't they?"

"They don't." Reba just smiled, so tomorrow was sorted. She just had to tag Zara along and it will all

be fine.

At Austin's house, Alora shot him glares as she watched him cook by the stove. She pressed her phone for a few seconds and then looked at him.

“You're getting pink by the minute.” She sucked in a breath. She was not speaking to him. He should do her a favour and die after he finishes cooking. He laughed as he picked the diced vegetables and threw them in the pan. Alora rolled her eyes and she redirected her attention to her phone. She scrolled her Facebook newsfeed before she went to her notifications. Reba posted? She clicked on it and she saw the picture. She smiled as she heart reacted on it, dropped a comment then shared the picture with the caption ‘ She's powered by the sun and all it's yellow.’ She smiled then placed her phone down. She faced Robert and she folded her arms.

“You’re still not taking caffeine.”

She was not going to give him the satisfaction of replying. She picked her phone again and she saw that Reba had replied her comment and commented on the shared picture as well. The fact that Reba had been bold enough to come back to social media? She was proud. So proud of her. She finally placed her phone down then faced Robert as he took out the pasta. She didn’t want pasta. She really didn’t. She swallowed her pride and opened her mouth.

“I don’t want that.” He paused and raised an eyebrow. She was finally talking to him.

“What do you want?”

“Phaleche.”(pap) she pushed her hair back.

“I haven’t had it in so long and I miss it.” He put back the pasta.

“I’ll make it for you then.”

“Thanks. We’ll pretend I didn’t speak to you.”

He laughed and took out the container that contained the maize meal. He spoiled her too much

that was clear and he didn't have a problem with that.

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Morning, let's get a move on. I'm back home and you know the usual, this city girl had to clean and do house chores so we have four more inserts to go.

[06/02, 19:51] : REBORN

126

The following morning, Alora woke up first and she turned to look at him. He was going to wake up in

an hour, she thought as she touched his unshaven jaw. She liked how it had grazed her thighs last night when he went down on her. She blushed as she pulled her hand back and got out of bed. She had to to the factory, see the construction workers and everything in between. She didn't have time to go and see a doctor. She was fine. What if she made breakfast? Well after picking out his and her clothes for the day that is. Great idea. She'll google. With that single thought in mind and the rest pushed back, she got out of bed and padded over to the wardrobe where she picked the clothes on the hangers. Yesterday he was wearing a blue suit, black would be more suitable for today, she picked a shirt and she turned out to pick one of her black dresses and a white blazer. Done. She walked over to bed and lightly kissed his cheek before picking her phone. She headed to the bathroom for a few minutes to freshen up then walked out to try and attempt breakfast.

In the kitchen, she placed her phone on the counter,

the recipe on the screen and she took out the measuring jugs and spoons. She was going to make this as accurately as possible. If not, it might turn out to be a disaster. She shook her head. She wasn't a failure, never was and never will be. She brewed coffee by the coffee machine and the wonderful scents of coffee wafted all around her. Sweet caffeine, how would she function without it? She sat on the chair and read the recipe three times over. She understood this, she can do this. She did her absolute best to follow the pancake recipe to the T. Once the batter was done, she picked out a non-stick pan and drizzled some olive oil waiting for it to heat up. Minutes later, she flipped the pancake. It looked good and she hoped it tasted just as good. She can make food now. She wasn't entirely useless. She beamed with pride. Ten minutes later she was done. She plated the pancakes before she washed all utensils used and made sure the kitchen was clean. She picked a mug and poured coffee, she placed the mug just a few inches from her nose, she could be a barista if she wanted. At that exact moment, Austin walked in, he saw the pancakes

then looked at her with coffee in her hand. She doesn't listen.

"Morning." He made his way to her to kiss her and he wrapped both hands around the coffee.

"Let this go. Thank you for trying to make breakfast though I don't entirely trust that it tastes as good as it looks."

"Oh ye of little faith! Let go of my mug."

"Lora we discussed your caffeine intake."

"You told me of my caffeine intake which has never been a problem."

"Lora, no coffee."

She glared at him and he lowered his head to kiss her, Alora knew it was a distraction but she couldn't help it. She kissed him back and her hold weakened on the mug. He took it from her hands and broke the kiss.

"You're difficult."

"I hate you." She folded her arms and he chuckled. He poured the coffee in the sink and pulled her to

him.

“You love me mon coeur.” She rolled her eyes.

“Die Robert.” He kissed her till she responded and she wrapped her hands around his neck. He picked her up and placed her over the counter without breaking the kiss. Her hands traveled over his bare chest and she moaned a little as he squeezed her breasts. A bit sore, her period was coming. He broke the kiss and looked at her unruly hair and her slightly aroused face.

“We’re going to the doctor.” She turned her face. She was fine but to prove him wrong she’ll go then. She’ll just go.

“I’m fine. I’m healthy and fine. There is nothing wrong with me. Let me down.” He kept her there and didn’t move an inch. She was getting pink by the second.

“Robert!”

“Breath.”

“Don’t tell me to breath when you are forcing me to

go the doctor, you deny me coffee. It's coffee for crying out loud, coffee. A simple mug of coffee." He touched her face and it was heating up.

"Bathong! O angry jang."(you're so angry.)

"F*ck you!"

"We have ten minutes to do that. Do you want it on the kitchen floor or counter?" Her eyes grew wider and she laughed while lightly hitting his chest.

"Wa tena."(you annoy me)

"I love you." He countered.

"J e t'aime." She said with a little smile. He pecked her lips and picked her up.

"We'll have breakfast after a hot shower." She just agreed with that.

At Susan's place Mooketsi was basking in the morning sun as he spoke to Bokamoso.

“I don’t know. Was it that bad that she’s not home? We all know nothing really hurts Alora. Yes she gets angry easily but it’s over small things like people messing the arrangement of her room, dirt and all that.”

“Every person has their limits.”

“So Alora told you what happened?”

“I got to hear everyone’s view point. Alora, mom, father and Reba.” Mooketsi chuckled. None of those people bothered to tell him. He heard from Bokamoso.

“Alora might be overreacting.”

“She isn’t but she just needs time. That’s all. I have to go. Have a good day Mox. Say hi to the family for me. Bye.” He hung up and Mooketsi looked at the screen. He’ll ask his mother later on what happened. He walked to the house and he heard Zara and Reba chatting up a storm in the kitchen. He smiled. They were probably cooking and in a way it was weird that his wife was much closer to the sister he grew up with his whole life. Ironic really if you think

about it. Everyone was close to everyone except him. He thought of calling Alora. He dialled her number as he walked to the bedroom. She answered on the fourth ring.

“Good morning Mox. How can I help?”

“Morning Rora, how are you?”

“I’m alive and busy. What is it?” She sat down with a towel wrapped around her as she watched Austin get dressed.

“I’m in town and I was hoping we meet. For lunch?”

“Definitely. You’re alone or?”

“I came with Zara.” Alora nodded. Zara got along with Reba more. She was just an observer of things.

“Alright. Lunch it is, around 2?”

“Two is fine.”

“It’s a date. See you at two and have a good day, mine already stared on a horrible note.” Austin looked at her and she glared back.

“It’s seven in the morning Alora.”

“It started horribly thirty minutes ago so yes. Bye now. Should I say ‘love you loads’ or we do it in the adult way and mutually know we love each other?” He laughed. She was...a piece of work. She was a year younger so basically they were like twins but not twins.

“I love you sis.” He heard a chortle and his eyes widened.

“Love you loads brother. Bye.” She hung up and he looked at the screen. This afternoon it was.

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[06/02, 19:51] : REBORN

In the car, Austin had that feeling in the pit of his stomach that his suspicions were correct. She had reluctantly agreed to go to the doctor and he had to drop her off at the labs before he went to pick Hades up from the rehab centre. She leaned back as she closed her eyes and yawned.

“See how tired I am without coffee?” She said softly.

“You’ll be okay.”

“I need my caffeine Robert.” He chuckled and kissed her cheek as he navigated the traffic. Her hands rested on her thighs as she yawned again.

“We’ll be there in less than thirty minutes.” She nodded still with eyes closed. The car was silent as he stole glances at her sleeping face. With her silent and half asleep she looked soft. He wasn’t going to tell her that but he loved every facet of her she showed him. He knew that if he somehow lost himself someday, all he had to do was find her and he will have himself back. He kissed her cheek and she placed a hand on his cheek.

“Drive please, we need to get this doctor thing out of the way. Coffee Robert.” He moved back and faced the road as she released a soft sigh.

“I-I’m doing this right?”

“What right?”

“This business thing? I finally have unlimited funds and I have a year to blow everyone’s mind?”

“You’re exceptional at what you do. You are heading the the labs to see if they followed what you gave them.” She chuckled.

“Those cosmetology and chemistry labs came in handy.” She said with a smile in her voice as she yawned.

“They did. You’re doing great.”

“Thank you.” She said and she stretched her arms and faced the other way, dropping her head. Her hair was slicked back and they didn’t leave unless it was the way she wanted it to be. He should be thanking her, she taught him how to love, the first person to love him when he didn’t know how to. She

was kind in her own way.

“I liked your pancakes.” She laughed softly.

“Don’t humour me. Don’t speak to me. I’m tired because of you.” He smiled and he kept on driving.

Twenty minutes later, he parked his car and she lifted her head then faced him.

“Can we make this fast?” He unbuckled her seatbelt for her and he watched her not so flat stomach. She never had a flat stomach to begin with though. He chuckled as she eyed him with her perfectly done makeup and red lips. She opened the car door.

“Okay sweetheart.” He got out of the car and picked her handbag. He is taking anything that might be used as a weapon against him in case things go south. She got out, her heels hitting the pavement and she waited for him as he locked the car and walked to where she was.

“My handbag.”

“I’ll carry it.” She shrugged as he placed a hand on

the small of her back and they made their way inside the hospital.

“Good morning. Is Dr Theres a Davis in?”

“Morning Mr Mathews. Yes.”

“Thank you.” He pushed Alora forward who was rubbing her eyes.

“You didn’t make an appointment..”

“I’m not like you sweetheart.”

“Liar. Liar.” She said as he headed to Tessa’s office. He knocked on the door.

“Come in.” He opened the door and stepped inside with Alora. Tessa looked up from her files. She had been oddly surprised when Mr Mathews called, she wasn’t his doctor but now he saw the lady by his side. The Mathews heir has a girlfriend? That was news. Everyone thought he was asexual, even the media had labelled him as such.

“Morning Dr Davis.” He pulled the chair out for Alora who sat down and he held her bag in another. He finally sat down.

“Hi.” Alora said and she didn’t have patience to just end there.

“Dr, if we can make this fast, this man forced me to come here and swears there is something wrong with me when there is none and he is denying me coffee. So I’m hoping you prove his theories wrong and I’m cleared of whatever invisible sickness he made up in his head and I can have my coffee.” She said in one breath and Tessa chuckled. She was so serious and her face was really grave. She was beautiful, what the fuck?

“Hi Ms?”

“Moremi. Alora Moremi.” Tessa had to internally digest the surname. Could she be related to Rebantle? Probably or maybe they just shared the same surname.

“Well Ms Moremi, let’s prove this man wrong then.”

“Thank you.” She glared at Austin and he just placed her bag on his lap. Keeping all her weapons away from her.

“Okay. Describe the last few weeks or anything that

prompted this visit.” Tessa waited.

“My caffeine intake. Just that.” Austin shook his head. How did he voice out his suspicions without her going ballistic once she catches on?

“Oh. That’s an odd case but we’ll go through routine check ups then.” Alora nodded.

Thirty minutes later, Tessa sat by her desk with Austin while Alora took the pregnancy test that was part of routine. She had wanted to argue that it wasn’t really necessary.

“Is it really caffeine?” She asked with a lowered voice.

“No. I’m thinking pregnancy and how I’ll be buried six feet under.” Tessa chuckled as she wrote down on the file she just opened for Alora.

“We’ll see in ten minutes.” Alora walked out with the pregnancy stick in the container and her face bored at the mundane task. She knew herself. Tessa got the pregnancy test and watched Alora sink onto the

chair and her glaring at her boyfriend.

“Now we wait.” She nodded and folded her eyes. She had a lot to say but she kept it inside and glared at Austin who smiled at her. Minutes elapsed and Tessa picked the pregnancy stick. She kept a straight face and she looked at the couple.

“Well can I say what I see?”

“And we can get this checkup over and done with..” would it be over and done with? Tessa asked herself.

“Let me place it here so I can explain it to you.” She grabbed a tissue and placed it on the desk. Austin kept a calm exterior as they both looked at the stick.

“It shows two lines. A single line means it’s a negative pregnancy test and two lines means it’s a positive pregnancy test.” Alora’s world stopped moving and she placed her fingers on her temple as she closed her eyes. No! No! No! This can’t be happening to her. This isn’t supposed to happen to her.

“Pregnancy tests can lie as well. It can be a false

positive and-“ whatever the doctor said wasn't audible to Alora who was too far gone in her head as she shook it multiple times. Pregnant. Positive. Little terrors running around. Pushing a human being. Questioning herself about raising human beings. Little monsters who are going to ruin everything she arranged. Noise. Tears stung in her eyes.

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[06/02, 19:51] : REBORN

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At the doctor's office, Tessa stopped talking

midway realising that Alora wasn't even listening. Austin asked for a moment as he placed her bag down and Tessa got up. She left her office to give them space.

“Swee-“

“Just-oh my God!” Her hands were shaking.

“God didn't make you pregnant Alora.” She lifted her head at the sound of his cocky voice. He just didn't...he looked at her mascara which was starting to run because of the tears. He breathed out. She looked like she was just about ready to kill him. He took her hand and she removed it.

“I need to think and wena, Robert Austin fucking Mathews don't speak to me. Don't touch me. Don't even breath.” She said with a tremulous voice and he nodded. She fanned her face but the tears couldn't stop and he wanted to know what was in her head. She stood up on her feet and walked to his side to pick her handbag and she walked into the small bathroom in the office. Was she going to kill him? He has never been anxious in his life as he

was when she was in that small bathroom for over ten minutes. He stood on his feet wanting to get her but the door opened and she walked out. Her face clear of any makeup. She must've used the wipes in her handbag. Even the false lashes were gone. It was her clear face and she didn't look like she was in any mood to talk. She sucked in a breath and closed her eyes. She was okay, she just needed to think. Tessa chose that exact moment to walk in and Alora looked at her. Tessa could feel the tension on the room. Someone was in trouble alright and she looked at Alora. She removed the makeup? Yoh! She looked years younger without it and she was so beautiful as well.

“Ms Moremi.”

“Dr Davis. You said I'm pre-“ she couldn't even say it.

Tessa just nodded.

“We can double check with an ultrasound.” She nodded without looking at Austin. They all stood up and they followed Tessa. Austin walked close to her and she quickened her pace. He wanted to face

palm. They got into the room and Tessa looked at them.

“Let me get a new hospital gown for you to change into while I go get a technician.” She walked to the other side of the bed and took out a hospital gown.

“You have to be completely naked underneath it.” Tessa added. She placed it on the bed and she walked out. Alora breathed in as she placed her bag on the bed, removed her blazer and unzipped the dress. She was thankful it had a side zip or else she’ll be forced to speak to him. She got rid of the heels and had to force herself not to think about the floors. She removed the dress, folded it nicely followed by the bra and her panties. What Austin was seeing wasn’t anything new so why should she hide her body? She removed the plastic wrapper on the gown and she wore it, problem was that it had to be tied at the back and she bit her lower lip. Austin didn’t have to be asked as he stood behind her short height to tie it up for her and he used that chance to hold her stiff body. He held her from behind as she remained like that.

“Baby..talk to me.” She didn’t say anything.

He breathed against her neck.

“I’m always here. You can shout at me, hit me, have my car since you already have my heart and soul but talk to me.” She didn’t reply him and he kissed her head.

“I love you okay?” Still no response. There was a door knock and she used that opportunity to escape his hold and she picked the folded up clothes to place them by the bedside table. She picked her shoes from the floor as the door opened. Tessa walked in with the technician. The technician pushed her glasses up and she greeted everyone. Alora nodded and Austin said hi back as she and Tessa started setting everything up. Austin stood by Alora’s side and the moment Tessa said she should climb on the bed, he picked her up to place her there.

“Place your legs on the stirrups, we are going to do a transvaginal ultrasound. It makes it easier to detect pregnancy especially if it’s in early stages.”

Alora closed her eyes. The probe was sanitised and then lubricated.

“This won’t hurt but you will feel some uncomfortable pressure, it won’t take too long and we can observe more things using this type of scan, you can look at the screen. Austin sat down and took her hand as he watched her suck in a breath with tears in her eyes. Dammit! He kissed her forehead and murmured to her in French as the technician inserted the probe.

“Je suis désolé d'accord mon amour?” (I’m sorry okay my love?) he soothed her as she opened her eyes.

“Now if we look at the screen..” they both looked at the screen as he squeezed her hand, they could hear a sound and Tessa smiled.

“That’s the heartbeat and here on the screen is your growing foetus.” She said and they both listened to Tessa talk, the heartbeat was a steady beat that didn’t fill the whole room and Tessa explained that she was in the early stages of pregnancy and this

ultrasound was safe for both the mother and baby.

“Furthermore, it looks like she is just about to enter her ninth week of pregnancy. We’ll register and you’ll have to report back here next week, the first trimester is always delicate.” She asked more questions about Alora’s symptoms these past few weeks and she answered the doctor as honestly as she could. Austin could hear it in Alora’s voice that she wanted to cry. Ten minutes later, the ultrasound was done and she had to change to see Tessa in her office. They were alone in the room and he pulled her to him.

“Lora...” she shook her head and he just held her.

“Talk to me...”

“I’m scared...” then the waterworks started. She cried into his shirt and he picked her up as he sat down, her head on his chest as she cried. Runny nose and all.

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[06/04, 08:11] : REBORN

129

He kissed her forehead while consoling her. She stopped crying and he just rubbed her back.

“Better?” She nodded and slowly untangled herself from him. She wiped her tears and got up on her feet with a pink puffy face.

He watched her remove the hospital gown and slowly get dressed. Alora blinked. Fuck! It wasn't supposed to happen like this, at least not now. She breathed out as she bent down to wear her heels. Three minutes later, he took her head and held her back as they walked out of the room. Alora tried to

keep her composure. She shouldn't even think now. She had work ahead of her and a lunch date with her brother. Then she had to see her sister who will most probably be busy with her boyfriend who was finally out of rehab today. She didn't have the time of day to think about what she was just told, at least not until 7pm today. They walked inside the office and Tessa smiled. She looked like she had been crying, her face gave it away. She'll accept it and life will move on. Hopefully.

The drive to the labs was a silent one with Alora who had her eyes closed. Thinking of other things and not the pregnancy. If she knew, she would have took her company car and drove herself after he dropped her off. He stopped by the gate and looked at her.

“Tom is available today, call him to pick you up okay sweetheart?” She nodded as he kissed her cheek

and she undid her seatbelt and got out of the car. He sighed. He watched her press the intercom waiting for the gate to open for her. He'll see her at home right? He wanted to hear more of what was on her mind. She stepped inside and he drove off.

At the rehab centre, Hades listened to the counsellor who went over what emphasised their three months of therapy and sobriety. He just wanted to live, he couldn't stay in this bubble forever and he couldn't wait to see his favourite girl. That was the highlight of his life, even when his skies were dark she was his sunshine. His only light so he couldn't wait to see her, hug her and just spend the rest of his life with her. Thinking of her made him smile.

“That is it and good luck on your journey. The centre is always there for everything and anything you might need.” He nodded. The counsellor smiled as

he shook Hades' hand and he walked out. Hades looked at the bag he had packed. Austin should be here any moment from now. Ten minutes later, there was a door knock and he stood up. The door opened and he gave him a smile.

“Finally. Been waiting love.” Austin chuckled.

“I wasn't going to abandon you darling. Done?”

“Sure.” He picked his bag as they walked out of the room and Austin asked questions which he answered. Hades asked about Reba and Austin gave him updates which he had gotten directly from Alora and yesterday Alora did confirm that Reba would be on her way to see Hades so that was sorted.

Hades stopped on the way and looked at Austin. He didn't have to do all that since he got the girl.

“What is it?”

“You know you don't have to go out of your way for me. You got the girl and all.” Austin slipped his hands in his pants pockets.

“You have a point. I have no moral obligation whatsoever to be assisting you with everything but I want to. It’s not about Lora.” Hades nodded slowly. As he had once thought, Reba had been the only person to care for him like that. His father dismissed his problem and Austin was the one who went through the steps of having him admitted into rehab.

“Don’t call her Lora. I don’t want to suddenly think she has a heart.” Austin chuckled.

“She’ll kill you if she hears that.”

“Luckily I don’t have to see her...” Austin kept on walking as Hades followed.

“Actually, you do have to see her.” Hades raised an eyebrow. He knew he could live alone but he was scared of relapsing and the counsellor did say it wasn’t a good idea to be alone. Loneliness in some form will make him overthink and he might break his sobriety. So far he had Antabuse pills with him to take everyday and he was sure they told Austin about it although he didn’t question him. It was kind

of surprising that a guy younger than him could be wiser than him.

“Elaborate...”

“She lives with me and I have mother in the house as well...”

“That’s a full house but okay.”

“You’re comfortable with that?” Hades should be asking him that. Austin unlocked the car and he opened the back to throw in the bag as Austin got in the driver’s seat. He got inside the car.

“I think so. Thank you. For everything.” Austin smiled as he started the car.

At Susan’s house, Reba styled her locs and she smiled as she looked at the mirror. She was waiting on Zara so they can go. The door burst open and Zara walked in.

“Hi, we have a problem.”

“Okay. That doesn’t sound good.”

“Mox says he is meeting Alora and he is taking the car, he can drop us off at lunch and he’ll pick us up after his lunch date with Alora or better yet we can join them.” Reba face palmed. She loved her siblings but no. No! She wanted to see Hades, the love of her life and be in his embrace. Alora has her man, Zara has her husband and she wanted to see Hades. Simple as that.

“Okay. Let’s drop it. Mama o tla omana hela. I’m going to see Hades.(mom will just get angry at me)

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah! Hundred percent sure. Hades is not the villain even though she makes him out to be one. Alora is not the villain, I’m not the villain. No one is the villain here, everyone needs psychological help. Simple as that.” With that Reba breathed in and out. She had a good feeling about this. For the first time in her life, she felt like she was headed somewhere and that somewhere was a good place. A happy

place.

“I’ll explain once I come back but thank you so much for the effort.” She hugged Zara before she picked her bag and walked out. Zara hugged herself. She was asking herself when she was going to tell Hades. Tomorrow was a Saturday so maybe then she’ll tell him about their blood relation. Now Reba was excited to see him and she shouldn’t ruin that. She sucked in a breath, she better go join her husband for lunch with his sister. Maybe that would be a chance to get close to her other sister in law. They were roughly the same age so it should be fun. She laughed at herself. Who was she kidding, Alora was not fun. In any way. RIP her.

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[06/04, 08:11] : REBORN

130

Hades made Austin stop on the way by a tattoo parlour. Austin raised an eyebrow, intrigued why Hades would want a tattoo.

“Don’t even ask, if possible get one yourself.” He said and Austin gave a burgeoning grin.

“Is this a let’s match and get the same kind of tattoos darling?”

“Of course love. And annoy Alora in the process.”

“You always want to annoy my girlfriend, I won’t be liable to any blood she’d that happens.”

“Trust me, I know better.” He laughed as he undid his seat belt.

“I won’t be long.” He said. Austin nodded as Hades got out of the car and Austin dialled Alora. Her phone just rang unanswered till it stopped going

through on the third try. She probably switched it off. He headed to his iMessages to send her a voice note. He sent it and he leaned back. He then sent a link as well to a song, he knew she was going to listen even if she might not reply. He was right here, she was well within her rights to be scared about the pregnancy and he understood that. She was also an obsessive compulsive, her mind was going to obsess over the negatives of their pregnancy and it was going to mess up with her psych leading to her compulsions flaring. Fuck! He called his driver.

“Mr Mathews..”

“Tom. Has Alora called?”

“Not yet sir.”

“Let me know when she calls.”

“Of course sir.” He hung up and tried calling her again. Her phone was off.

Meanwhile inside the tattoo parlour, Hades sat down on the chair. He had thought about this and it

was going to be his first tattoo. It had a meaning and somehow, making it past three months sober was an achievement on his part.

“I would like a tattoo.” His brittle voice said and the man who had a shit dozen of tattoos adorning his arms nodded.

“What design?” Hades just said the semi colon on his wrist, it was enough for the tattoo artist to understand. They weren’t going to take much time since the design was simple and fast. Hades stretched his arm as the artist sat on the chair next to the one Hades was sitting on. Hades watched him take out his machines, clean and sterilise it before he switched the machine on twenty minutes later after making sure it was really clean. He was sure the pain wasn’t enough to surpass the emotional pain he had been for his whole life.

Reba tried to call Alora. Her phone wasn’t going

through and she wondered why. She stood in front of Austin's house. What if she was early? She was sure she might be or maybe Hades was waiting for her and had his arms open for her. She didn't want to bother Austin. He probably is busy and besides she was here for Hades. She pressed on the intercom and waited. Her heart leapt in her chest as the gate slid open and she stepped inside the yard. Well wow! She just had the directions to the house and she had never been here. She walked to the door and knocked. A woman in a nurse uniform opened the door. Reba smiled.

"Hi, I'm here for Hades.." the nurse frowned.

"Hades?"

"Yes. Uhm Austin was supposed bring him."

"Oh. I have no idea. You may have a seat and I'll call Mr Mathews to confirm. Who should I say is looking for Hades?"

"Rebante." She stepped inside the house and sat on the couch. She looked around. It was immaculate. She picked her phone and went

through the pictures she had with Hades. She should contain her excitement. The nurse came back and gave her a smile.

“He says you can wait. They are on their way.” Reba nodded. This was happening. She laughed into her hands.

Austin saw Hades make his way to the car and he got inside.

“Done?”

“Yes. He says it should heal in a few days and thank you once again.”

“We should get home as soon as possible.” Austin said as he started the car. Hades buckled up and closed his eyes. The whole ride to Austin’s house was quiet and he was still trying to keep his thoughts clear. The gate slid open and he drove inside the yard.

“I’ll have to leave you here. My mother is downstairs with her nurse, the room you used is still the same one. Welcome back.” They shoulder bumped and Hades let out a bitter laugh. The world had clearly moved on and he hoped it was going to get better from here.

“Bye.”

“Sure.” Hades picked his bag from the car and he got out of the car. He closed the car door and watched the car reverse out of the yard. He saluted and Austin saluted back as the gate closed once the car was out. He walked to the house. He should charge his phone once he gets inside and call Reba. Reba was the first person he is calling and she was the first person he was planning on seeing tomorrow. He opened the door and he didn’t even make it three steps inside the house when his sharp gaze stopped on Reba who looked up. Her eyes widened then filled with tears as she slowly stood up and he dropped his bag. Reba didn’t hold back as she ran to him and flung herself at him. Like old times he picked her up and she wrapped her legs

around his torso as he supported her body by placing his arms below her flat butt.

“Hiiiiiii...” She breathed against his ear and he inhaled her scent. His best girl was in his arms. The tears were so close as he held her tightly and she smiled into his neck.

“Hi love.” He breathed and Reba’s heart combusted. She loved him. It was like old times. Reba and Hades. Hades and Reba. Only this time they were better and stronger. Sober.

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Next one will be up I had a long day guys.

[06/08, 13:31] : REBORN

Hades finally let her down on her feet but he picked her up and spun her around as she giggled. Seconds later he genuinely put her down.

“Hello baby.” She said again. She kissed his cheek before she went for his lips. He kissed her back and she wrapped her hands around his neck as he held her waist. She was bubbling with love for this man. This man. This one in particular. They locked eyes for seconds and it felt like eternity as she smiled and he gave her that knowing smile of his, all handsome and cynical. She chuckled and looked the other way. Hades could see that she looked lively. It was a beautiful sight to behold.

She faced him and grinned.

“There is so much I want to update you on...” the smile broke on his lips. Trust Reba to fill him in on everything that has been going on and he was sure she wasn’t going to leave any detail out. He let go of

her waist and took her hand as he led her to the sofas. His bag was still by the door and she rolled her eyes. She let go of his hand and picked the bag.

“You forgot this.” She said and he smiled. She did pay attention to details too.

“I’m all ears love.”

“Okay. A lot has happened. A lot I mean a lot. It’s like you skipped five chapters of a book wa bona and now everything is confusing. I’m here to clear the confusion.”

“Of course you will love. You’re sunshine, it clears the clouds after a storm.” She grinned more as he held her hand while he led her to the room he used in Austin’s house.

“That’s cute, I wonder why you love me.”

“Because you’re made for me.” She stopped talking then resumed.

“True. True. There hasn’t been a moment when I didn’t love you.”

“Together.”

“All the time. Where was I? Uh okay the tea.”

He laughed as he opened the door and it was as exactly as he left it. It seemed like no one entered it since he left.

Reba placed the bag on the floor and sat on the bed. It was so comfortable. Should she start with the drama at home? Or what the doctor said about her body? Which one? And there was more she had to say, from her therapy sessions to her social media to her agreeing to be part of Alora’s brand. She was still going to talk and she didn’t even want to go home.

He sat next to her and pulled her to him.

“You’re my best friend.” She said and he kissed her head.

“You’re mine too. We changed subjects?”

“Noooo!! It’s a lot. Be prepared to be shocked and all. Kana ko go Moremi things happen. Let me start the update from when you left, our last visit was short and there was no room to discuss people.”

“Okay. When I left...”

“Ehe! Kana from there you know Mox has a wife. Zara.”

“I remember her..”

“Mom accepted it just fine, they are friends I think. Okay they get along just fine. Then Alora ke yoo she has a boyfriend, your friend Austin.”

“I know. Did she get over her fear of intimacy?”
Reba chuckled.

“O hoo?”(you’re still there?)

Hades was lost as Reba placed a hand on his chest. She loved that he was really attentive to her gossip and all the piping hot tea she spilled even when they were addicts, he has always been attentive to her. Like every word she said was golden even though she spurted out nonsense most of the time.

“She got over that. Thanks to Austin.” Hades laughed.

“Your little demon sister? The one who gave stiff hugs and sanitised everything that came into

contact with her? Got over it? Like even if she could tolerate hugs but more than that?”

“You’ll be surprised. They even live together. But he loves her just like that. Even if they never touch in public and every time he holds her she seems aloof. They get each other I guess. Fucking nerds.” Hades laughed.

“Cursing doesn’t suit you.” She giggled.

“Ehe, she got over that. Then I managed to change therapists. I have a new one. Dr Violet Carson. I love her, she is so warm and she listens to me. She doesn’t think I’m crazy and she knows it’s not my fault I was always sexually assaulted. She said someone close to her has CSA trauma and although it will never go away, I’m stronger than that.” He kissed her forehead.

“You’re more than that Reba. You’re more than everything that tried to break you.” She looked up at him and pecked his lips.

“She believes in me. She says I’m strong, it might not be the kind of strength other people have but

she believes in me, like a pixie.” Her smile was so contagious and he couldn’t help but smile at his girl. Fuck he loved her to the moon and never back. She could possess his entire being and he wouldn’t have a problem with that. He was consumed by her, ever since they first met that day and they became friends.

“So moving on, she had me see a doctor. A medical doctor. Her name is Tessa. She is also nice as well, she is my doctor now. Well Tessa told me I had ovarian cysts.” His smile diminished. She touched his cheek and shook her head.

“Okay besides the anorexia, she said I have to have surgery. I think it’s next week to have them removed. They have been observing them but that will be it. The cysts are one ovary so my other one is safe. I have been trying to gain healthy weight and I’m away from scales and have been avoiding my past model pictures where I obsessed over weight. I know I look scrawny but it’s okay.”

“How did you feel about the cysts. Explain that to me and everything.” She sucked in a breath as she

gave him the short version of whatever Tessa told him. How the anorexia could affect her fertility. Well of course, she didn't tell him she wanted kids in future. They'll see how it goes in two to three years from now. He locked his lips as he listened.

Mentally digesting what his girlfriend was saying.

"That is that. Uhm there is a lot. I don't sleepwalk a lot and Dr V said she is probably going to put me on anti-depressants next week, I have been showing progress but I have to take the pills with constant monitoring, the drug addiction thing thing but so far so good."

"I'm on Antabuse." She nodded. Pills he takes so he can control the urge to drink. She knew how much he drunk and on days she wasn't on a high, she used to make him shots to take away the hangover when he woke up after he drank himself into a stupor. They were really each other's best friend. She smiled.

"I have more to say but let's enjoy this silence for ten minutes before we continue. Hold me tight and never let me go."

He held her and he closed his eyes. He should stay sober. For this girl here.

Mooketsi and Zara sat by the outside chairs of the restaurant. Zara held his hand as they waited for Alora to show up. Mooketsi looked at his watch. Alora is never late. She was usually on time for everything so this was unusual of her to not show up on time. They waited for five more minutes and that's when they saw her make her way to the restaurant. Meanwhile Alora had sat in the car with her boyfriend's driver as she fanned her face waiting for it to look close to normal. No pink cheeks from crying. No red blotches from her excessive hand washing after she was done from the site and the labs. She had been normal as possible. Well her regular self. She had gotten the reports and now she had the weekend to work on it but the fatigue was heavy on her. She promised her

brother she would meet him and she didn't like breaking promises. She was everything but she couldn't break promises for the life of her. As she walked toward the restaurant her hands smoothed over her stomach. Just briefly before she dropped them and she looked around till she saw him. Well he wasn't alone. That was okay. She guessed. She walked over to their table and she took out her wipes from the bag and wiped her seat before she sat down, she placed the bag on the table and she was conflicted on where to throw the used wipe. Mooketsi sucked in a breath. This was going to take time. Alora said hi and excused herself. She walked away and Zara sighed.

“Is she always like this? The chair was just fine.”

“I'm already used to it.” Zara leaned back. The chair was absolutely fine. If it was anything it might be a speck of dust. They waited for Alora who came back minutes later with her hands slightly pink. Mooketsi quietly observed her. She didn't seem like herself.

“Hi again. My apologies for being late.” She said

quickly and looked at them.

“We’ll it’s okay. How are you?” That how are you caught her off guard. How was she? She was still shocked that she is carrying a fucking human being inside of her and there was nothing she could do about it because she was not a murderer and all she had was self doubt in her abilities and everything she has learnt while growing up. That she had the biggest deal and she wasn’t even established but she had a baby on the way. One that would be here in seven to 8 months from here. She didn’t know how she was.

“I’m okay dear brother.” That was her careful response.

“Are you sure? Is it because you miss home and you just pretend to be okay?” She didn’t need this. She placed the menu down.

“I am okay. Mox I am fine! A okay okay? Ke sharpo!”

“Rora I’m not fighting.” He said calmly. Zara looked at Alora and Mooketsi. Why’s as she flipping over nothing? She couldn’t even understand.

“I know.” She said slowly. She needs to get a grip on her emotions. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the menu.

“Should we order?”

“Of course.” Mooketsi said and they all placed their orders. Mooketsi from there engaged in light conversation with Alora who seemed distracted by her own thoughts but answered and was half present.

“Alora, now that you’re done with school have you thought about finding a job?” Alora paused.

“Not really.” Zara nodded. Was she going to live off her boyfriend? Everyone knew Austin was rich and not just the regular kind of rich.

“But what will you doing in the meantime?”

“Try to build a business.”

“But isn’t a 9-5 job a better way to get a head start?”

“For most people it is. For me it’s not. I don’t want to be under the authority of someone else, I’d rather be the alpha and leader of my own establishment

which follows my rules and terms. Everyone has different ideas about what they want to do.”

“Acceptable but the funding?”

“I think that is a problem I should worry about Zara.”

Alora closed that subject off just as the waiter brought their food. She took a sip of the orange juice and shook her head. She called the waiter to place an order for a different kind of juice. Maybe apple juice will be better. She looked at her plate and she didn't want to smile but she barely ate anything all day.

“When are you going to talk to mom?”

“Mooketsi. Not today. We spoke and we reached a conclusion.”

“But Alora don't you think you blew it out of proportion.”

“Hmm..Think what you think. I don't want to explain that I didn't like being called trash and even though I never showed it, I didn't like it and no, don't tell me I'm overreacting. Have you been called an ungrateful twat? Or trash?” Mooketsi kept quiet.

“Have you been told you might birth little bastards?”
Zara was taken by how calm Alora seemed.
Knowing her own weak self she would have been in
tears.

“Exactly. Don’t dictate how I’m supposed to handle that. I forgave your mother as she explained that she is not mine and I understood the favour she did for me and privilege she gave me. Can we not have this discussion now? Because if we are here to discuss that I will gladly walk away from this lunch date and I came here to spend time with my brother. Let’s not ruin that.” She picked her fork and moved it around the plate.

“I understand that. But some day we will have to discuss it.”

“Hopefully some day is years away.” She said and Mooketsi took a sip of his juice. They all started eating as they moved onto safer topics like her graduation day and light topics that didn’t involve high emotions. Once the lunch was over, Alora picked her bag and she stood on her feet. She squeezed Mooketsi’s shoulder who ignored that

and stood up to hug her.

“We’ll talk yeah?”

“Anytime. J ust call. Love you too, don’t squeeze the life out of me.”

“Or what?” She chuckled and he was surprised yet again. She was chuckling?

“I might really punch you for spilling water on my novel when I was 16.”

“I though we were over that.” He said, she had been so angry and her face was all pink as she huffed and puffed with a murderous gaze. He had been quite amused as she said out all the ways she can kill him for that.

“Don’t try me...” He laughed and rubbed her back as she rubbed his for a few seconds before her hand dropped.

“You can let go now.” He let go of her.

“I love you Rora.” She smiled briefly before her face fell and he smiled more. She smiled.

“Bye Zara.” She said.

“Should I hug you?” Zara asked and Alora looked at her older brother to save her. She had enough hugs to last her a week.

“Go ahead babe.” Zara smiled as she hugged Alora. Alora shot Mooketsi a death glare as Zara hugged her and she patted Zara’s back. Awkward.

“Zara let go of me now. Let go. Let go.” She said and Zara laughed as she let go.

“Thank you and enjoy your day guys.” She said as she opened her bag to take her purse.

“The lunch is on me..”

“Sure? I can sti-“

“Just go.”

“Bye.” Then she walked away.

As soon as she was out of sight Zara looked at her husband.

“She is peculiar and interesting. Definitely not bad.”

“She doesn’t open up easily. You’ll get used to her the more you spend time with her. When are you

telling him?” Zara picked her juice.

“Maybe tomorrow. He just arrived and I wouldn’t want to steal his time with Reba. That would be selfish of me. Definitely tomorrow. I hope he accepts me.” She said more to herself.

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[06/08, 13:31] : REBORN

132

Alora closed her eyes as soon after she buckled up. She didn’t want to go anywhere but home. Tom looked at his boss’s girlfriend at the back and

smiled to himself. He started the car as she slept.

At Austin's house, Reba laughed into his chest as he chuckled. She smiled. She had missed her best friend.

"I talk too much?" She asked and he shook his head. He didn't mind listening to her voice. Knowing she was just open around him was a blessing on its own.

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Why would I be be bothered?"

"Good question. When are the owners of the hose coming back?" Hades shrugged, he had no idea when Austin was coming back but most likely after five since he used to come back home that time. He wasn't sure what time it was, time went undeniably fast every time he was with Reba. She got off the bed and she stretched her body before she shot him

a smile. He got up on his feet and she took his hand.

“And let me check if there is food.”

“Yes sir.” With that they walked out of the room and made their way downstairs just as the front door opened. They both looked and in walked Alora. She shot them glares.

“The devil tests me each and everyday.” Hades gave a half smile.

“You woke up on the wrong side of the bed, my day is not going to be ruined by you.” She rolled her eyes.

“Now that you’re here, my to-do list will always have your name on it so I can just ruin your day and annoy you.” Reba laughed. It felt like old times again. Her sister and Hades throwing shade at each other. Equally and with everything that was in their arsenal and none of them offended.

“But you’re good?” Alora asked. Her voice a bit concerned.

“I’m good. Thank you.” She nodded.

“Well, if you’re good Reba is good and if my sister is good then I’m good.” That was all she said as she walked up the stairs and Reba looked at her boyfriend.

“Food was on the agenda?”

“Yes.” Reba knew whatever food they were going to find, Alora didn’t make it. Her sister couldn’t cook to save her own behind.

Meanwhile in the bedroom Alora removed her shoes and held them in her hand as she walked to the wardrobe. She picked out clothes and put the shoes where they belong. She unzipped her dress and everything except her panties as she walked over to the laundry basket to throw in her dress and blazer. A bath, then she check up on Celine then she eats. God she was hungry again. She hated this now. She walked to the bathroom and she started showering. Today had been a long day. A baby? A baby? Tears filled her eyes again and she let them roll as the water washed them away. Her hands

moved to her stomach. A baby? Little terrorists. That's what they were. Because Emory had been one and it had annoyed her but the little goblin was behaved and it surprised her. Why did Emory like her? But she guessed it was a lapse of judgement on Emory's part. She dropped her hands and resumed her shower session. Twenty minutes later, she stepped out and dried herself before she got dressed and wore her silk gown over her pyjamas. She took out her phone and she finally opened Austin's messages. She listened to the voice note he sent and she smiled. She also followed the link to the song. She replied with an 'ok' and she put her phone down. She also took out their scan. She looked at the picture. She was defeated. She was with a child? She picked the photo frame that had a picture of her and Robert. She removed that picture and put the scan there. A constant reminder of the consequences of their decisions and actions. She touched her stomach.

“You little goblin better behave. Behave because God knows mommy has no idea how to handle your

sudden intrusion in her life. Whatever you do or become, I hope you surpass me.” She breathed in and walked out. Time to see Celine.

Austin read her response on his way home. He still didn't know what was on her mind and she said ok? He looked at the flowers in his passenger seat. He'll see his mother, have their daily talks and this will be ticked off her bucket list. He opened the gate and drove inside the yard, the garage door opened as he drove in, the gate sliding closed as well as the garage door. He stopped the engine, got out with the flowers in hand, phone and briefcase. He could hear chatter as he walked inside the house. Hades and Reba. He just headed straight to his mother's room and found Alora there.

“Hi ladies.” He said as he placed his briefcase down and his mother smiled. He got her flowers? Or were they for Alora.

“I brought you flowers.” He told his mother and she smiled. Alora smiled.

“I’ll leave you two in peace.” She got up and walked out. Austin sat down.

“Y-you look like you have a lot on y-yo-your mind.”

“How are you feeling?” She was worse by the day and it was a miracle she survived this long, she didn’t know why she was even holding on.

“Worse.” He knew that. He didn’t know why he thought her response might be different. He placed the flowers down. He’ll put them in a vase and maybe every two days he might get her flowers.

“She’s pregnant.” Celine’s eyes lit up. She knew she wasn’t going to live long enough to see the baby but knowing there was one was enough.

From there, Austin updated her about his day, she usually listened and talked less. To preserve whatever shards of energy she possessed that day. He offered to feed her but Alora did that and he smiled as his mother closed her eyes. She was tired now and needed some rest. He kissed her forehead.

He took his briefcase and walked out of the room. He took the stairs to their bedroom and he found her.

“Lora...” She faced him. She was so stubborn and he wanted to be in her head for a few seconds because she had been ignoring him all day.

“Have you cooled off?” She stared at the ceiling.

“I’m really pregnant? It’s hard to believe and the fact that I pieced it together that you suspected it.” He sat next to her and she folded her arms.

“But he or she is already here akere? We have to move and see how to figure it all out. I don’t know how I’m going to do it. The fatigue is already messing up with my work and I can’t take caffeine now..” she was accepting it? She wasn’t aborting? Should he be excited? Well this was only baby number one out of five but should he be excited? It was safe to be happy he was expecting with his girlfriend...

Alora rolled her eyes.

“Go ahead and rub it on my face that you’re finally

having kids and I had sworn I'm not going to carry your dna but look at me now." He grinned. She pushed him back and he laughed as he picked her up.

"I'm right here for everything, I'll help you with whatever and you can delegate some of your tasks to me, to make it easier for you." She nodded.

"But what if I'm a bad mother?"

"Lora we can only hope for the best, don't overthink this." She moved her legs up and down as she looked at him.

"Do you want it to be a boy or a girl?"

"As long as it's a baby I'm happy."

"Well I hope this baby makes you rethink having five kids.." he laughed and kissed her cheek.

"Lora we're going to have an empire." She rolled her eyes at him.

"Me? I'm not birthing any of your minions after this one Robert. Don't get ahead of yourself." He chuckled.

“Thank you and I love you sweetheart.”

“I love you too.” She placed her head on his shoulder.

“I’m hungry.” He kissed her cheek.

“What do you want to eat?”

“Beef stew le phaleche.”

“Okay. Let me take a shower and we’ll head to the kitchen.” He kissed her again.

“Thank you.”

“Join me for a shower?”

She just showered less than an hour ago but why not.

“Okay.” She got off him and started undressing as he got rid of his blazer and started unbuttoning his shirt. Did this pregnancy mean he was going to ease up on her? Sexually she meant. She’ll ask him.

At Susan's house, she checked Rebante's room but she wasn't there. She saw Zara who was on her phone when she walked out of the room she shared with Mooketsi.

"Hey Zara, have you seen Reba?" Reba was still not back? Reba had said her mother didn't want her to see Hades.

"Uhm probably school? I have no idea tota." She walked away and Susan sighed. Reba had no lessons on Friday. It could only mean one thing. The only thing she had told her to not do to not deter her own healing. Why wouldn't these kids listen to her? She was their mother for God's sake and she knew best. She walked to her bedroom and picked her phone to call Reba. The phone rang but she answered on the second ring.

"Rebante, why don't you listen? That boy is not good for you. Now you're gallivanting with him and very soon you'll be on drugs again and it will be another story. Rebante Moremi wee?"

“Mama, I love Hades and don’t shout. I will be home, I just needed to spend time with Hades.” Reba replied softly.

“In my house, you don’t do as you please. You listen and if I say you don’t see someone then you don’t.” There was silence at the end of the line.

“Rebante?”

“Are you really asking me to break up with him?”

“Yes.” Susan breathed out.

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Morning guys.

[06/08, 13:31] : REBORN

Reba sucked in a breath. Hades looked at her and she smiled. Everyone just has to believe in her. She placed the phone on her lap. She was doing the right thing. She put it on her ear.

"Mom, calm down. Take a deep breath. Don't push all of us away. I will be home tomorrow morning and we will discuss everything with no heightened feelings. You mean well in the wrong way mama and I hear you. I understand, breath. Don't say anything you'll regret. I love you mama and spend time with Em and Mooketsi. Bye." She hung up and laughed. She actually said that? She was so proud for standing up for herself.

"You're spending the night?"

"Seems so." She giggled as they shared a kiss and Alora and Austin walked inside the kitchen.

"Pornography. Cut it out guys!" Reba laughed.

"We're older than both of you." She shrugged then looked at Austin.

"We're cooking." Alora said with a huffed chest as if she knew shit about cooking.

"Dear God, I hope she doesn't poison me."

"I might just do that. Everyday I find new ways to kill people."

"Very funny." it was in fact not funny as Hades gave her a bored look and she flicked him off with her wrist.

"You guys can choose a movie or something..."

"I forgot how it is like living with you." Reba added and Alora gasped dramatically.

"You're on his side? Our pact was sisters before boys." Austin kissed her neck and she pushed him back.

"Ae. Wena wa disturber."(No. You're disturbing me.)

"But you're cooking?" Reba asked with a serious tone. Alora looked at her sister. She seemed horrified by the prospect of her cooking.

"Yes."

"Oh God!" Alora rolled her eyes. Reba shook her head. This was going to be a long long night. She could feel it.

At Susan's house, she stared at the phone just as Thabiso walked in from work.

"Reba says she she is with Hades. After I tol-"

"Su don't start. Love don't start. I have had enough of you trying to micromanage everyone in the house. Reba is an adult. Yes she made mistakes and she is getting help. Alora is an adult and yes she can speak out of turn but she is out of your hair now like you wanted. The boys are both married and we have Emory. Susan there was a time you cried about being left out, let the kids live their lives. Love them but don't dictate them with an iron fist and give ultimatums. I am tired of you acting like a

victim when you orchestrated the mess that ensued. Su get help, your therapist currently might be doing a shitty job of making see you see that you might be ruining the best thing in your lives. This time you could be excited about being a grandma any time soon knowing your kids are responsible adults and ready for that. You should be happy they found partners that love them for who they are." Susan held back tears as she broke down. Thabiso pulled his wife to him and hugged her.

"Love you can do better, you're better than what you are doing now. What happened to the Susan I fell in love with? The one who supported her kids? What happened?" She cried more.

"It's never too late. Find a new therapist, let go of your past. Don't let past hurts. Don't let things that happened 23 years ago ruin the life we built with the kids. Don't let those past demons win. He cheated and he is dead, don't blame anyone but him. Alora didn't ask to be born, Reba has reasons that may be greater than us and that explain why she resorted to drugs regardless of the stellar upbringing she had.

Alora has been showing signs of OCD for the longest, Bokamoso is always away and he didn't pass by for that long for Christmas. Mooketsi is his own person and does what he wants, each of these kids are different and you can change and do better. There is still time, Emory has been avoiding you since your outburst and do you want your own daughter to fear you?" She shook her head.

"I know you don't. I'll attend those therapy sessions with you, breath and think before you speak. We don't want you to be lonely years from now when all of our kids have cut you off. It's not fulfilling at old age." She nodded as he rubbed her back.

"I'll do better." She said in between tears.

"Promise."

"Good. Don't say that and not be committed to doing better. Do better for you first then the kids, put yourself first, love yourself and forgive yourself okay?" She nodded as he embraced her. How did she get here? How had he not left her? Thabiso breathed out and kissed the top of her head. For

better or for worse. This was their worse.

Alora chopped the vegetables as he sat on the stool. She wanted to eat and she should help him. The dishes as well. Austin imagined her with a swelling stomach ordering him around and it brought a smile to his face. He had everything he could wish for. But that was not what scared him, the scary thing about having everything was losing everything. That scares him. Losing everything. Losing her and their child. He hoped it didn't come to that. He wasn't in any way religious but he prayed and hoped that whatever deity people placed their hopes on, would not let him lose everything. Alora looked up at him.

"What?"

"Nothing." She stopped chopping the peppers.

"I have a knife in my hand."

"Alora bathong!" Hades said from the lounge.

"Now now, don't fight like kids. Especially when Lora has a knife in her hand."

Alora rolled her eyes as she continued chopping.

"Tota you should be grateful you managed to make me your girlfriend. It's an achievement on it's own."

"And I knocked you up." He said smugly and she placed the knife down.

"O tsamaela go ntena."(you're so close to making me angry.)

In the lounge Reba paused. Wait what? What did Austin just

say? Or there was something wrong with her hearing? She tapped Hades' chest.

"Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

She whispered in his ear. He gave her confused look

"Are you sure?" She nodded.

"But we'll wait till she says something. Which movie should we pick?"

"Anything I guess?" She snuggled into him while in the kitchen Alora finished chopping up.

"Done." She walked to the fridge and got the carton of apple juice. She washed a glass before she filled it up with juice. Chugged down the juice, had a refill and chugged it down again.

"It's like a reward." She said as she threw the empty carton in the bin. Austin couldn't help but smile.

"Okay pop quiz." He got the cut up vegetables as she quizzed him and he answered her. He got every one of the questions correct.

"Uhm a game of chess after this?"

"You're such a sore loser."

"Shut up!" He laughed and she smiled.

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[06/08, 13:32] : REBORN

134

At Austin's house, the night went progressively faster than how Reba would have wanted. She was quietly observing her sister who was casually threatening death as she snuggled into Austin while eating something. It was painfully adorable to her weak heart to look at them. She didn't know if Alora knew that but the way Austin casually held her hair back for when she said she blew it away from her face. It was the way he looked at her. Alora's lips moved and he just nodded agreeing with what she said and she rolled her eyes before she faced him and a slow smile touched his lips. She went off in French and he replied. Reba sighed. They were cute

and it didn't take a blind man to see that these two were in love. Regardless of her sister's personality. What she heard wasn't repeated so she gave up on that.

"I think I'll be putting Alora to bed. Switch off the lights when you're done guys." Austin said as Alora rolled her eyes and let him carry her out of the lounge.

"So now that you're done, will you go back to work?" Reba asked

Hades breathed out, he didn't know how he was going to face his father. He was part the reason he was an alcoholic but he eventually had to.

"I have to. At some point. How has the media been on you?" she shrugged. It was always going to be there she guessed.

"I'm surviving. I'm surviving." Hades hugged her as she asked him more questions about the future and he laughed casually. They could envision a life beyond thirty now? It was mind boggling that they never saw that, at some point they thought their

addictions were going to kill them and if one of them was to die first, the other one would follow because it was Reba and Hades. Not just Reba or not just Hades, it was Reba and Hades. Together. He kissed the top of her head and she smiled. Finally switching channels to watch a Marvel movie. “Dr Strange?” She asked.

“And how could I say no to a marvel movie?” He couldn’t. It was their comfort movies and shows and funny thing they knew everything there was to know about the marvel universe. The movie started and she smiled. For sure in another universe they were together minus the addictions.

Meanwhile in the bedroom, Alora watched her boyfriend get rid of his clothes and he made his way to bed with only his boxer briefs.

“Austin?”

“Yes darling?”

“So..now that we have a little goblin on the way..”

“A baby Alora. Repeat after me and say BABY!” She rolled her eyes for the umpteenth time that day and cleared her throat.

“A little goblin on the way will the..this is embarrassing.” Her face flushed. She pulled the comforter closer to her chin as the bed dipped because of his weight. She looked at him.

“Will you ease up on me?” She knew he understood her but he can be an *s s and would want clarity.

“Do you want me to do that?” He was giving her options? She knew he loved being in control and was very dominant in the bedroom so now that she was being given an option...

“Yes. No. I don’t know.” She breathed out.

“Let’s do this, I’ll try to be pregnant friendly to you okay?”

“I’m not an invalid.”

“Lora, I’m trying to compromise here and you’ll tell me what you like okay?” She nodded.

“Will you let me touch you?” He chuckled and pulled

her to him.

“You’re pushing it sweetheart.” She sighed. It was worth a try.

“I’m still getting handcuffed?”

“Don’t act like you don’t like it.” She did.

“Sleep.”

“Don’t force sleep on me.”

“You’re the one always fatigued. Sleep.” He kissed her cheek and then her lips. He got off the bed to go switch off the lights. In the darkness as he made his way to bed she started speaking again.

“Will I be a good mom? Will the little goblin love me?”

“Darling, our child will love you and I’m here. You’re not going through this parenting journey alone.” She nodded as she breathed out.

“But in your own opinion, will our baby love me?”

“Yes. Don’t overthink, take this one day at a time.” She breathed out.

“I think I might actually hate myself if our child inherits my OCD.” She said quietly as he got in bed. He just held her and kissed her head.

“It’s terrible and it’s more than just cleaning. It usually messes me up a bad and sometimes I have it under control if I can keep to the ritual and schedule and sometimes it ruins my whole day. I don’t want to take pills for it because I might be dependent on them to keep sane. Austin this is just scary.”

“I know sweetheart.” She breathed out as he held her tight in the quiet of the night as her mind started working overtime.

The following morning, Alora was the first one to wake up and she looked at Austin who was asleep. She was having the best time falling in love with him. She got out of bed and headed to the bathroom. Twenty minutes later, she was done and walking

out of the bedroom. She made her way down stairs to check on Celine. She was probably asleep. She knocked on the door and opened it. She looked at her, fully asleep. She shouldn't tire the old woman. She headed to the kitchen. A pancake breakfast for everyone. That was the thing she did right and maybe she should scramble eggs? That was an idea. Her heart fell as she looked at the coffee in the cabinet. She breathed out. She didn't coffee. She repeated that over and over again. She didn't need coffee. She didn't need caffeine.

At Susan's place she had woke up first and was in the kitchen making breakfast for everyone. She breathed out. She was going to do better. Emory made her way to the kitchen yawning and rubbing her eyes.

“Good morning Em.” The little girl smiled.

“Morning mom.”

“Do you want to help me with breakfast?” Susan said gently and Emory smiled and nodded. She yawned a bit as she walked closer. Susan breathed out and engaged her youngest into an animated conversation as they made breakfast. Well minus her short height, the breakfast was a success and she was sure the people asleep in the house were going to love it. She already had lunch ideas and maybe they found bond. She was going to do better. It was a new day and it meant new beginnings.

Alora clapped her hands all alone in the kitchen. She made breakfast. For everyone, well being the genius, responsible and very sophisticated person she was, it was such an achievement. Her silent win was disrupted by Robert and she stopped smiling.

“I thought you died in your sleep.”

“Your hyperboles are always amusing sweetheart.”
He walked closer to hug her and she moved back.

“Don’t touch me. Stay back.” He just picked her up and she screamed and ended up laughing into his neck.

“How are you this morning?”

“I cooked.”

“I can see that. How are you?”

“Alive and I cooked.” She repeated again. He chuckled.

“You want me to say good girl? I’m not going to give you that satisfaction Lora.”

“Die Robert!” He placed her on the counter and placed his hands on either side of her. He softened his voice as he spoke in between kissing her neck.

“You’re okay? No fatigue? Or morning sickness?” She shook her head.

“Not yet.”

“Okay mon coeur.” She shivered as his voice went husky. They weren’t in the bedroom and he shouldn’t be doing that. What if the nurse walks in or Reba or Hades? He sucked on her neck and she

pushed his head back. He wanted to leave a hickey on her neck and she didn't want that.

"I think we're going to have a very long pregnancy."
She smiled.

"Good. I'm in no rush to meet this intruder." He laughed. She was always dramatic.

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Hello guys. I'm working on the second insert and it's not the last one as well.

[06/08, 13:32] : REBORN

Austin helped her with setting up the table in the dining room as she came with the plates. They set it up for five people. In case Celine's nurse wanted to eat. Now Alora was internally panicking. What if they spit out the pancakes? Okay she would hold knives against their throats so they can swallow. It was no big deal. Reba and Hades walked in after hearing the sounds that came from the dining room.

“Good morning.”

“It's not a good morning Reba. For a morning to be good, something good has to actually happened and in the last three hours nothing good has happened. Robert isn't dead, Hades' horrendous face is still visible so no, it's not a good morning.”

“Someone is sharpening her talons.” Hades remarked.

“Extra sharp too, for your information.” Both Reba and Austin shook their heads. Alora walked back to the kitchen with Austin on her heel. Reba took a seat next to Hades. After breakfast she was heading back home. She hoped her mother calmed

down and they'll all be able to talk.

In the kitchen Alora picked the jug full of juice.

“You're extra nice today.”

“Watch it.” She walked out and left him there as he smiled. It's always been her hasn't it? He couldn't imagine his world now without her, it had been so mundane before she was in it and she was just existing in his right now. In the best possible way and he was happy. It was full of technicolour now. Because of her, he learnt to love more than himself. He loved her, he had people he cared about now. Reba and Hades. Because she was in his life. He was now closer with his mother now. Much more closer because of her intervention. He walked back to the dining room and everyone sitting down and it felt right as there was banter around the table, Alora rolling her eyes at something Hades said and Austin agreed with. Reba interrupting with her sunshine personality and Alora assuring her sister that she shared the same sentiments. And it was a

relief that breakfast didn't end in bloodshed.

Everyone at the table was already used to Alora and they thanked their lucky stars that the ice queen didn't pick a knife and all.

"I'll drop you off at home." Alora volunteered. She just needed to get clean again and she'll drop Reba off. Austin on the other hand, had planned a trip with his mother to Lion's park. He was going to tick off her bucket list one by one. Make the memories count.

"Okay that's that. Excuse me." Alora got up and headed to the kitchen with some of the plates while conversation ensued in the dining room. She leaned against the counter. She touched her stomach. She'll live with this one.

An hour later, Alora started her car as Reba buckled up. Reba breathed in.

“You are happy and I love that for you.”

“You’re the happy one since Hades is back.”

Reba smiled.

“One step at a time. We are taking it one day at a time and I’ll live.”

Alora drove out of the garage.

“But do you ever get the urge to go back to drugs again?” Alora asked. She didn’t even approach the matter with caution and that earned her a chuckle from Reba.

“I won’t lie and say I never think of them.

Sometimes some days are so hard and I want to escape my own thoughts and body and wish I was high. On some daze where I see things that don’t exist, I do think of them but then I remember that I’ve come so far and I’m stronger than that.” Alora gave her a small smile. Reba smiled wider. She was smiling.

“If you need to talk, although you do a lot of that at therapy, I’m here.” She said as she drove out of the

yard and Reba nodded. Her sister didn't know it but she saved her in the end.

At Susan's homestead, there was laughter at the table and so much lightheartedness as they feasted on the breakfast. Deep down, Susan could feel the impact of an empty house. Two of her kids weren't here. Reba wasn't and Alora? She wasn't even sure she was coming back. She shook her head, she'll think about that later. Right now the people at the table required her full attention. She heard the intercom and she stood up. She walked to the door. She pressed the buttons for the gate to open and she waited by the door. A door knock followed a minute later and she opened.

She smiled when she saw Rebantle. She was going to try her best.

"Hi mom." Reba said. She had been expecting some sort of showdown or hostility especially after what

she said yesterday before she hung up. Yes she stood up for herself but this was her mother they were talking about...

“Are you okay?” She asked cautiously.

“Yes. We are eating breakfast, want to join us?”

Reba agreed even though she was full. She headed to the dining room and the atmosphere was light. That caught her off guard. She pulled out a chair and sat down as Zara narrated something. She was going to need a few minutes to catch up. She listened as she sipped on the juice. She smiled but was still cautious wondering what was up with her mother. Once breakfast was over, Zara offered to do the dishes and Emory wanted to help as well. Mooketsi and Thabiso cleared the table leaving her with her mother.

“You wanted to talk?” She nodded slowly.

“Okay. Now or later? How w-“ Susan sucked in a deep breath. She was trying.

“How is Hades?” Reba’s eyes widened. What the hell was going on here?

“He-he’s well. He is sober and okay.” Susan nodded slowly.

“I’m free today. The whole day if you want to talk..”
Reba nodded. Did she perhaps skip three chapters?

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[06/08, 13:32] : REBORN

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Content Warning

At Susan’s house, Reba was still waiting for her mother to do something. Tell her how Hades was

bad for her recovery and all of that but it never came. There was a door knock on her bedroom and Zara walked in.

“Hey, how was the sleepover?”

“It was good. Hades is good.” Zara sucked in a breath. She wanted to meet Hades and she didn’t want to involve their father in it because it was not going to end well with that man involved. And it was going to seem out of character for her to ask for Hades’ number from Reba because she was going to ask why. She should tell her why so she could at least speak to her older brother and see if he is willing to form a sibling relationship. She hoped he wanted one.

“This won’t take much of your time..” Reba nodded as Zara sat next to her.

“Well, I’ve known this for most of my life and-“ she sucked in a breath. Reba just listened.

“Remember that dinner where I was first introduced?”

“Yep.”

“I’ve known about his existence and seen pictures but have never really met with him face to face.”

“I’m not following Zara.” Reba sat upright. She was really lost.

“Hades.” Reba’s forehead scrunched.

“I-I Hades is my half brother.” Reba shook her head. Hades didn’t have any siblings she knew of. Hell she grew up with him and he was an only child.

“It comes as a shock, he is my brother. I-I just need to tell him that.”

“Wait let me get this right..Hades is your brother?” She nodded.

“You knew about it?” Zara nodded again.

“And he doesn’t know?” She shook her head. She wanted to tell him.

“I wanted to speak to him. To tell him, It seems useless to want to tell him now but I just want him to know. What he does from there is up to him.”

“This is-wow. Uhm I don’t know but I have a question...” Zara could take a good guess at what

the question would be.

“We’re you friendly to me to get close to Hades?” It was complex. She wanted to know Reba as her sister in law as well as someone who knew her half-brother.

“You are my sister in law so I wanted to know you because of that and as well as the fact that you are close to Hades.” Reba digested that. At least she didn’t lie and try to placate her that she wanted to know her because she was just her. The honesty was appreciated even though it kind of hurt.

“I guess you had your reasons...well I can call him to meet you.” Zara’s face lit up. She hugged Reba.

“Thank you so much.” Reba nodded as Zara stood up on her feet and walked out.

Reba watched her leave. She had never seen the resemblance but now the more she thought about it, she could see the similar cheekbone structure or was her mind trying to look for similarities that weren’t there. She texted Hades, a lunch date would do. She sent the text and threw her phone on the

bed. The issue at hand right now was her mother. Was she genuine?

There was a door knock and she pushed her locs back.

“Come in.” Her mother walked in and she braved herself for the verbal sparring. Well her mother was going to do the talking while she would try to avoid a fight and quickly apologise to have it over and done with. Susan sucked in a breath. She can let her children make their own decisions and all.

“Uhm I was just about to go find you,” Reba said. Susan nodded. It was kind of not nice to not be the one telling them what to do.

“I hope I don’t offend you mom.” Reba started out. Susan forced a smile, she was going to try.

“You can say what you want to say,” then Reba sucked in a breath. Her therapist would be so proud of her right now. Other than Alora, Hades and the therapist no one knew why she took drugs.

“Hades isn’t the reason I took drugs.” Susan wanted to hear this. She always said this but what other possible explanation was there? She was stronger now. She told herself. They couldn’t touch her now.

“Uhm where do I start?” She closed her eyes. She had sworn not tell a soul, Alora didn’t know the gory details and she had just summed it all up into sexual assault when it was more than that. Her heart raced as she recalled every bad thing that happened. After this she was never telling the story again, unless it was really necessary but she had skipped that stage with her therapist.

“Well modelling was fine in Botswana.” She was going to skip over the time she experimented with drugs here at that party before she turned 18.

“Uhm then France happened...” she was too young for that. Tears filled her eyes. It was a miracle she could have sex with her boyfriend or was it because she had pushed thoughts and feelings and the memories aside with the drugs?

“When we got there, shoots and all right?” Susan

nodded. She was there most of the time.

“Uhm during rehearsals the racist slurs started...” tears filled her eyes.

“For the first time in my life, I was bullied for my skin colour.” Her voice shook. All she had ever known was praise for her skin and she had been hurt that she was being bashed for her skin.

“That was the least of it though.” She added.

“Then the sexual assaults started.” Susan’s heart stopped beating. What did she mean by sexual assault? That’s as a broad term and Reba had never said anything. Reba licked her lips.

“The unwanted touches from the other male models, the photographers. It was small and something I pushed aside.” She maintained an even voice but it was hard to try and narrate each and every incident. Each and every incident she felt useless and they had laughed in her face and told her she was good for that or they have always wanted to touch a black c*nt.

“There are so many instances and I wanted to block

me out so bad. I wanted to forget those memories. Did I tell you that this one time, at the after party my drink was spiked and I don't even drink. They spiked my juice and in the morning I woke up alone in the venue, naked and feeling used but not knowing what happened or who had dragged me where? How am I supposed to see myself as someone worthy? How do you report in a country where they would believe the locals over you? Or say you're lying for attention and they further degrade you with words?" Susan's tears rolled down her cheeks. God she had no idea. She had no idea.

"For years some of the sexual stuff got worse and people didn't hide it, the racism worse and the other female models mocking my weight and telling me I'm too fat to model? That caused a whole eating disorder that is affecting me now...It was hell. Modelling was hell on earth for me. It killed me and destroyed every piece of me and Hades had nothing to do with it. He isn't the reason I took drugs, to some degree he was my sanity and he loved me regardless of how dirty I felt, I was ashamed of my

own self. I didn't even recognise myself anymore and I am fighting so hard to be the me before all of that happened but I can't go back in time and tell those people who forcefully put their hands and imprinted themselves on me to not to. I was scared. I-“ she covered her mouth as she burst into tears. Susan was crying as she held her daughter. She didn't know how she never noticed a change in Reba. She had still been that bright child she had known, nothing was really different and she couldn't have noticed it. She had failed her as a parent. She shouldn't have encouraged her to take their contract in Paris. She didn't know...

“I didn't know.” She said as she comforted Reba. Reba moved her head back and shook it while trying to wipe her tears. Her heart broke as it replayed that incident in the elevator where they had stopped it midway and forcefully removed her clothes and forced their fingers into her. Her tears choked her and she hit her flat chest, her heart was breaking and the feelings were overwhelming her. She didn't want o feel like this. It was too much to remember.

Her lips quivered and she sobbed. Susan held her as she cried into her arms.

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[06/22, 09:38] : REBORN

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Susan rubbed her back as she cried along with her daughter. How could she not sense that her daughter was not okay? She should've tried to read in between the smiles and her sunshine personality that there was a change. She should have tried harder. At this very moment she felt like a failure. She failed all the children. Reba broke the hug and

rubbed her eyes. She was a strong girl. They just needed to believe in her. She smiled and pushed her locs back.

“I’m so sorry. I know it-“ Reba shook her head. Her mother didn’t know and she didn’t have to apologise for what other people did. She couldn’t control them. She did take drugs but she was clean now and trying to deal with her trauma the best way she could.

Susan was still flabbergasted by what she heard and it broke her heart into a million little pieces. She wondered how it felt and as much as drugs were bad, she could understand her daughter’s choices. Tears filled her eyes. She could understand why she decided to take drugs regardless of the fact that they might make her an addict.

“I’m here for anything.” Susan hugged her again and Reba nodded. She needed that. God knew she has been yearning for that, she blinked back the tears that wanted to fall again. If she started crying again she wasn’t going to stop.

“I’m so sorry you went through that. So sorry for not reading between the lines.” Her mother soothed and she nodded. God she needed to hear that.

At Austin’s house, Alora watched Austin put Celine in the car. She was not going to intrude on their little outing.

“You can take pictures..” she shook her head. They were going with her nurse just to make sure she was okay and not over exerting herself.

“You two go and have fun. I’ll just try to get through work.” He hugged her and she hugged him back for a brief second before she pushed him back.

“Go.” He kissed her cheek and she watched the nurse get inside the car along with Austin. The car reversed and the gate closed seconds later after the car was out. She walked to the house and touched her stomach again. She better get started with work.

She took the stairs and disappeared down the hallways as she headed to the study. Meanwhile in the bedroom, Hades got ready for the lunch date. Anything to spend time with Reba. He will deal with his father on Monday, he just needed this last weekend without him buzzing in his ear and tearing him down with words.

Almost an hour later, Zara faced her husband.

“Wish me luck.”

“Zee you don’t have to do this if you don’t want to. Hades can be a bastard if he wants. He is not that nice and at times I wonder how Reba loves that guy.”

“He is your brother-in-law babe.”

“I just speaking my truth. I’ll drive you guys there but don’t want you to have expectations. He might

reject you and you'll-

“Don’t be so negative. Who knows, maybe he has wanted a sibling. It might be tough to adjust to that but eventually he’ll let me in.” Zara hoped so anyway.

“Okay. I hear you. Let’s do this baby girl.” She grinned as she tied her hair.

In the bedroom, Reba made sure her eyes were okay. If Lora was here, she should have helped her with makeup. Maybe there was hope that her mother was going to get better. She smiled at the mirror.

“Rebante Moremi I’m proud of you now.” She smiled at her reflection. Her broken pieces won’t be back to normal but they can create something new. A mosaic. A mosaic is always beautiful because it’s made from broken pieces. She was a mosaic. She’ll update Violet on Monday. With that she picked her bag and walked out of the room. She saw her mother who looked like she was beating herself

over her recent revelation.

“Mom...it’s in the past.” She said as she closed her bedroom door and Zara walked out with Mox.

“But still...”

“Mom, it happened and I’m surviving aren’t I? Just believe in me, like a pixie. I’m strong and some days are tough but I’m tougher now.” She grinned and hugged her mother before kissing her forehead.

“I have to go now. We’ll be back later but I love you and it’s not your fault. It’s not even mine.” Zara and Mooketsi were lost. What were they talking about?

“Guys are you ready?” She asked them and Zara gave her a thumbs up.

“Never been this excited.”

“Fake it till you make it I guess.” Zara’s smile dropped.

“Does it show?”

“Yep.” They said bye to Susan who waved at them and walked into the bedroom. Her husband had listened attentively and she could see the hurt in his

eyes. She was going to do better. Thabiso just patted on the bed and she sat down next to him. He hugged her and she released a sad sigh.

At Austin's house, Hades checked the study and he found her with her face down.

"I'll be back."

"No one is going to miss you Hades. Out you go." She didn't lift her head and he leaned back.

"Alora." She lifted her head annoyed.

"Hmm..."

"Thank you." She squinted her eyes. What's as he up to?

"For what?"

"I kind of suspected you had Austin help me, thank you." Austin was that male friend he never had growing up since he had no siblings. Alora's eyes

softened a fraction.

“In our weakest moments we all need someone to be there. It might not seem like much but it does help. I would do it over and over again.” He looked down at his shoes and smiled. She closed the file she was busy with.

“It means a lot to me.” He said again licking his lips as he lifted his head to look at her. She had a beautiful heart even though outwardly she acted like a bitch. He smiled and she rolled her eyes.

“Welcome, now leave.” He chuckled and walked out. Alora continued reading the other file she and to go through.

Hades finally arrived at the lunch spot. He looked around. He hasn't been in public for months and he had to force himself to come here because his girlfriend asked for a lunch meeting. He would have

preferred somewhere private but then again if you're known there is no privacy is there? He spotted her but stopped in his tracks seeing her with that girl from the last dinner he had with her family. What was going on? He continued walking till he got to the table. Reba smiled at him as he kissed her lips then broke it before sitting down.

“Hi love. Uhm okay, I'll make this quick and disappear. Hades this is Zara, Zara this is Hades...” Hades nodded. Not following.

“Zara has something to tell you and it's not my place to be here. I love you baby.” She stood up and kissed his cheek before she walked out leaving her clueless boyfriend with Zara.

“Hi. I'm Z-“ her heart pounded with each breath and she could see his confusion and boredom and was hoping he wasn't going to shut her down immediately.

“Cut to the chase.” There was the swift verbal cutoff. Swift and kind of bitter. Her skin tingled as her vision went woozy. She opened her mouth but her

tongue felt heavy before she could even continue speaking.

“I-I have something to tell you.” Her words mashed and Hades was obviously already bored of her. Why couldn’t she get to the real reason she was here so he would leave and spend time with his girlfriend? He nodded.

“I-uhm I-oh God!” She fanned her face and her heart drummed in her chest. He was intimidating in person and actually speaking to him. He was her big brother and she was scared already. Maybe this had been a bad idea.

“I-I’m your sister.” She blurted. Hades stopped moving. He thinned his eyes to look at her before he laughed bitterly.

“This is some kind of sick joke right?” Zara’s heart plummeted in her chest. She was a joke? Tears burned in her eyes. She was a joke? This had been a bad idea.

Hades was waiting for her to agree and get to the real point instead he saw tears in her eyes. Shit!

Fuck! It wasn't?

"You're serious?" Did she look like she would lie about that? She nodded and blinked back the salty water welling in her eyes. She should leave now. She pushed her chair back.

"Wait, what do you mean you're my sister?" He asked. Because how the fuck did he have a sibling when he knew he was an only child?

"We sha-" Zara rubbed her eyes.

"We share a father." Hades remained quiet.

"Fred Hudson, he's my biological father. His name is on my birth certificate if you want proof." She said. He sent her money every month because that's what he did, he threw money at his problems and he hoped it was enough.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have burdened you with that, I just wanted you to know." Zara finally said and she got up, grabbing her bag and rubbing her eyes. An astonished Hades was trying to process that. It hasn't even been 24 hours since he's been back and this?

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A MONTH LATER

My sincerest apologies my oxygen tanks. I've been stuck for hours. Five cups of coffee later and now we have this. I'll try to see if we can squeeze in another one. Try being the doing word. Love and light my loves.

[06/22, 09:38] : REBORN

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Alora paused as she looked at her investors after

her three month update on the progress.

“So far so good.” Grey said as he eyed her and she nodded waiting for the rest to give their views. She was exhausted from working on this all week.

Finally in a month’s time she will have the sample of most of the products. The builder were doing good. She now had to work on building her company. The hiring process and advertisement. PR and all the works. Three months in and the little gremlin was behaving in her stomach.

“I am just waiting for the final product and Lora Cosmetics hitting the shelves.” Maduo added as she filled her glass with water.

“So there aren’t any more questions?”

“No Alora. We are very satisfied with your work ethic and our money is being used wisely so that’s it.” She nodded and placed her hands on the table.

“Thank you and the meeting is over then. I’ll send emails for the next meeting and we’ll take it from there.” They agreed and murmured amongst themselves. She flashed a quick smile before she

picked her laptop bag and disconnected her laptop. She walked out after she packed her stuff. She wanted to go home and sleep. Austin offered to help her so she can rest when needed. It did help sometimes to have a smart man by her side who knew everything there is to know in the business world. The elevator opened and she stepped inside. She looked up as she pressed the buttons for it to go down. They had discussed letting people know about the pregnancy. Well her family in particular because his mother knew and it brought a smile to her face when Celine asked her how she was every morning when she was the one supposed to ask her how she was. She has been getting weaker by the day and the doctor had said, it was a miracle that she was surviving till now. Alora had a bad feeling that she might die soon because she slept more and it was scary because Robert would wake in the middle of the night to check on her heartbeat. Of course she would wake up and stand by him but sometimes it hurt that she couldn't reverse time and hope that Celine hadn't reached the last stage of cancer but fate had other plans she guessed.

The elevator pinged, doors slid open and Alora in a black suit stepped out exuding the confidence only few could muster with heels sky high and makeup being her armour. She nodded as she passed the receptionist and stepped out of the building. She headed to the parking lot. As soon as she got inside her car, she removed her heels, adjusted her seat forward and blew the weave from her face as she started the car, laptop bag in the passenger seat. Should she check on Robert? She was tired but a hi won't kill her will it? To Robert's office then.

At Austin's office, he looked at the design. It was missing something. He couldn't pinpoint what bit something was missing and of course she had been wearing Mathew Inc. original designs for months. He needed this one to be perfect because it had to be and it was missing a certain element to it. He picked his pencil and he locked his lips as his

office telephone started ringing. He picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Ms Moremi is here to see you. She looks like she is ready to kill me.” The receptionist added with a whisper.

“She can proceed. Thank you.” He cut the call. He put the pencil down and the paper was shoved into his desk drawer. He’ll worry about his specific design sometime later after she leaves. He had only three months from now to put this together but this design was more stressful than the rest. Was it because this one was special than the others? Minutes later, there was a door knock and she opened the door.

“Hi Robert. I decided to pass by and see your not so attractive face before heading home.”

“Just say you missed me and I am very attractive darling.”

“No you’re not.” She closed the door and she headed straight to the couch. She removed her heels and she placed her legs on the couch as well.

She frowned. She wasn't comfortable. He watched her try to sit comfortably till she decided to sit cross legged.

"Better. The investors are happy." He nodded.

"I'm not here to disturb although that is on my to-do list as well."

"I'll always make time for you darling. You want to talk and I'm listening." She went to on to explain the plan for this week and next week.

"I obviously need a marketing team. That especially because how can we introduce Lora Cosmetics without the power of social media and a good PR team."

"True." She bit her lower lip.

"My dress doesn't fit." She changed topics just like that.

"Which one sweetheart?" She had so many dresses and he didn't bother memorising all of them, she didn't wear some of the dresses.

"Graduation dress and it's next month. It no longer

fits.”

“Find another one sweetheart.” She rolled her eyes and folded her arms.

“You’re supposed to assure me Robert, why o n t a t h e l e l a ? ” (why are you not taking me seriously?)

“Darling that’s the only option available.” She knew that. But she loved it. She is probably going to start showing next month and her chosen dress didn’t fit. What a time to be alive.

“Do you love me?”

“You own my heart and soul Alora.”

“Would you tattoo my name on your back?” He picked his pen.

“Alora I already tattooed your birth date on my chest. Where is this going sweetheart?” She grinned. Ah. That tattoo. He really didn’t have to but that had been sweet of him and she didn’t know how much love this man required because he had hers in tonnes and tonnes. Like she always said, fate aligned them. They were destined for each other.

He was calm, like the sea.

“Would you duel for me?”

“You are so fucking weird.” She laughed and he smiled.

“I love you.” She said and she placed her hands on her thighs.

“Your offspring is behaving so I better go home now.” He shook his head with an ear splitting grin on his face. He got up from his desk just as she got ready to stand up.

“Not so fast.”

“You’re starting..”

“Starting what?” He helped her up on her feet and she thought he was going to help her with her shoes but the bastard just picked her up to place her on his desk.

“Robert..” her voice trailed as he removed her blazer. She knew what he was doing and she wanted that too. She can’t tell him that because she was going to inflate his ego. Seeing him smug irritated the hell

out of her. He placed the blazer on his chair carefully. Good. He shouldn't wrinkle it. He carefully unbuttoned her pants and she could breathe nicely now.

“You really do want me 11 inches deep inside of you..”

“Robert, are we doing this or not?” He laughed as he kissed her lips and she kissed his back.

“C-can you..” he broke the kiss to listen to her. She flushed.

“Speak.”

“Can you take me roughly?” He kissed her neck before his teeth grated her ear and she shuddered.

“With pleasure sweetheart.” He had been much more lenient on her because she was always tired and the doctor mentioned something about miscarriages happening during the first trimester. With that he lowered his hands to pull down her pants just as her hands went down to his belt buckle.

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[06/22, 09:39] : REBORN

139

His eyes fell on her breasts as he clasped her bra. He kissed her neck before whispering.

“I love you.”

“I can see that.” He laughed as he picked up her shirt and held it behind her so she can slide her arms into the sleeves. She did just that as he picked her pants while she buttoned up. Her hair was all messed up but they’ll deal with that after she is fully

dressed. He handed her her pants and he watched her do a little jump for them to move over her butt. She breathed out. She couldn't wait to head home, take a bath because this man really had his way with her and she had to walk normally out of this place.

“What time will you be home?”

“A little bit late.”

“How late Robert? Be specific.”

“Don't wait up for me.” She nodded as she tucked in her shirt and he came up behind her, wrapping his arms around her stomach.

“Glad to know our baby is behaving and I love you.”

“I love you. Let go of me.” He chuckled.

“You should wash off your makeup.”

“I look horrible don't I?”

“Very horrible. You're terrifying.”

“You're a terrible human being Robert.” She looked at her lipstick stain on his shirt. How was she going

to get it out of his shirt during laundry day? He let go of her as she scurried to the bathroom in his office. She looked at the mirror. She should wash her face now. He walked inside the bathroom holding wipes. She was glad to know he was adopting her habits. She shouldn't have left her bag in the car, she will have to remove even the lashes. Gosh Robert had one job, to stay away from her face now she's struggling. She held back tears as she brought her hand up to her nose to try not to cry.

"Lora you're crying?" She wasn't. She wasn't. He sighed.

"What is it?" He asked as he held her waist.

"I'm not crying. You're seeing things."

He let her think that and nodded before kissing the top of her head.

"Okay sweetheart." She nodded and he just stood behind her as she washed her face clean of the makeup. When she was done, he handed her the wipes and she gave him a grateful nod. He squeezed her cheeks, she was getting chubby now.

“Ekete o legwinya.”(you look like a fat cake)

She glared at him as he gave her smug grin whilst still squeezing her cheeks. She slapped his hands away.

“Well this legwinya won’t be sharing the bed with you anytime soon. Waitse wa kgora.” She rolled her eyes and he laughed. She ended up laughing.

“But seriously now, ke legwinya?”(Do I look like a fat cake?)

“I’m afraid so darling. But you’re a delicious fat cake don’t worry about it.” Her face heated in annoyance. This man was annoying.

“God knows I despise you. Just die.”

“You don’t.” He smoothed back her weave and he squeezed her cheeks again.

“But on a serious note, jokes aside. You’re a cute fat cake darling.” She fisted her hands.

“I’m going to throw hands and someone is dying and that person isn’t me.” He laughed watching her get pink in the face and he kissed her forehead. It

was so easy to rile her up, always fiery.

“Do I look presentable?” She asked and he assessed her.

“Your clothes aren’t wrinkled but your hair says another thing entirely.” She groaned. He smoothed it down whilst towering over her. He smiled and lowered his head to kiss her. She moved her face.

“I’m not a fat cake.” He laughed and she joined him as he got his kiss that almost led to another round of sex.

Reba walked out of the lecture theatre as she took out her phone. She had to head out to another lesson in ten minutes. Did she mention that she hated University? Test twos were around the corner and she was studying and studying but nothing clicked. Why can’t they trust they learnt the content and just give them their degrees? She sighed as she

sent Hades a quick message before pocketing her phone.

Hades didn't know whether he should confront his father about the Zara issue. During the course of the month, they did speak. Occasionally that was and he heard her side of the story and he wanted to hear his father's side of the story. Why he never mentioned her, did he hate him that much to even not allow contact between siblings? He knew his mother was well, very much non-existent in his life. The woman abandoned him when he was a kid, she leaked the addictions to the media and changed the course of his and Reba's life. Most especially Reba because people bashed her the most and she had been so uncomfortable showing her face out in public. He slid his phone out and read Reba's message with a smile. He decided he will ask his father tomorrow. He had summoned him to his

house for dinner. A dinner he was not going to enjoy either way but he had no choice. He was using the bastard's last name.

Susan smiled as she went through the photo album of the kids, therapy was better and true to his promise Thabiso had been attending therapy with her. It was eye opening hearing how he felt about her actions these last few months, she knew he was right and now that she was dealing with the ghost from the 23 years ago, things were going to get better. They had to. She accepted she ruined the relationship she had with her daughter and it would take some sort of miracle for her to fully forgive her and come back home. Reba was being much open to her and she accepted her daughter's choice in men. She wanted Hades and she had no choice but to accept her. He had loved her when she had felt like she didn't deserve to be loved, something she

didn't give her daughter when she was going through the worst. Her heart still aches at that thought. She closed the photo album. She didn't forget that Alora was graduating next month as well, it hurt to be on the outside looking in and the fact that none of her children updated her about Alora hurt more. She was starting to be a stranger and it wasn't a good feeling.

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[06/22, 09:39] : REBORN

140

At Austin's office shortly after Alora left, his

telephone rang.

“Hello?”

“You have an unexpected visitor..”

“Who?”

“My Hudson.” He frowned. Hades?

“Let him pass.” He hung up and leaned back on his desk as he took out his sketch and pencil. He lifted up the sketch, trying to envision the final product. Sighing there was a door knock and he put the sketch back in his drawer.

“Come in.” The door opened and he was surprised to see Fred Hudson. Of course his face was devoid of any emotion as he eyes the man who took a seat.

“What is it that you want?” Austin raised an eyebrow. What did he want?

“My son. He is nothing without his trust fund and he can't give you anything, what do you want from him?”

“Good day to you and well, that's an interesting take.”

“Just answer the damn question Mathews? Do you want him for yourself or are you trying to manipulate him?” Austin didn’t shudder as Fred tried to get his reaction. He was too calm for his liking.

“How did you get to that conclusion?” His voice was level. Calm and it didn’t waver.

“I am looking out for my son, maybe you want him for yourself since you are-or maybe still gay.”

Austin leaned back. He didn’t want Hades, he cared for him the way a friend does and his sexuality had to be dragged into it. Question was how did he find out?

“Hmm. So I pose as a threat? That I’m there for your son in a way you couldn’t and instead of talking to your son, you came to me. That is very idiotic.”

“How dare you?”

“I call out idiocy when I see it. You should be mending your relationship with your son. It really isn’t my concern that you are failing him and he couldn’t get an ounce of concern from his father. If

that is all, would you please leave my office. Thank you.” Fred bubbled internally as he stood up on his feet. He walked out and Austin cursed under his breath. Dammit. How did he find out? And he wasn’t gay, he didn’t compartmentalise his sexuality. He didn’t see gender and that was the problem with people knowing, they won’t see it from his point of view.

Alora sat down by Celine’s bed as Celine weakly turned to face her.

“Hi, how are you feeling?” Celine gave a weak smile and Alora blinked back tears. She wasn’t this emotional person. She blamed the pregnancy.

“Thank you.” Celine croaked out before she coughed. Celine could feel that her days were near. She made memories with her son and he was in good hands. He was finally starting a family, a family that loved him. A woman that matched and

loved him with no inhibitions. She coughed some more and Alora stood on her feet to fix her pillow and help her sit upright, she gave her a grateful smile. Everything happened for a reason, she loved her life and she had regrets but now she had to let go. She was so tired. So weak. A shell of who she had been.

“H-how is the baby?” Alora smiled.

“Behaving. We’re good. Do you need anything?” Celine shook her head as she fought to keep her eyes open.

“Please love him for me.” Alora blinked back tears.

“I will always do.” She replied softly as Celine nodded weakly and coughed. She had so much to say but that was all she could muster up to say. Alora made sure she was comfortable as Celine closed her eyes. She released a sad sigh as she covered her up. She smiled as she looked at the bucket list. She gave a low chuckle blinking back the tears as she walked out of the room. Alora went to their shared room to catch up on her own sleep.

What she didn't know was that ten minutes after she left, Celine struggled with breathing and the nurse had tried control it to the point of calling Austin home because she didn't want to worry Alora.

Austin rushed home and he hated the traffic on the way home, his heart raced frantically as he prayed to a God he didn't even believe in. The minute he parked his car inside the yard, he jumped right out as he rushed into the house. His tie was almost choking him as he fought with it heading to his mother's bedroom. He found her there as the nurse gave him a hopeless look. His eyes welled over as Celine's eyes gave him an adoring look amidst the pain. Her body was fighting to go but at least she was seeing her son for the last time, he held her frail and thin hands in his as he sniffed.

"Mother..." she coughed, her chest closing in on her. She could physically feel her organs shutting down

as she gave him a weak smile.

“I-I love you.” She said and this fucked Austin up. The nurse walked out and the tears rolled down his cheeks. Twenty five years later she was saying that and he didn’t know if this restored his heart or was just the beginning of a major heartbreak because now they didn’t have time, he didn’t want to say goodbye because this one meant forever.

“Mom...” Celine’s eyes glittered with tears, this was goodbye. She was sure of it. He will be okay. He will be fine.

“I-I love you and I’m so proud of you.” She said with a breaking voice. His lips trembled as he crouched down, he knew this day was coming but it felt like a knife had been pierced into his heart and it was being stabbed continuously. He wanted someone to unchain the reactions.

“Y-you..it’s too early.” He was fooling himself and he had never been a man to fool himself but he could hope for a miracle. He wasn’t religious but he could hope for a miracle. Celine squeezed his hand.

Everything she wanted to say had been said these past three months with her son and his wonderful girlfriend. She had hoped he was going to make an honest woman out of her and marry Alora some day but she was tired of fighting. He brought her hands to his face and kissed them, his tears touched her hand and she gave him a smile.

“Goodbye Austin.” She said in a whisper and she closed her eyes. Austin watched the monitor beep quieten till it was just a straight line. She flatlined and that was the end of Celine Mathews life on planet earth.

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My apologies my oxygen tanks. This week my creative tank had been considerably low but I'll try

to push and see where we end today. Thank you for your patience.

[06/22, 09:39] : REBORN

141

Austin laid in the silence, waiting to hear the sirens of the ambulance even though he never called one as he watched his mother's still body. His tears blinding his eyes, he didn't want to lose it and he wasn't sure if he was getting through this. How did one get through this? How did one find hope in the hopeless? He could feel his heart breaking and it hurt in his chest. It was on fire and he bit his lower lip as he placed his head on his knees, it took him ten minutes to accept that as he looked at the heart monitor, hoping her heart rate was going to pick up somehow and it would be a scare but it never did. It was flat and she had her eyes closed. He didn't know where he got the strength to get up but he did. He didn't know why he was hurting over her death

when he knew it was coming. He rubbed his eyes and breathed into his hands, trying not to break down. He took her lifeless hand and bit his lower lip hard till he tasted blood. He opened his lips, releasing his lower lip from its agony but no words came out. Just a sob that choked him and he lowered his head.

“Goodbye Celine Mathews.” He whispered and kissed her lifeless hand before he finally let go and turned his body on his mother’s corpse. He rubbed his eyes and with every step he was taking towards the door, a piece of himself remained with his mother. He finally got out of the room and the nurse came rushing.

“Call an ambulance.” He said stoically before he proceeded to walk. When he reached the staircase, he took two steps at a time making his way to the room he shared with Alora. He opened the door and she was fast asleep. She was precious. She was carrying life while another life was just lost. It was crazy how the karmic cycle worked. He sat by the edge of the bed and pushed her hair back, she

looked so soft. She would never take that as a compliment, he smiled holding back tears. She moved and he looked at her, trying to smile. If he didn't, he was going to cry and he didn't want to stress this pregnant fatcake. Alora turned on her side, she turned yet again sensing a presence. She lazily opened her eyes five minutes later. She rubbed them as she looked at Robert who was studying her with an intense gaze and teary eyes. Teary eyes? She rubbed her eyes again and tried to sit upright. He was home? Didn't he say he would be home late? She yawned.

“Hi, why are you home?” She pulled the blankets to her chest even though she was far from being naked.

“She's gone.” Was all he said and the weight of his words silenced the room. She understood what he meant. She looked at him as he fought the tears and chuckled. He was human dammit, he was allowed to cry and grieve his mother. She raised her hand to hold his jaw. It wasn't the time to convince him that his mother had lived and it had been time

because something in her heart nudged. What if Susan died any moment from now? Would she still be angry at her? She pulled him to her and placed his head on his lap. She didn't speak as she moved her hands softly on his cheek, she heard a sob before he started crying like a banshee. She just comforted him while she blinked her own tears back. It hurt and it might not go away but once the sun rises, they will have to go on with life, he got her and he knew. She got him and she knew.

The nurse covered Celine up. She shed a few tears before she called the ambulance. This was one of the hardest things about her job. She breathed out, she had bonded with her patient and she had been a joy to work with. Onto another home call, she smiled sadly as she walked out of the room. A gloom hovering in the house. That was how death usually looked like and the tough part was how to move on after the funeral.

Hades came back an hour later and as he walked in inside the yard, he saw the ambulance and in his heart he instantly knew. He licked his lips as he watched a black plastic load a body into the back as Alora stood next to Austin. Holding him and for the first time, he saw the broken side of Austin, the vulnerable side of him as he watched the doors of the ambulance close and Alora's pink face gave away the fact that she had been in tears. Her eyes did. He looked at Austin who's stare was bleak and dead. Calm but in a stony way. Alora was the one who tried to smile, probably on behalf of Austin because she rarely smiled. He walked over to where they were standing and he touched Austin's shoulder.

"I'm sorry." Austin nodded and Hades walked away as the two stood there with the paramedics. Austin sucked in a deep breath.

"In another life, she would've have lived longer." She

whispered. The girl who hated PDA held him tighter, as tight as she could.

“She is probably with Emily right now and looking down at us, okay? It doesn’t get better, it never does my love but we live with half hearts knowing that you might not get that missing piece back but you can make the most of the time you have with the other people closest to you.” She stood on her tip toes and kissed his cheek. She’ll be here with him as he grieves his mother. He can count on her. Austin looked down at her with a sad smile and then faced the paramedics as they talked.

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[06/22, 09:39] : REBORN

By the evening, Celine had been pronounced deceased and arrangements for her funeral were underway. It was going to be a short ceremony and fairly brief. Austin didn't want anything big, just a memorial service at Mathews Inc and a funeral attended by close family. She watched him bury himself in the funeral arrangements, probably to try and not think about the fact that she wasn't there. The minute he placed the phone down, she folded her arms.

"Austin I'm not letting you do this to yourself." She said as she tried to take the phone from him.

"The sooner I get this over and don with, the better."

"Not at the expense of your sanity." She took the phone from his hand and she switched it off. He watched her as he sat on the bed, something caught in his throat and his eyes started tearing up. Lora walked to the bathroom and she sucked in a

breath, she was going to be there for him in every way possible even though she was doing the bare minimum. She washed the bathtub before she filled it up with hot water and she poured in a few drops of chamomile essential oil. She stepped out and found him with his head low.

“Hey..” he lifted his head as she walked closer to hold his hand and get him to stand up. She started unbuttoning his shirt.

“Lo-“

“I’ll take care of you okay?” He sighed as she then moved onto his pants. She undid those like a pro.

“Okay, you can step out of the pants.” She was intently focused on him as he did so and she pulled down the boxers.

“And those too.” Her hawk eye gaze still on him. He didn’t have the energy to fight with her.

“Okay. Good. Good.” She tried not to think of sex, they had serious matters to deal with here other than that. She led him to the bathroom.

“Step in the water and relax. Close your eyes and relax, it smells nice doesn’t it?” She smiled a bit as he got inside. It was hot but okay. Oh so he thought and he jumped up the minute his bare *ss touched the water. What the hell? Alora stifled a giggle.

“Lora it burns. Why do women torture themselves with boiling water?”

“I won’t apologise for your gender being the weaker one and unable to tolerate such temperatures. A grown man like you?” He chuckled and she grinned as she opened the tap to drop the water temperature down a notch.

“Better?” She asked as she waited for him to sit in the bathtub. He did so cautiously. It seemed fine since he was comfortable.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Relax and enjoy the aromatic fragrances in the bathroom.” She kissed his forehead and ran out. Alora raced down the stairs and paused in the lounge. Hades was cooking? She slowly walked to the kitchen and she heard her sister’s voice. She walked inside and the

two were cooking. Reba turned her head first and stopped what she was doing to hug her sister.

“How are you two holding up?” Alora looked up at her.

“Okay. I think.” Reba gave her a sympathetic smile. She was being there for her sister even if it was in the smallest of ways.

“Are you sure?” Alora cursed the hormones to hell and back because she was holding back tears when Reba asked that.

She shook her head.

“H-he isn’t and it’s him I’m worried about.” She whispered as Reba rubbed her sister’s back.

Hades watched them silently before he turned back to the pot, Reba walked out of the kitchen with Alora. She hugged her sister tight and gave her the warmest hug as she sniffed.

“But I’ll be his rock yeah?” She broke the hug and rubbed her eyes.

“I’ll be fine. Uhm what are you guys making?”

“Food for the both of you, we are all here for him..” Alora’s eyes glistened with tears again. He had a support system. One he could count on, how beautiful was that?

“Thank you.” She blew out a breath.

“I have to go back upstairs and thank you for just being here.”

“Anytime.”

“How’s Su?” That caught Reba by surprise.

“She is working on herself and she is attending therapy.” Alora nodded.

“Okay. I’ll be down in an hour or so.” Reba nodded and Alora detached from her sister and she ran up the stairs. Reba sighed.

“Babe how far with the food?”

“Getting there my love..” she walked back to the kitchen and they looked at each other. She smiled. He smiled. She resumed what she was doing, he stopped what he was doing to give her a fluttery kiss and she grinned like a fool. The silent

communication making her jittery as she rewarded him with a smile and he smiled. She could drown in him forever.

In the bedroom, Alora tied her weave back and blew steady breaths before she walked inside the bathroom. He was silent with his eyes closed.

“I hope you ask your mind to be gentle on you.” She softened her voice and he opened his eyes, a smile on his lips.

“I’ll try.” She walked closer to the bathtub and kissed his forehead.

“I’ll wait till you’re done and do you want a massage? Not that you have a choice but just to make you think you had a choice..” he gave a low chuckle.

“Of course.”

“You got it.” She sat on the toilet seat and he closed his eyes again. Comfortable silence, her own thoughts racing and threatening to consume her. She stood up and headed to the sink, she washed

her hands. Once, twice before she literally forced herself to step away. She sucked in a breath. She faced him and he had his eyes open.

“I’m okay, are you done?” He got out of the water and he walked over to pick a clean towel to dry himself before wrapping it around his waist. He held her hands.

“Thank you, let’s go.”

“I’m the one who is supposed to boss you around.” He smiled. She always kept him guessing, forever his wonder. He led her out of the bathroom and she pulled her hands from his grip.

“You can lie on the bed.”

“Alora you don’t ha-“ she rolled her eyes as she walked to the bathroom and came back with her oils.

“Kanama Robert.”(lie down Robert) he couldn’t help himself and he laughed as he finally did as she said. Alora’s heart fluttered. They’ll make it.

Ten minutes later, his temperament girlfriend was

already in competitive mode as she quizzed him while giving him a massage. He appreciated her trying to take his mind off things. He sighed as she stopped.

“I’m done. I’ll go check on the food and bring it up here, wear a gown or something.” She kissed his cheek and she sprinted out.

“Alora don’t run...” his voice faded. Alone once again, something choked in his throat, it hurt for a million different reasons. He blinked back tears. He said goodbye, it was forever.

Downstairs Alora was just in time when Reba was dishing up. She picked a tray.

“Thank you.” She was grateful for this. And then. She put their plates on the tray and she walked out carefully holding it. She made her way upstairs. Inside their bedroom as she reluctantly placed the pillow on the carpet to please him as they ate, he escaped his own grief. He teased her and she rolled her eyes while forcing him to eat more than what he

was eating. The room was much more lighter in between their smiles. She took the plates to the kitchen and was back minutes later. She just forced him to put his head on her stomach while she rubbed his ear, she'll announce her pregnancy another time.

‘If this child looks like you, I’ll hate you forever Robert.’ He chuckled.

‘You love me darling..’ she did. That she did.

‘I don’t know who lied to you.’ She denied vehemently and he rested his chin on her stomach looking up at her.

‘Thank you.’

‘Anytime.’ She replied softly and he kissed her stomach. Even in the midst of heartache, broken hearts can still be mended by hearts that were once broken. That was a sign of hope.

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A FEW DAYS LATER

[06/22, 09:39] : REBORN

143

I'm still holding on to everything's that dead and gone

I don't want to say goodbye cause this one means forever

Now you're in the stars and six feet's never felt so far

Here I am alone between the heavens and the embers

Oh, it hurts so hard for a million different reasons

The song played in Austin's car as he drove to the office, he had to meet the lawyer even though he knew what her Will was going to say. Alora had tried to convince him not to go because it hasn't even been 24 hours since his mother was buried. He argued over the fact that life has to go on. She gave up when she realised she was not winning the argument. He sighed as he turned on the curve. Life has to go on.

At Austin's house, Alora breathed in. Life has to go on. He is hurting and he knows he can be vulnerable with her. Regardless of his moods or how he is feeling, she will be with him. She breathed in and out. She was just about to start a whole conference video call with her siblings and they better answer. She dialled them all and they phones rang. Reba answered first, she didn't have any lessons this Friday afternoon.

“Hello? Are you okay?” Bokamoso answered and he stared at the screen at an awkward angle. Alora rolled her eyes.

“Bk please hold the phone at a proper angle, we do get you’re older and techno-“

“Alora!” She shrugged at Reba just as Mooketsi answered.

“Are you okay Rora?” She placed the phone against her pile of books as she fixed her hair and patted her head.

“We’ll I’m not. I’m afraid I will never be okay.” Her siblings looked at her with concern.

“Is Em with you Reba? She closed schools..”

“Em is in her room..”

“Call her for me..It is really unfortunate that we have a problem guys. A huge problem.” Bokamoso eyes softened. Reba walked out holding her phone as she headed to Emory’s room. Emory looked up from her story book and smiled. Reba whispered with her and sat on the carpet with her as Emory looked at

the screen.

“Do you need me to fly out there? Something we can deal with?” Alora breathed out.

“It’s okay. I have made peace with it and I-“

“Hello Alora!” Emory giggled and Alora’s dramatic speech paused midway as she looked at her little sister.

“Hey you goblin. Miss me?”

“Yes. When are you coming to see me?”

“Soon. Very soon. You interrupted me.” Alora rolled her eyes and Emory grinned like the kid she was. Now with all of her siblings looking at her and waiting to hear what’s wrong.

“It is to my utmost disappointment to notify you guys, as the Moremi siblings and siblings to this very hot and gorgeous woman, me of course that we have a huge problem.”

“Rora, the point please.” Mooketsi urged and she glared at him.

“Bona jaaka o nna pink.”(look at you getting

pink)Mooketsi snickered.

She breathed in and out. Typical of him to try and rile her up and watch her blow off her temper on him.

“As I was saying, your very independent sibling who is about to graduate with the highest honours from Princeton University is going through a lot.” They laughed and Emory was still grinning.

“Okay, long story short since we have work to get through and it’s only lunch time, I’m expecting.” She paused. Bokamoso’s jaw dropped and Mooketsi’s eyes widened. Reba grinned as she punched the air. She was right. Emory was confused. What is her sister expecting?

“Rora I have a question.” Alora could see the questions on her little face.

“Ask.”

“What are you expecting?” Alora’s face broke into a smile and her older siblings smiled at the way her face softened.

“Well, I’m expecting a little goblin. He or she is growing in my tummy and you’ll meet him or her in six months from now...” Emory’s eyes glowed and she smiled.

“A baby?” Alora nodded.

“Yes. That.”

“Tell me it’s an April Fool’s joke.” Mooketsi asked. Pregnant? His sister detested baby and she scared children. She as expecting?

“I don’t joke about things pertaining to my sanity Mooketsi. I’m very much pregnant and congratulations you’re going to be an uncle I guess.” She said nonchalantly and Bokamoso laughed. Why did she start off being dramatic?

“You’re okay about it?” She smiled.

“Yes. I had a month to get used to the idea and yes, I’m going to nurture one of those loud little terrorists that never let people rest...”

“Congratulations baby sis.” Reba said and she smiled.

“Thank you.”

“To be honest I thought Bokamoso was going to have kids first.” Mooketsi said and Bokamoso just smiled.

“Everything has it’s own time.” What he didn’t mention was that he had been struggling to conceive with his wife and they had been trying but still nothing. Now they were waiting for test results from the doctor. Well a third opinion to be more specific.

“Fate. Well now that you know, act accordingly guys. We have a little baby to get ready for..” she said and they all laughed.

“Congratulations Rora. You are going to make a great mom.” She nodded at Bokamoso’s compliment. She wasn’t sure about that.

“How have you been holding up?” Reba asked.

“Okay. The baby is okay, I’m healthy. He or she is growing and we are okay. No morning sickness so all good.”

“Is the father present?” Mooketsi asked. It was important to know that she was getting support from the father.

“More than present.” He was actively involved in the pregnancy and he was helping her with her workload so she can rest.

“I’m happy to know that. We’ll be with you every step of the way okay?” Her eyes glistened with tears. Hormones. She doesn’t cry.

“Thank you. I love each and every one of you.” Emory smiled.

“I’m going to babysit?”

“If you don’t drop my little goblin then yes. I’ll pay you.” Emory laughed.

“I’m so happy.” She giggled and they all laughed. They chatted for ten minutes before she said bye to all of them and cut the call. She touched her stomach.

“Thank you for behaving, it saves your mother a whole lot of stress. You must be calm like your

father, no wonder I didn't have any morning sickness. Such a calm little thing..." she leaned back on the chair and released a content sigh. She looked down at her stomach and the little bump that was developing. She needs to get a dress. One that will hide the bump for her graduation and not draw attention to her. So far, not many people knew about her relationship with Austin. They barely went out and that can work in her favour till after she launches Lora Cosmetics because she has to be more active on social media and she can't have people speculating that she was able to set up a whole brand just because her boyfriend was rich and them stepping all over her capabilities and hard work. She picked up the phone and snapped a picture of her tummy with her hand over it to send it to him.

'We are just thinking of you.' sent.

Hades walked around the house he used to share with Reba. This place had good and bad memories. The bad of it was that they were both in their worst phases of life while simultaneously being each other's saviour. He opened the cabinets and he saw the bottles and bottles of alcohol, the weed and the heroine in a little packet. The alcohol was tempting but the thing was facing your fears head on right? He perused the kitchen to look for a refuse bag and when he found one, he started picking the bottles one by one to throw into the refuse bag. It took him thirty minutes to fill it up, going to the bedroom to get more of those bottles he hid around and where Reba used to leave her drugs. He threw it all in the bag and it felt so cathartic to do that.

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[06/22, 09:40] : REBORN

144

Hades held his phone in between his shoulder and ear as he talked to Reba while heading to his car.

“I threw away all the alcohol.”

“I love who we are becoming.” He grinned. He loved that too.

“Should we clean the house together tomorrow?”

“Most definitely.” He nodded. Just to keep it clean. Or would it better to sell it? Put it on the market because it has a past they would rather not revisit?

“Tomorrow it’s cleaning date.” She smiled at the other end of the line. Even in her worst times he saw the best in her, she would forever be grateful for that kind of love. It was rare.

“Hades, I’m going to be an aunty.” Hades paused.

“To which of your siblings?”

“Your housemate.” He chuckled. He knew his housemate alright.

“That one?”

“Yes. That one. Isn’t that exciting?”

“I don’t know if life is going to get worse or better from here on.” Reba laughed.

“Anyway what’s up with you and Zara?”

“I decided to give her a chance…” he breathed out.

“My father is an asshole. We both know that but I never had siblings before, you have always been more than a best friend to me even when we were best friends, Alora was like the annoying little sister and the past few months Austin has been the brother I never had.”

“So you and Zara are finally going to pursue that sibling relationship?”

“Yes. We’ll see how it goes. I don’t want to regret not giving it a shot, life is so unpredictable.”

“True that. I am sure you’ll love her, she is such a sweetheart.” Hades chuckled bitterly. He was jaded

and people didn't like him.

“You know you're the only person who loved me pretty girl.”

“And I will love you. I have to go, I have to start making dinner now. I love you.”

“I love you.” She hung up and he smiled as he opened the car door. A message reported.

My best girl : your happiness is my happiness H.
Love you.

He got inside and replied the text before he started his car. It's been months and now he was driving again, look at how far he has come. If it was him from a year ago, he would be stone drunk this time and he would drink hard liquor in the morning to try and get rid of the hangover even though he would be stone drunk three hours later if he wasn't at his father's company.

Austin finally got the time to open his messages after hours of burying himself with work. Just as he predicted, everything his mother owned went to him. There was no surprise there. He opened Alora's message and he smiled. He'll see her at home plus Hades said he had something to tell him so he guess he'll attend to that at home. He took out his design, to work on it yet again and make the necessary changes to the design. He had new ideas now.

At Susan's household, Susan and Thabiso walked inside the house and they both smiled. Reba was making dinner and as always the meal was going to be a great one.

"Hi Reba."

"Hello. I'm far from being done though."

“Okay.” They both headed to their bedroom and Susan placed her bag down.

“I’m going to check on Emory and I’ll be back.”

“Should I shower without you then?”

“I won’t be long.” He kissed her cheek and she smiled. She walked out and headed to her youngest daughter’s room.

“Can I come in?” She knocked lightly on the open door.

“Hi mom. Come in.” She walked in and she sat on the bed as Emory smiled.

“How was your day sweet pumpkin?”

“I liked today, I had a nice day.” She smiled.

“I love to hear all about it.”

“So..uhm ne ke bua le Alora.”(I was speaking with Alora.) Susan kept that smile on her face. Of course Alora didn’t cut off her siblings. Only her and she guessed she deserved it but she was still going to listen to Emory because she loved her sister.

“That’s nice...”

“Very. I’m going to be an aunty.” That caught Su by surprise. What?

“Hmm?”

“Rora is going to have a baby. She said it herself.” Susan’s eyesight blurred as her heart was filled with sorrow at that. She blinked a couple of times as she forced a smile.

“I am sure you are going to make a great aunty.” She said with fake enthusiasm.

“I am happy. I don’t want to drop the baby, Alora would kill me and you’re going to be a grandma. It’s exciting.” Susan nodded as she patted her daughter’s back.

“Let me go and I love you.”

“I love you too mama.” She stood up on her feet and walked out. She sucked in a deep breath, she rued the day she spat out those harsh words to her daughter. It hurt that all her children probably knew except her and she was happy for Alora, she really

is but it hurt to be on the outside. Just a stranger to the events happening in her life and having a baby was a big event. It was her first child and most first time mothers need help and assistance, especially during those first few months when mothers are prone to depression. She rubbed her eyes. God she wished she had thought her words through months ago, they wouldn't be here. She walked to the bedroom and Thabiso stopped unbuttoning his shirt mid-way, noting Susan's teary eyes.

"Hey, hey what's wrong?" He walked closer and hugged her. Susan started crying.

"I-I failed her right?"

"Failed who?"

"First I failed Reba, then Alora. She really really cut me out of her life?" He rubbed her back.

"Give it time, Alora is reasonable but give it time."

"I don't think time can heal this rift.." he just rubbed her back, there was no telling what can happen in the future but time usually helps.

“I caused it and it’s like I’m chewing glass and bleeding because it’s my fault that a child I raised for over two decades, my own daughter has completely forgotten my existence..”

“Su..don’t do this to yourself.”

“It’s true. I shouldn’t even be crying but it hurts. She’s pregnant.” She laughed sadly.

“I just found out from Emory and she must’ve told the rest of the kids except for me. Because I hurt her and she probably won’t want me around her child..” that hurt more as she bawled her eyes out. Her first grandchild and she was a stranger to her daughter.

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[06/22, 09:40] : REBORN

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Thabiso broke the hug once Susan stopped crying. “She’ll come around, just give her time.” Susan nodded. She had no choice but to do that right? It’s been just three months and she was still giving her time. There was also the issue of damages although she knew most of her kids didn’t like following the traditional aspect of life, look at Mooketsi who married without even the magadi process. She wiped her tears.

“It’s okay to be hurt about that, that’s a milestone in her life and I know it would have been wonderful to be a part of it but she’ll come around. Even if it might take her years.” The fact that it might take years broke Susan’s heart more. Years? A lot can happen in years. She just nodded.

“I’ll live with it. Can we shower?” She asked as she

moved back and rubbed her eyes one last time.

“Of course. Are you okay?” She nodded. She had to be. She might mention this to her therapist in their next session.

“I’m okay.” She said finally.

At Austin’s house, he found Alora in his study.

“Hi.” She looked up and leaned back.

“How was work today? Were you coping? It’s okay to take a week off.”

“Work was fine, I’m okay Lora and I am not taking a week off.”

“You’re not a superhero, you’re human and grieving.”

“And life goes on. How was your day?” She pushed the chair back and she got up on her feet to walk to him.

“You’re sure you’re fine?” She asked again as she held the lapels of his jacket and he smiled at her.

“Yes.”

“If you’re good then I’m good. Anyway I told my siblings.”

“How did they take the news?”

“They are excited. Happy for them though. And I managed to call Primrose...”

“The designer?”

“Yes. Yes. I’m going to take measurements tomorrow for the graduation dress and I hope that in a month’s time I won’t have gained that much weight to not fit in the dress...”

“How is the graduation plan going to go?” She bit her lip. Flight tickets were so expensive God.

“I really genuinely want my siblings there, I really do but obviously we use multiple flights and the costs are around 20k to and another 20k from.” She said.

“Uhm also still on that flight ticket, what if I rent out my mother’s house? It has been vacant for months

and I am still not over the fact that some of my furniture was stolen.”

“It’s a good idea, advertise the house on Facebook.”

“And I want to sell the furniture, it’s still brand new kana..” he chuckled.

“Do as you wish...”

“And the money, I can use most of it for my siblings’ flights? God. I think we need to have a conference call again...”

“I can pay f-“

“Ng ng. No, you mean well but I’ll take some of the money in my own pocket and if I am really desperate, nkampa ka loma skontere though, we’ll make an arrangement and I’ll pay you back once I’m a millionaire okay?(I’d rather chew the road)

He laughed.

“You still have the black card. It’s your choice to see...”

“I don’t want your card anymore. It served its purpose. Can we change topics?” He kissed her

cheek and he picked her up before placing her on top of the desk.

“Are you hungry?”

“I ate an hour ago, are you hungry? I can try to follow a recipe or something...” he laughed.

“You don’t have to..” he nuzzled her neck and she pushed his head back laughing.

At Susan’s house, Susan headed to the kitchen after her shower and she found Reba leaning against the kitchen counter.

“How are you?”

“Doing okay. I don’t sleepwalk that much and I’m okay mama. Are you good?” Susan bit her lip as she sat on the high chair.

“No. Is your sister okay?”

“She said she is okay and coping, is anything

wrong?”

“Em just told me Alora is pregnant.”

“Oh. She told us earlier. She is excited as Alora can be.” Susan chuckled.

“Is she okay? Is she surviving with the pregnancy?”

“I think so, she is. She is calling her baby a goblin and a terror which is typical of Alora but she is okay.”

Susan went silent for a bit before she continued.

“Do you think she will forgive me?”

“Mama, don’t hurt yourself like that. People get over stuff differently, she might feel like distance will do good. Alora will come around. Life is short and some moments are meant to be cherished.” Susan nodded.

“I saw the news days ago.”

“Everyone did. Her son loved her and he sent her off peacefully, as I said life is short. Alora might need more time because as tough as she is, she might have been breaking. Violet said sometimes words

are hard to get over than being slapped and being beaten because after being slapped, that bruise will go away but words bruise your heart and it never fully goes away.” Susan forced a smile. The truth hurt and look at Reba speaking like the brown up she is and advising her.

“Mama don’t beat yourself up over it okay? She will reach out, give her time. Time heals kana gatweng. Ee that. And she will be ready in her own time and you’ll meet your grand baby.”

“I guess. Are you excited?”

“Very. I can’t wait to see how she will be like as a mother and funny thing is that the only person who hated children with her whole being is the first one to fall pregnant. Karma!” Reba laughed as she moved back to the pots and he switched to safe topics with her mother.

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[06/22, 09:40] : REBORN

146

At Austin's house, Hades found Austin in the kitchen as he slid his hands in his back pocket.

"I met my father a few days ago." Hades started out. Austin nodded. He saw Fred a few days ago too.

"I just want you to know that I know you're not manipulating me in any way or am I useful to you in any way but thank you for being there." Austin leaned against the kitchen counter.

"He does have a right to worry to some extent, that's not really his main concern really." Hades raised his eyebrows. Okay, what was he not getting here?

"Your father, found out that I have been with men

before and he thinks I might be using you because I want you.” Austin waited. For Hades to recoil because of his sexuality and decide then and there that he might not want to be associated with him. Most men usually can’t stand being with people who like men as well. Hades shrugged.

“Okay. Well that’s him and his not me.” Austin’s jaw slackened.

“It doesn’t bother you that I have been with men before?” Hades smiled and shook his head.

“Unless you want me to be bothered by it but no.” Austin’s lips slowly curved into a smile. He didn’t even ask why he was with Alora now or even his history. Was that how people generally accepted you for who you truly are without questioning you?

“Thank you.”

“I should be saying thank you but you already know.” He did. Through Alora he had a family he never had. Reba and Hades were like his siblings, the ones he can count on during rainy days and of course his only love. Alora.

“Where is the wicked witch of the West?”

“Nako nngwe ke bolaya motho.”(one day I’m going to kill someone) Hades laughed.

“Love save me from her.”

“There is no escaping her darling.”

Alora ended up smiling while rolling her eyes. Her boyfriend could finally experience sibling love and all the wonderful things siblings had.

“What’s for dinner and Hades keep a distance, there will be knives at the dinner table.”

“Kill me Cruella, kill me.”

“I might. How is going with Zara?” She asked as she sat on the high chair and Austin stole a kiss.

“Time will help I guess.”

“I know your dad is your dad and you don’t choose family but Fred is a bigger asshole for keeping you away from your sister even though he knew both of you existed. He is to blame for robbing you guys of the years you could have spent together.”

“You have a point. As much as I hate you. But we have time now and we might be older but maybe it’s better that we are older and understand stuff.”

Alora nodded. Being older really opened one’s life.

“So when are we welcoming the little devil?”

Alora scoffed.

“Robert if you don’t strangle your best friend on my behalf, I will officially dump you.”

“Now you two are behaving like insolent kids.”

Instead of saying anything she laughed.

“It’s him over me? No wonder I hate you Robert. But my little goblin will be here in six months or so for your information. The only good thing about you is your girlfriend and that’s because I love her.”

“You’re right about that. We both love.”

“Good to hear.” Austin went back to the pots as Hades and Alora bantered back and forth with his girlfriend threatening bodily harm like always until Hades raised a topic that’s been avoided for months.

“Have you talked to your mother?” Alora shrank her eyes and then licked her lips.

“No. Why would I do that?”

“No need to get defensive and let your talons show.” She rubbed her cheek. She hasn’t talked to Susan yet but someday she will. Maybe months from now or a year from now but she will. She just needs to let the words her mother said supposedly out of anger replay a thousand times in her head to the point of them no longer hurting her anymore. Then she will try to shove it down and pretend it never happened even if she will always prepare for such an outburst moving on. For now she was focusing on the little goblin and her cosmetics line.

“I will talk to her. Just allow me to forget everything that happened..”

“Lora you do know it’s impossible right?” She knew that but she will. See? She wasn’t even thinking about the incident until Hades mentioned her mother.

“I’ll get over it then, that’s a better option.” Austin

sighed and turned to face her. She was blinking before she breathed into her hands.

“What if by the time you are ready, you acknowledge it did happen and work around it?”

“What if I’m never ready? That scares me..” Hades felt like he shouldn’t be hearing this conversation because Alora was never raw with her feelings except those of hate of course. He silently left the kitchen as Austin walked over to her.

“Why does that scare you?”

“Because the traitorous part of me wants to have her meet this child but then again it’s the same woman who called me trash and told me about birthing little bastards. It’s conflicting. What if she gets angry again someday and tells my baby stuff like that? I badly want to protect my child from the world.” He placed his hands on her shoulders.

“The world will always be a cruel place, children learn and grow.”

“I know but you can protect a child from the things you can control. I grew up knowing I was nothing

but a side chick's daughter and it's the truth I know but the way the truth was delivered wasn't pretty for a kid. It hurt and I don't want to hurt my child."

"Baby, we are going to do our best for our children okay? I don't want you stressing and you're rightly stressed but don't stress." he kissed her forehead.

"Maybe it will be more clear on what I should do months from now? See if once this little terror is born will get to meet his or hers only living grandmother."

"It's your decision and I'll support you in everything you do. You know I do." She smiled and lifted her head so he can kiss her lips.

"I love you Lora."

"I know Robert. I love you just as much maybe even more."

"Are you sure about that?" She nodded.

"I'm always number one Robert, you should know that." He chuckled. He'll let her get away with that but he loved her so much, he treated her like an

extension of himself. The violent side of him of course because she was always ready to say something to start a ruckus.

“Forever still?”

“Still endgame baby.” She grinned and she kissed him this time as he placed his hands on her lap.

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THREE MONTHS LATER

[06/22, 09:40] : REBORN

147

Alora sat in the car as she held her stomach while

Tom drove her. Her phone rang and she knew it was another one of those phone calls to tell her about her internet behaviour. She wondered about what she did this time.

“Hello..”

“Alora, what happened yesterday?” She rolled her eyes.

“It was a normal day Neo.”

“You coming after one of the country’s best business man unprovoked is not normal.” Alora almost snorted.

“Who are we talking about?”

“Alora, don’t behave as if you didn’t come after Mr Mathews yesterday on Facebook.” Alora rubbed her stomach as her little goblin kicked a bit. Yes, she was annoyed just like her baby was.

“He was wrong and I gave evidence over that debate.”

“That isn’t a good look, his business acumen is trusted and he is a millionaire soon to be billionaire

because of the new line his company is about to launch and you are just starting out, you don't need bad publicity and the public hating on you Alora. Most people were slandering you on Facebook for that." She rolled her eyes. They didn't see the look on Austin's smug face as he replied her while they sat next to each other in bed, she wanted to wipe that smug look off his ugly face and she did.

"That was an honest debate." She defended herself to her publicist.

"Regardless, Alora Cosmetics is a brand and you are a brand yourself, you can't fight big company CEOs on the internet." She was sleeping with the prick everyday and she wanted to one up him because it always gave her satisfaction to wipe off the conceited grin on his face. Of course their relationship wasn't public so of course she came off as an attention seeker to the public.

"I'll behave."

"And your Reba is doing so good. People loved the red lipstick she was rocking on her latest picture.

That advert on Thompson Entertainment also did the trick, other than you being unhinged on your social media platforms, so far so good and we are expected to have Lora Cosmetics, the lipsticks, eyeliner and mascara in stores this week. It was a good idea to have Rebantle use the products, her online presence is beautiful and people are loving her although there are trolls about the drug issue but so far so good.”

“Good to hear that.”

“And behave today on the internet Alora.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’ll try my best but it is my opinion but I’ll behave.”

“Alright. Have a good day. Will you be at the office tomorrow?”

“Only in the morning, I’ll meet the team at 8am on the dot. Bye.” She hung up and tapped her tummy.

“Hmm...” Tom parked his car by the gate before he turned.

“Ms Moremi..” she nodded and looked at the gate

before she leaned back. Did she want to do this? Maybe she should ask Tom to start the car and leave then she can worry about Austin's launch tomorrow. But she was not a quitter. She hated herself this instant. She looked at her tummy. Her weight during this pregnancy was not much of an issue, she just had to buy new clothes but otherwise, she knew she was hot. No one could tell her otherwise. They would never come for her confidence like that, only Austin and she knew he loved annoying her then she steps on his toes more. She loved their dynamic.

“Thank you.” She got out of the car and she walked to the gate with her handbag on one hand and the phone in the other. She stopped and slid her phone in her bag. She can do this. The last time she was here, she had been hurt. She wanted to lick her lips but lipstick. Instead she took out her sanitiser and sanitised her hands before she pressed the intercom. The gate slid open and she walked inside the yard. She looked around. Not much had changed. The door opened and her sister frowned.

“Alora?”

“Hi. I was just checking up on you.” She said as she walked toward the door and Reba held her hip as a very pregnant Alora made her way to her. She hasn’t been here since the incident and Reba was the one who visited her or they met up somewhere so what was going on?

“Really?”

“Yes really.” Reba hugged her and Alora rubbed her back before she patted it and wriggled away.

“How are you?”

“Alive and loving the response I’m getting.”

“See, I told you you can do this.”

“And congratulations for getting it off the ground..”

“Thank you.” She placed a hand on her back and Reba hit her own head.

“Come in and sit down, I forgot that you shouldn’t be on your feet for too long.”

“I’m fine but I won’t decline an opportunity to sit

down.” She followed her sister and she sat on the sofa. She came here as a guest now.

“I hope you didn’t drive yourself here..”

“He threatened to take away that Hermes handbag he bought for me if I start driving so no.” Reba laughed.

“So threats work better?”

“That handbag is expensive and I love it so it’s like my first baby and he can’t take it away.”

At Austin’s office, he went through the final touch ups for the launch and he opened his desk drawer to take out the black velvet box. He opened it and it screamed Alora through and through. She didn’t know all those diamond necklaces he gifted her were the first designs of Mathews Diamonds and he designed them himself. She was wearing Mathew Diamonds originals and so was this ring. He closed

the box before he sent her a text.

“So you don’t want a baby shower?” She shook her head.

“No. It’s okay.”

“Hmm..” Alora had a spoonful as she looked at her sister.

“Reba?”

“Yes?”

“I’m proud of you.” Reba just hugged her and Alora pushed her back.

“I didn’t say hug me.”

“I’ll hug you anyway.” She let her and Reba kissed her little sister’s forehead.

“You’re the kindest soul I’ve met.” Reba said and kissed Alora’s cheek as well.

“Don’t say that.”

“I love you Rora. To infinity and beyond.”

“I love you too. You can let go of us now.” Reba looked at Alora’s protruding stomach.

“Have you found out the gender.”

“Uhm we have the results in an envelope. We’ll find the right time get everyone and then open the envelope.” She breathed out, that made her anxious. No matter how many baby books she read and all those cute baby videos she watched and ‘how to take care of a child’ YouTube tutorials she watched, she felt like she wasn’t going to be good enough for her baby.

“Is that why you’re here?”

“You think I have ulterior motives?”

“I know you sister.” She breathed out.

“Fine. I’m building up courage to say hi to your mother without getting my head bit off.” Reba laughed.

“A reunion maybe?”

“Don’t push it Reba, just hi.”

“Hi wa gago could have been said over the phone instead of you being here.” Alpha rolled her eyes.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. You look like a cute little fat cat.” Alora glared.

“Nna ga o ntheye tlhemma!”(that’s not me) Reba laughed.

“Cute and well fed.”

“If it’s something you’re the cat, I’m a lioness my dear. I bite and I’m dangerous.”

“A lioness is still a cat Alora. A wild cat that is.” Her sister huffed.

“I swear to God if I don’t kill you or your boyfriend and Austin, it will be a miracle.” Reba laughed some more and a smile broke out on Alora’s face.

“Does your dress fit? For tomorrow?”

“It does and also for publicity I’ll be rocking Lora Cosmetics.”

“Exactly! See why I love you...”

“I’m your sister, you’re supposed to love me.” She shrugged just as the gate slid open and Reba lifted her head to look at the wall clock. Oh. The parents were back from work. Things are about to get awkward. Alora shifted in her seat.

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[06/22, 09:40] : REBORN

148

Susan frowned as she stepped out of her car. Why was there a car parked outside of her yard? Emily

got out of the car and ran to the house as Susan made her way to the parked car. She knocked on the tinted windows for a few seconds before the windows slid down.

“Hello. Is there a problem?” She asked and Tom fixed his shirt. He fell asleep even.

“No Mrs.” he said in the most professional way.

“Then why o parkile ha kgorong ya jarata yame?”(why is your car parked by my gate?)

“My apologies. I’m just waiting for Ms Moremi.” Susan frowned.

“Ms Moremi?”

Go.

“Okay. Thank you.” Susan walked away trying to process everything. It had been a blow for her for her kids to tell her they enjoyed the graduation and an even bigger blow seeing Alora announcing her Cosmetics line with Reba being the face of the brand. Just all these huge milestones passed over her head and she didn’t know how much an ageing

woman could take from being so excluded in her daughter's life. Her therapy sessions were so much better and it was always so refreshing being at the therapist's office. She was able to say things without being judged and her therapist was really nice. She pushed the door open and she found Alora who was talking to Emory. Alora looked up from her conversation with Emory as Susan awkwardly stood at the door. Reba had long ejected herself out of this the minute Emory walked in and she was safely in the kitchen praying that this interaction goes well.

“Hi Rora.” Susan said, taking in Alora's weight gain and the baby bump. She was glowing and somehow it was another blow. That basically Alora can be happy with or without her. She swallowed.

“Hi.” Alora responded with a erratic beating heart.

Emory broke the ice as she announced that she is going to change her uniform and come to speak to Alora's tummy like they do in the movies. She skipped to her room and Alora sucked in a breath. It was awkward but she made the move to come her

so she will woman it all out.

“Uhm how have you been?” Susan smiled. It was better than nothing. She’ll take that. A one in a million chance was still a chance and she would take those odds.

“I’ve been good and how have you been? You’re glowing.” Alora nodded as she kept her gaze in Susan’s face. Observing her features and her face to gauge any reaction she might not like but there was none, her eyes were softened on her and her shoulders dropped as she breathed out.

“Alora I know that what I said will always come back to haunt you and there is no way I can take away those words.”

“At least we do agree on one thing.” She chuckled because if she doesn’t laugh she’ll cry and she doesn’t cry.

Susan heard the uneasy laugh.

“But I’m still sorry ngwanake.” Alora nodded as she licked her now dry lips.

“We move hey?” Susan’s eyes became bright with hope.

“We?” Alora nodded.

“It might take time I guess but there is still time.” She looked at her stomach shortly after she said those words. Hope blossomed in Susan’s heart as tears welled in her eyes.

“I know the hurt won’t pass but I’m happy, as selfish as that sounds that it’s not the end of the line.” Alora lifted her head and she blinked back tears and hit her lower lip.

“Me too Su.” She said and Susan didn’t know whether to hug her but she was grateful.

“Thank you. For another chance.” Alora nodded. It was going to take time though.

“How is the baby?”

“Doing okay, just a lot of fatigue and weird food combinations but otherwise the little goblin is healthy.”

“Congratulations. On your achievements and the

baby on the way. Motherhood is a beautiful thing.” Susan said and Alora just nodded. Was it? She was very much doubting her own abilities but she kept her fears to herself. Emory came back and she sat next to Alora. She placed her hands over Alora’s stomach.

“Can the baby hear me?”

“Yes goblin.” Emory smiled and Alora watched with curiosity as she took in whatever Emory was saying to her developing baby. Minutes later Emory stopped talking as Susan smiled.

“Are you staying for dinner?”

“Unfortunately not but I’ll pass by some other time. I have to go now and let Thabiso know that I said hi.” Alora said as she finally stood up and Emory hugged her lower body.

“Bye and I love you.”

“Love you too. Reba I’m gone.”

“Alright. We’ll talk.” Emory let go of her sister as Alora walked to the door.

“Bye Rora.”

“Bye” she replied Susan as she stepped out of the house. She rubbed her arms, why didn’t she wear a jacket when she was coming here? The cold air hit her bare arms as she walked out of the yard. She opened the car door and looked at Tom.

“Thank you for staying. Did you get lunch or anything to eat?”

“I’m okay Ms Moremi.” Alora rolled her eyes.

“Pass by the shops.” She buckled up as he started the car. The air conditioning was on minutes later and she was warm again. She leaned back and took out her phone from her bag. She saw Austin’s message. She smiled texting him back although she was minutes late. Tom drove off.

Meanwhile inside the house, Susan was still happy from that little interaction. It was better than nothing and baby steps will do. She wasn’t going to ruin this chance, she had a feeling it was the last one. Reba smiled in the kitchen. Slow and steady

did it. One thing she loved about her sister was that she did things at her own pace and didn't let people dictate her feelings or her. There was hope.

Once they arrived at Austin's house after an hour in which she had bought food and silently ate in the mall parking lot, she was home. She got out of the car as she said bye and headed to the house. She opened the door and as spoilt as she was, she was excited at the prospect of eating again. The house smelled delicious.

"I'm home to torment the residents."

"The house was peaceful till you showed up."

"Boo-hoo! Get over yourself Hades. Hi Robert."

"Place your bag down and come here." Hades watched her obey without question. Somehow, living with them he noticed a few things and at first he had been equally surprised that as much as

Alora can chew up Austin, she was submissive to him and it was scary because that was Alora and the way he could tap into that without even trying.

Alora sat on the high chair and he looked at her feet.

“What did I say about the high heels?” He kissed her forehead and placed both hands on her sides.

“You don’t want me to wear them and obviously I don’t take instructions from you so...”

“Alora?”

“Rra?” He cursed under his breath. She didn’t have to look at him like that, all submissive and shit knowing very well he can’t fully dominate her because he was taking it easy on her. For their baby and because she was always exhausted.

“We shouldn’t have this conversation again.”

“We’ll see.”

“I’m the one who deals with your swollen feet every other day Alora and you keep wearing these damn high heels knowing very well you’re putting pressure on your back and your feet can’t stand

them now. We won't be having this discussion again." She jutted her chin in defiance and he held it.

"Sweetheart..you're pregnant not sick, I can still punish you in other ways." Heat pooled between her legs as she swallowed.

"We're over this discussion right?" She nodded.

"Words."

"We're over this discussion Robert."

"Good. How was your day?"

"I-I was told to not bash you on social media." He stepped back and laughed.

"The public coming to my defense."

"You deserved every word I typed out and no, I won't be deleting my comments. God I hate seeing that smug look on your face. It makes my day worse." He walked over to the stove to cover the pots as she laid out a thousand reasons why she should hate him but just because somehow she loves him she hates him less. Her hormones were hard to deal with but she was his.

“Okay then I went to see Su.” He paused.

“That’s the first step. How did it go?”

“It was kind of uncomfortable but with time we’ll be good. I think.” He kissed her head and she smiled up at him.

“So, about what you said about punishing me, were you serious?” He just looked down at her.

“What do you want me to do to you?”

“One thing bout you? You get me. I am tragically in love with you autwe?”

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[06/22, 09:41] : REBORN

At Susan's house, the minute her husband walked through the door she told him all about Alora's visit and Thabiso smiled. His wife sounded genuinely happy and he could even see it in her eyes. It was beautiful.

"What did I say?" She blushed with a smile.

"Give her time."

"Exactly." He held her in her arms and she breathed in his scent. And he was still here? After all the things she normally said? She smiled up at him as he lowered his head to kiss her. The kiss quickly escalated as he picked her up and laid her on the bed, removing her pyjamas.

Hades laid on bed as he texted Reba. These past few months, he had been thinking of moving. Not that he didn't love it here, but those two deserved

their space and sooner or later, he would have to learn how to live on his own without reverting back to alcohol. For now though, he had to show up tomorrow for Austin's launch. People had been surprised that he was working on a diamond line but that had been a smart move. A very smart one.

Meanwhile in the bedroom, Alora traced his chest. He was always in good condition, gym sessions with Hades and always a bit out of breath after his runs. It was kind of sexy but she won't tell him.

"I'm wearing heels for tomorrow's launch."

"Alora!"

"It's the last time. The dress I have needs heels and I refuse to be short compared to you."

"You are short."

"But I'm even shorter without the heels so tomorrow I'm wearing the heels. You can punish me after." He chuckled.

"Sleep."

“I don’t take orders from you.” She yawned.

“But I’m happy. Are you happy Austin?”

“More than you’ll ever know.”

“Good. Goodnight.” She adjusted herself till she was comfortable and finally laid her head on his chest.

“Who knew that a decade later, I would be here with my biggest rival?”

“Tangled up in bed and carrying my baby?” She smiled and nodded.

“I hated your guts. I still do.”

“And I’m always in your guts..” she laughed softly with eyes closed.

“You are never going to let it die that you got me?”

“Never, I love you more than I love myself which is something I never thought was possible.”

“Say thank you!”

“No darling.”

“Choke on your saliva in your sleep.”

“We’ll see.” Her hand just settled on his abdomen.

“This situation we find ourselves in is more of an academic rivals to lovers.”

“There is always a thin line between love and hate. Always.”

“I detested your existence and somehow you are everything.”

He chuckled kissing her forehead while holding her.

“And I can’t help but brag that I’m your first.”

“I can have any man I want Robert. Don’t try me.”

He nuzzled her neck and she held the back of his head.

“But you didn’t want anyone but me.” True. It was like somehow she was waiting for him. Plus he never made fun of her inexperience in the bedroom, he was always ready to teach her and guide her. Explore things with her. It was bliss. She couldn’t ask for more.

“Don’t let it get to your head.” She chided and he laughed against her neck.

“I love you my fiery dreamer.”

“Mhmm. I want to sleep.”

“You’re tired?” Her eyes opened. Were they about to have sex? She couldn’t say no to that.

“Not at all.” He moved his head to look at her. Her eyes were bright and alert. He chortled and she rolled her eyes. He kissed her and she placed her hands on his shoulders as they kissed and it deepened, while he was still very vigilant of her stomach.

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Last night’s insert. The morning insert is coming up.

[06/22, 09:41] : REBORN

The following morning was a busy one for the sisters. Alora was meeting up with the team, Reba included to go over everything before a part of Lora Cosmetics hits the shelves. She walked across the hallways in her flats, she hated Austin so much and she felt so short. God she hated that man as she headed to her publicists office. She opened the door and Neo lowered her glasses.

“You look shorter.”

“I’m your boss and I’m not here to discuss my height.” She sat on the chair and placed her hands on the desk.

“Here is the deal, today is Mathews Diamonds’ launch and Reba and I will be there..”

“Wait! Mr Mathews invited you?” I’m embarrassed to tell you but that man is the one who fucks me and he knocked me up but she kept those thoughts

to herself.

“Yes. And this is the perfect opportunity for Reba to use Lora Cosmetic for a full face glam. I know we have more products which will be advertised and used by the select influencers chosen but a full face glam using Lora Cosmetics will work and that is a way to subtly tell the people we have more products and leave them guessing. Plus we are working towards inclusivity. Some make up brands don't have the darkest shade of concealer and do you know how much, my sister struggled to find the right makeup to use for shoots? Hence she doesn't exactly like it that much but anyways Lora Cosmetics to the rescue.”

“And what about you?”

“I do my own makeup. Get the team on it, I have to see other people after this.”

“Alora, will you behave at the launch?”

“Neo I'm not a child, I'm your boss and whatever that I said to Ro-Mr Mathews he deserves it and more. Have a good day.” She stood up and waddled

out of the office with her tummy. Neo shook her head with a loved her boss as angry as she always was. Who knew that her? A graduate who had been looking for work for two years would land this job? Alora looked at her, loved the interview and said she had tenacity and hired her even though she had no working experience other than what she did whilst on attachment. That had been a gamble but everyday she was more confident in her role and things were going extremely well. So well it was like a dream.

Reba sat in Alora's office as she looked around. Alora finally opened the door, the woman had been moving up and down these offices for the past hour.

“You're exhausting yourself.”

“I'm almost done, we have an hour here then we leave to get ready. I'll have a makeup artist sent home to do your make up with the full line and I think the media will be at the event. It's red carpet so yes.”

“Look at you in action.” Alora chuckled as she sat at her desk and looked at the paperwork.

“I have to deal with these tomorrow, Monday is a big day and we have you of course so we’ll be together. I think re ya Edgars first then Foschini.”

“This is really happening?”

“You bet sister. Thank you so much. Thank you so so much.” Reba would do that for her and she had been surprised when she signed the contract finally looking at her payroll. Alora believed in her product so much and how it was going to be that successful. It took a lot of guts.

“I’ll be counting the minutes.” Reba spun around in the chair while on her phone and Alora blocked it all out as she opened her laptop to work.

At Austin’s office, it was a normal day even though the staff knew they were leaving early this Friday

for the company launch of course under their CEO. Everything had been planned to the T and the usual anxiety that planners usually succumb to wasn't there. The company did a good job and Austin had been satisfied. He took out his phone to text Hades if everything was ready, he will be home around lunchtime. Solely for Alora to help her if she does need his help. Hades gave him a thumbs up and he called his girlfriend.

“Hello, you're disturbing me I'm working.”

“I'll pick you up.”

“No you won't. I'm with Reba.”

“I'll pick you guys up...” she went silent for a while then she was back on the phone.

“Fine, meet you in the parking lot and have a good day.”

“You're wishing me a good day?”

“Have a horrible one then.” She cut him off and he scoffed. Fuck he loved her.

Reba picked a pen and she didn't dare throw it because she was working but she was bored. Semester results had long been out, she did fairly well. She was not that smart smart like Alora but at least she didn't have supplementary exams or any retakes. As long as she didn't have that she was fine. She checked her watch.

"Time's up. Stand up!"

"I'm not going to be forced to stop working in my own office, I'm still wrapping a few things up." Reba stood up and picked her sister's bag.

"Nope. Let's go. You're almost seven months and you want to overwork yourself. On top of that we have an event that might tire you so up..." she glared as Reba picked the files on the desk to sort them up. She slid the files in Alora's bag and she picked the laptop. She switched it off as Alora dejectedly looked at her.

"Everyday you guys find a new reason to annoy

me.”

“Get up. I won’t pick you up, you must be so heavy.”

“Hmm.” Alora tapped her temple.

“Just a minute.” She rubbed her stomach and she breathed out letting that little sharp pain go down. She stood up on her feet and she stretched. Her hands settled on her stomach. She rubbed her tummy, the pain didn’t hit her again so she followed Reba out of her office after she picked her phone. She whispered under her breath. Her baby was fine, the doctor said the pregnancy was healthy and they had nothing to worry about even though that didn’t feel like a kick. She knew her baby’s kicks. The people at the office waved at her and she waved with a blank face. They walked out of the building and she spotted Austin’s car.

“Here we go again.” They made their way to his car and he opened the door for her as Reba opened the back door.

“Hi Reba. Hey Lora.” She held onto the car seat as she climbed into the car. She finally got

comfortable and she glared.

He kissed her cheek and she held his.

“Hi.” She smiled.

“Hello.” He moved back as she buckled up. He started the car and reversed out of his parking spot as she shifted in her seat. She kept a straight face when another sharp pain hit her lower abdomen. She just placed hands protectively over her stomach and Austin extended a hand to settle it on her stomach. Her baby was fine.

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[06/22, 09:41] : REBORN

They dropped Reba off at home before he drove them home.

“You’re up for tonight sweetheart?” It was his night and she was going to support him and stand by him. Her baby just had to behave. She nodded.

“I’ll always stand by your side so yes.” He kissed her hand and squeezed it as she kept another one on her stomach. The drive was silent and Alora was hyperaware of any movement or any shot of pain and none sufficed till they got home. Okay, she was going to be okay. She got out of the car leaving Austin inside. She was going to take a bath and get ready for the event. She smiled as she knocked on the door then opened it.

“How far with the room?”

She asked just as Austin made his way to the door with their bags.

“Not ready yet.”

“I want to see.”

“I don’t want you fixating on the little details and then obsessing before your compulsions flare.” She pouted as she stepped inside the house. Austin looked at her for a second, would she be open to get into therapy for her OCD? It was something he thought about time and time again.

“So I’ll see it when? When the baby comes?”

“Yes. Keep it moving woman.’ She continued walking and when she got to the stair case she exhaled. She held the railing as she took slow steps up as he followed closely behind her.

“We have less than five hours to get ready.”

“We still have time, keep moving baby.” She walked up the stairs till she reached their room. She touched her stomach. No pain. Thank God! She patted her tummy as she pushed the door open and Austin placed their bags on the bed.

“You’re creasing the sheets with the bags.” He removed them and placed them on the bedside table and she looked at the sheets. She walked to

the bed and straightened the sheets.

“Better. I’m taking a bath. Do you want to join me?”
Of course he was joining her right? He wouldn’t say no.

“I’ll be right behind you.” She slipped off her flats and touched her head. She needs to wash the gel off before she styles it for tonight’s event.

“Robert?”

“Hmm?”

“Help me wash my hair, I need to get the gel off..” he nodded as he placed his jacket on the bed followed by the tie.

Minutes later, they were both on their underwear as Alora headed to the bathroom. She picked a clean towel and wrapped it around her body before she opened the cupboards to take out her shampoo. Austin walked in minutes later and they stepped inside the shower. He opened the water and checked the temperature for her.

“Is it okay?”

“Mhmmm.” She kept her eyes closed as he took the shampoo from her.

“The hair is wet enough? If it is pour the shampoo and massage my scalp to get the gel off. Make it three washes.” He did as instructed and once the shampoo was lathered on her hair, he massaged her scalp and Alora released a sigh. Maybe he should wash her hair often. His hands were so nice in her hair.

Their little bath time took almost an hour, as she relaxed in the water with him. After they were done, she started with her hair first. Did she keep the curls or was she straightening it? Her face looked less fat with the curls all over and she was still going to contour the hell out of her face. She watched him apply lotion and smiled but that smile disappeared as another sharp pain hit her unexpectedly. She breathed out and faced him but he wasn't looking at her.

“Gremlin please behave, just for tonight.” She whispered under her breath. She wasn’t ruining this for him, he worked so hard for this diamond line that was under his company.

“We have four hours to kill.”

“I think if we’re fast enough we’ll be done in three. I’m hungry.” She added and he walked over to the closet to get his robe.

“Let me see what I can whip up okay? You’re the one who has to fix your hair and makeup. Are you sure you’re up for this sweetheart?”

“I am. I won’t answer you again if you ask that question.” He walked over to the vanity table to kiss her forehead.

“I won’t be long.” He walked out and she breathed out looking at her stomach. She got to her feet to go pick up her phone as she went to Google to search up. She just didn’t want it to be anything major, she bit her lip looking at the search results. She had Tessa on speed dial as well, if she calls Tessa Austin will know and get worried and not attend his

launch unless she begs Tessa not to tell on her. She walked up and down the rooms she dialled Tessa who answered after three rings.

“Ms Alora...”

“Hi doctor. I have a question...”

“Is everything okay? I’m still at the hospital.”

“I’m not sure...” she bit her lower lip.

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[06/22, 09:41] : REBORN

Alora sat on the bed as she listened to Tessa.

“But T-“

“Alora, we are not risking the baby. Come to the hospital now.”

“Just a few mo-“

“Alora! I know best and you should be here in less than an hour.” Tessa hung up and she face palmed. It was only a couple of times but here her doctor was demanding she goes to the hospital. She walked to the wardrobe and picked a dress, hopefully it doesn't take as long. With a sour face, she walked out of the room and made her way down the stairs. She made her way to the kitchen and Austin spotted her before she could say anything. Her hair was still not done and she looked annoyed.

“What is it?”

“We have to go to the hospital...” he paused.

“What's wrong? Are you okay? Is the baby okay? Shit, let me get dressed.” He quickly switched off

the stove and he rubbed her arm as he passed her while he rushed to the bedroom to get dressed. She didn't even tell him what the problem was and he was already in a rush to get her to the hospital. It was in that exact moment she realised that Austin might be the better parent once the child is born. How was she supposed to do this motherhood thing? What if it was really labour pains and it was okay to think about what the future might look like but if the baby comes early it is going to ruin her vision because she far from being ready to be a mother. Of course she felt the maternal bond but that is not enough. With those thoughts, she didn't realise she was pacing up and down the kitchen as her mind conjured the worst case scenarios. It wasn't until Austin held her to stop the pacing.

“What's wrong?” He asked and she blinked back tears. He held her in his arms as she started crying.

“Sweetheart what's wrong?” He turned her so that she can face him.

“I'm going to be a bad mother right? I just know it..” he held her hands before he pulled her to him. She

sniffed.

“No you’re not.” They all said that. They all fucking said that but she didn’t believe that herself. He held her until she stopped crying. He then held her cheeks.

“Let’s go to the hospital okay?” She nodded as they walked out of the house.

Reba looked at her makeup. This was good, so good.

“Now the finishing touches.” The lady said and Reba smiled.

“I look so surreal,”

“I completely have no idea what that word means.” Reba chuckled and the lady smiled.

“Look at how pretty you made me.”

“You have such a gorgeous skin tone and you’re

beautiful too. You're respectful unlike some of my clients."

"Oh?"

"Ee. Kana some of them usually tell me that I should be grateful they are using my services because go tlhoka degree hewehe.."(not having a degree what what.)

"That's rude. Not many of us choose our life circumstances and things happen."

"Wa bona? That"(you see?) She nodded.

"Done. Look at the mirror." Reba did and she smiled as the girl placed Lora Cosmetics stuff on the table.

"These products are so good, it's my first time using them and they said I can keep them, they seem expensive but they are quality too."The girl smiled and Reba grinned.

"Let me get my purse.."

"No, it's okay. I was paid before hand so it's really okay."

"I insist. I'll be back." Reba got up and she left the

lady there as she looked around. She smiled and thought about the tip she already got beforehand and this makeup set on it's own was expensive, she could tell and the fact that she had Lora Cosmetics before it hit the shelves? Crazy, especially for a young makeup artist like her. Reba walked back with her phone and purse. She took out a P100 note and handed it to her.

“Thank you and can I have your social media page? Or handle so I can tag you for the look?” Reba handed her the phone and the girl searched her page on Facebook.

“That’s the one.” Reba got her phone back and liked the page.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” The girl stood up with her makeup kit and smiled as she walked out.

“And thank you so much. It was a pleasure working on your beautiful face.” Reba grinned. She saw the girl out before she made her way back to the house. Time for the dress and the final touches. She still

had time.

At the hospital, Austin stood by Alora as they both looked at the screen. Tessa had attended to them immediately and he was a bit frustrated when he listened to Tessa tell Alora that she should have been here as soon as the pains started and she didn't tell him. For the past two hours she had been silent and didn't tell him she was in pain. But still he held her hand as Tessa finally looked at them.

“Well the scan shows that the baby is okay, very healthy and no sign of wanting out for some time, another possible cause for the cramps might be dehydration. It can cause something close to contractions during pregnancy. Have you been drinking enough water?” She looked at the doctor and she knew that she just had a bottle of water today and she drank water when she really felt thirsty or was about to eat.

“No.”

“We have the cause. Drink enough water, you know two litre is the minimum.”

“I hear you.”

“Next time, show up immediately and drink water Alora. Stay hydrated. Otherwise there is nothing to worry about. The baby is okay. Did you guys open the results?”

“Not yet.” Alora quickly answered.

“I’ll see you guys for next week’s appointment and all the best at the launch.” She nodded and walked out. Her brother-in-law was going to be there along with Masa and the older kids. Austin looked at Alora. He sucked in a deep breath as he let go of her hand and Alora missed the heat of his hand.

“I didn’t want to worry you and ruin your day.”

“That wasn’t enough reason not to tell me Alora, what if it was more serious than dehydration and it put our child in danger?” She bit her lower lip.

“Austin I just didn’t-“

“Your stubbornness can be so infuriating at times.” She watched him fight his own emotions before he took a deep breath and schooled his features. She couldn’t even read his face, it was just a cold calm that made her shiver a bit. He silently helped her sit upright by the corner of the bed. He picked her shoes and slid them on her slightly swollen feet. He helped her get off the bed and she pulled down the dress over her bump.

“Austin...”

“Let’s go Alora.” She swallowed as he placed a hand on her back leading her out of the room.

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[06/22, 09:42] : REBORN

The drive home was silent, too silent as she held her stomach. She closed her eyes as he drove them home. Twenty minutes later, the car had stopped moving and Alora finally opened her eyes five minutes later. She was alone in the car. She sucked in a deep breath as she slowly got out of the car. She closed the door and made her way to house, she passed by the kitchen first to have a glass of water before she slowly took the stairs heading to the bedroom. Just as she stepped inside the bedroom, Austin walked out. No words were exchanged.

Alora just headed to the bathroom to take bath.

Reba twirled in front of the mirror. Primrose outdid herself with this dress, she loved it and the makeup and her hair? She was beautiful. She grinned as she snapped a few selfies because obviously the final look needed a professional photographer to take pictures. She smiled as she uploaded the selfie captioning it and mentioning the makeup artist. She sat down reading the comments with a smile before her phone rang and she answered him immediately.

“Hi.”

“Hey there pretty girl, are you ready?”

“I think so. This is my first formal event in years. I haven’t walked the red carpet in years.”

“Well I’ll be by your side, I’m on my way.”

“Okay. Can’t wait to see you and bye.”

“Bye.” Her phone rang and she answered again.

“Neo hi.”

“Hi and I love the look, the picture is getting good reviews and people are amped for Lora Cosmetics.”

“Thank you. I am the face of the brand.”

“And rightly so. All the best at the launch and you are beautiful Reba. Stay beautiful. Is Alora with you?”

“Thank you and no. I’m at home. What’s wrong?”

“She’s not answering her phone.”

“She must be busy with her makeup and hair. She’ll get back to you. Bye.”

“Bye” Lora’s publicist hung up and Reba stood up on her feet as she twirled in front of the mirror one last time before she walked out with the matching clutch. Susan who had arrived minutes gasped.

“Look at you, reminds me of the time you went to Prom.” Reba grinned.

“It looks amazing doesn’t it?”

“It’s more than amazing, batho monyana yo wa Mokwena o montle gore.” Reba’s mouth hurt from the smiling but she couldn’t help it.

Thabiso walked inside the house minutes later and his jaw dropped.

“Look at you.”

“She looks like a princess.” Emory added as she looked up at her sister.

“That she does Em.”

“Obviously there will be pictures and the media. Are you sure you can handle that?” Susan asked. A bit concerned at the media’s presence at the event.

“I’ll live and I am sure the media will be regulated by the security, they can’t harass me.”

“True.”

“I’m proud of you Reba.” Thabiso said as he hugged his oldest daughter and Reba hugged him back. The father she never knew she needed until her mother married him.

“Thank you guys for he support.” She broke the hug and hugged her mother,

“Hades is coming to pick me up. I’m so nervous.”

“He better bring flowers or something.” Susan added and Reba laughed.

“I remember that for Prom he was sweating as he came with flowers and chocolates even though you liked him.”

“He had to sweat, you’re a dime. You all are.”

“Yes ma’am.” They laughed as they asked questions and she answered them while they waited with her for Hades.

At Molepolole, Sentle and her friend stood under the tree that was in front of her friend’s yard as her friend scrolled through social media. Sentle took out her phone and put it back in the pocket. She was too embarrassed to have her friend charge it for her just because the electricity at home had finished and she had used her last money to buy food.

“Sentle look at this girl.” Sentle looked at the screen and she forced a smile.

“Kana she was a former model and she looks so beautiful, that face-beat is nice.”

“Yeah.”

“Kana I’ve been meaning to ask you but I was afraid because maybe I’m jumping into conclusions..”

“Mhmm..”

“Are you guys related? Kana bona her surname is Moremi and the Lora Cosmetics brand is owned by her sister, Alora Moremi. Are you guys somehow related? I mean you share the same surname.”

Sentle swallowed and laughed to try and get her friend to not talk about it.

“Themma ska itshegis a ke serious.”(don’t laugh about it, I’m serious)

Sentle breathed out, they were cousins yes and she last saw them years ago. More than a decade ago.

“We are cousins, they’re dad was my uncle.”

“The one you said passed away?”

“Mhmm..”

“And you’re still here, stuck in the village and don’t have a job when you have rich cousins? Sentle? These days people use connections. Ba ka go soma somewhere kana.”

“It’s complicated. I just can’t insert myself in their lives. Our parents don’t get along..”

“So you’re going to suffer just because of your parents? Ae mma. Be serious. This is a dog eat dog world. They probably have rich friends and Reba ene is dating Hades Hudson, his father is rich and has a huge company so wa re they can’t find you a job? As a cleaner or PA? Sentle being nice and humble doesn’t work in this life.” Sentle breathed out.

“Still. We haven’t talked in years and they probably forgot me.”

“Family is still family no matter how much time passes. Be smart.” Sentle breathed out and listened to her friend go on and on.

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[06/22, 09:42] : REBORN

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Hades stepped out of the car as he held the flowers in hand. They will do, why was her nervous now? It all resembled when he took her for prom and she was out there looking like a dream. He always knew she was his, even though their journey had been a little rough and had the most bumps but someday he was going to marry her. He pressed the intercom and the gate slid open. He breathed out as he walked to the door reciting his words and everything he was going to say. He cleared his throat and knocked on the door. The seconds that passed seemed like years. He looked at his shoes

before raising his head as the door was opened. He looked at Thabiso.

“Good evening, I’m here for Reba.” Thabiso smiled and opened the door wider. Hades nodded nervously as he smiled and he licked his dry lips locking eyes with Reba. He shifted his attention to Susan.

“Good evening, these are for you.” He handed Susan the flowers and she took them with a smile.

“Thank you.” He walked to where Reba was sitting and he took her hand.

“Hi gorgeous.”

“Hey handsome.” He smiled as he took her hand and helped her up on her feet.

“I’ll bring her home back safe, I promise.” He assured the parents.

“Have fun kids.” Thabiso added and Emory just waved. Hades walked to the door with Reba and he led her out before he closed the door. He pecked her lips.

“You’re stunning.” He breathed against her lips.

“Thank you.” She whispered. When was the last time they actually had sex? She couldn’t remember but he was breathing against her lips in that sexy way he always did and she was waiting for his whisper, the one that gave her goosebumps every time.

“I think we should get going.”

“Yeah.” She breathed out as he moved his head and led her to the car. The show was just about to begin.

Alora finished up her makeup look and turned to face Austin. She looked at her face in the mirror then him. He was facing the other way and his muscles strained against his shirt leaving little to the imagination especially with those back muscles of his. They had been silent the past two hours as they got ready.

“Austin I-“ she whispered and his head turned so fast that the apology died on her lips. She watched him wear the cuff links she had gifted him. She nearly smiled but she had to apologise first.

“I’m sorry. What I did was stupid.” She nearly cringed hearing herself call herself stupid.

“I should have told you and I should have gone to the hospital at the first sign of pain, I pushed it back because I didn’t want us to stress you on your big day and you deserve today but I am so sorry. Little gremlin comes first in everything.” She finished her sentence.

“Alora, it’s not even about me. It’s our baby. Everything is pretty much useless when our child is in danger. Sweetheart, you have been telling yourself that you’re going to be a bad mother at every turn and somehow, as much as I hate to believe in things that don’t exist, you make it happen unaware.” Alora swallowed.

“I’m not saying you are going to be one but you hear me Alora, I never really sugar coat things with you.”

“I-I know.” She blinked and nodded.

“Sweetheart I know that voice, you’re about to start bawling your eyes out. Don’t let this happen again. Because as much as I’m excited to be a father, a complication during this pregnancy puts your life at risk as well and I’m not ready to lose you.” She nodded.

“I understand. Le nna I do love our child, I really do and I understand.” She’ll do better. She rubbed her stomach underneath the silk gown she wore. She just didn’t know how she was going to navigate motherhood but it was this once that she didn’t do something. He walked closer and held her shoulders.

“Don’t cry Alora, you’re going to ruin your makeup.” She chuckled with tears gleaming in her eyes.

“I’ll try not to.” He kissed the top of her head as he wrapped a single arm over her chest.

“I love you okay?”

“Le nna ka go rata.” (I love you too) she whispered. He let go and she sucked in a deep breath and

fanned her face so that she didn't cry. Pregnancy made her cry a lot and that's one she didn't like. The crying. Why couldn't she soldier everything out like she used to? When she was sure she wasn't going to cry she finally stood up and headed to the wardrobe to take out her dress. She turned and watched him pick his tux vest and buttoned it up. She shouldn't get distracted by him. She picked out her gown and she looked at it then at her shoes. She walked over to the bed to place the dress down then went back to the wardrobe to pick out the most comfortable and classy ballet flats she had in her wardrobe. They won't show because the dress is long. She waddled to the bed and got rid of her robe. Austin chuckled as he saw her yellow behind in a black thong. She picked the dress and she turned to Austin.

"Help me put it on." She asked. He didn't waste time as he stood behind her.

"What should I do?" From there he helped her with the dress and she sat on the bed as he offered to put on her shoes for her. She stood up and walked

to the wardrobe where she opened it wider to reveal the full body mirror. Her bump was visible, you couldn't miss the swell of her tummy after her chest area in that flare gown. She looked at her cleavage, they looked bigger than her last fitting in this dress. Austin stood behind her and lowered his head to kiss her neck.

“You'll get the shimmers on your lips and then you'll kiss me with those lips again.” He sighed against her neck.

“Ga ke gane I just don't want shimmers on my lips, they are not edible.” He chuckled.

“I hear you.” He stepped back as he slid one hand into his pocket and Alora looked at them in the mirror.

“We stuck to the theme right?”

“You out dressed me but I'm the better looking partner..” she hit his chest.

“You're not.” She chuckled and she touched her hair again, the natural curls came out nice and she was happy about that.

“I think after eating we’ll be ready to go.”

“Just wait there for a moment.” He opened the top part of the wardrobe and took out a box. Her eyes followed him as he opened it then had her face to the mirror.

“This one is for you.” She lifted her hair as he placed the necklace against her neck.

“A Mathew Diamonds original?” She asked as his fingers lightly skimmed her collarbone.

“You’ve been wearing my originals since the first date darling.” He murmured and her eyes widened. What?

“I-“

“It’s gorgeous on you.” He took out the earrings as well. He looked at her after she had adorned the jewellery.

“Beautiful. Keep the necklace on later tonight when I fuck you.” And that sent her blood rushing and her breathing became uneven as he said that. He wasn’t even asking her and how sure was he that he

was having her tonight?

“How sure are you?”

“I know you darling.”

“We’ll see Robert.”

He chuckled.

“Time to go. You’ll eat on the way.” With that he stepped back and she picked her matching clutch. Time to put on a good show and surprise the masses.

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[06/22, 09:43] : REBORN

In the hired Limousine, Austin's phone rang and Alora stopped eating from the lunchbox as she looked at him. He answered his phone and she continued eating her meal, she hoped they had more time left. She still had to eat her cookies, it was more like dessert after meals.

"Hades.."

"We've arrived. Where are you guys?" Hades asked over the phone.

"On our way."

"Okay. It's already packed."

"All I can say is that you guys got this, we might be the last people to arrive." Austin said as he watched Alora stuff her face with food and he nearly laughed.

"Okay. See you." Hades hung up and he placed his phone down. Alora swallowed and she placed the back of her hand on her lips.

"I'm almost full. Where are the cookies le juice?" He laughed and she rolled her eyes. Her bladder was

going to hate her after all the liquid she is consuming but as long as she is hydrated and her baby is okay in there. He picked another lunchbox and she closed the one she just finished eating out of. She handed it to him and he gave her the other one. Her eyes lit up as she looked at the chocolate chip cookies and her apple juice in that small carton box that was used for pre-scholars lunchboxes. She leaned back as she started with the juice and Austin shook his head. She ate like a child and it was insanelly cute to watch. They were going to arrive in twenty minutes.

At the prestigious venue, Sapphire fixed Esmeralda mic and her firstborn looked at her mother.

“Mom, I got this. There more red carpet interviews to take place.” Sapphire waved her off.

“I know. You’re doing great. I’ll just be by the sidelines.” She chuckled as her mother stepped

back and she fixed a smile as she went back live on tv after that quick ad break the camera men said they were going to.

“That was fast.” She started off with a smile and Sapphire was proud of her baby. She was a great interviewer and it had been natural as she interviewed the event attendees on the red carpet from the Kgosis to her uncle Dan and aunt Loapi. She had laughed at how cute it had been. She smiled as she saw the Hades heir coming up with his model girlfriend who was now the face of Lora Cosmetics.

“And I must say I love that gown.” Reba grinned as she twirled in front of the cameras that clicked.

“It’s a Prima C Design original.” Esmeralda grinned.

“I love it and the makeup...”

“Proudly a Lora Cosmetics girl through and through.”

“I need to get my hands on those products as soon as they hit the shelves.”

“Please do. You won’t regret it.”

“Must I add that the gentleman is also a nice accessory to add.” They all laughed as she leaned against Hades.

“A really nice one, a girl has to have one like him as an accessory.”

“Agreed, what inspired this look?” Reba loved that the red carpet interviewer was so respectful and she didn’t bring up her past. And Hades was there smiling answering questions as well by her side.

“Well enjoy the evening.” They nodded and gracefully made their way inside the venue. Esmeralda took out her phone as she read the social media comments on the best dressed couple so far and the best dressed female.

“Mas ego says she loved Rebantle’s dress, the low back cut and that slit. She loved it. Mas ego I have to say I agree and Prima C Designs know their stuff.” She grinned as she went on. Almost everyone had arrived and it had been nice conducting interviews for the past two hours but then the people had

questions.

“Another comment is asking about the owner of Lora Cosmetics..” Esmeralda read out in front of the cameras that snapped. The paparazzi was here and the love crew as well. Well everyone saw her post as she showed her makeup look and the diamonds adorning her neck as people asked themselves where they were from. She was waiting for the man of the moment though. The owner of Mathews Inc. then the red carpet will officially be done with so that the event can start. A shiny black limo stopped and the cameras shifted to that direction and cameras flashed.

Meanwhile in the limousine Alora sprayed herself with her perfume and fixed her lipstick.

“It doesn’t show that I’ve been eating?”

“It doesn’t darling.” She placed a hand on his chest as he lowered his head to kiss her. They shared that slow kiss and he broke it with a smile.

“You don’t need luck. You got this.” She said softly

and he held her chin.

“Ready?”

“I was always born ready.” They could hear the cameras flashing outside and she smiled at him one last time before the smile disappeared and he pecked her lips. He was on the side where the door was about to be opened. Tom got out of the driver’s seat to go open the door. The cameras stopped flashing for a second as the door opened and Austin stepped out with that smile of his. The camera lights flashed and some of the media house wanted to ask questions as he stood by the car door in his height and that tux that was carefully crafted for his body. It took them by surprise as he extended a hand and they saw the lady’s delicate fingers and arm without seeing the face. It all happened slowly as the cameras and the questions faded into the background as he helped his significant other get out of the car. Jaws dropped when they saw a pregnant Alora step out of the limo. She had been scarce and had only posted half body pictures on social media and seeing her pregnant

was a slap in the face. Alora being Alora was internally scowling at herself. He was so tall besides her. Tom closed the door after she stepped out and Austin rested his hand on her back as he walked behind her and the cameras flashed uncontrollably. They made it to Esmeralda who was just shocked like the whole country was. This was an Uno reverse card because this was Alora who had come for Austin unprovoked on social media and here they were.

“I think as a country we need to take a moment to wrap our heads around this.” Austin chuckled as he looked down at Alora who graced him with a small smile.

“Okay now we got a moment, Mr Mathews and Ms Moremi.” They both nodded at the same time and Esmeralda chuckled.

“Okay let’s start with the diamonds on Ms Moremi. They are beautiful and the makeup..” Esmeralda was nice and she loved that she didn’t start with Austin. She was going to brag about it later on.

“The makeup look can all be me...”

“Ma’am you do your own makeup?”

“Yes not forgetting that Lora Cosmetics was used.”

“A talented queen. Yes we love that...”

“And the diamonds are his...” she said and Esmeralda held back a laugh at the gruff way she indicated that they are part of Mathew Diamonds.

“Darling that’s not nice.” He said with love gleaming in his eyes and Alora scoffed.

“I’m also not nice Robert.” Esmeralda laughed and Alora smiled.

“But you can talk to him now...” she shuffled her feet as he grinned and Esmeralda asked the right questions as Austin answered.

“Thank you so much and we can’t wait to see what the night has for us.” They walked away with Austin lowering his head to talk to her and she rolled her eyes at him while the cameras flashed.

“That was it guys. We hoped this red carpet part of the show was enjoyable and we were pleasantly

surprised.” She said finally as she stopped. There was murmuring as the paparazzi knew what they were going to talk about on their Monday morning News headlines,

At home Susan who sat next to her husband smiled as they watched Thompson Entertainment, the red carpet event was successful and Reba was a natural. Alora was just Alora and they had chuckled looking at her. She had come so far and she was beautiful. They were proud of their girls and the name they made for themselves.

“Happy?”

“Very...” Susan answered as she rested her head on his chest and he rubbed her arm.

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Once the guests were settled down after the murmuring of seeing Austin and Alora walk in, the event could begin. They had hired professional models who were adorning the Mathew Diamonds either as tennis bracelets, pendants, watches, chokers and necklaces. It was genius on his team's part because people could see the jewellery while they were served by the waitresses and waiters. This was going to be a long night, Alora mused as Austin placed his hand on top of hers.

“Comfortable?”

“Yep.”

Across the room, Maduo sipped her juice as she nudged her husband.

“They look cute together. Young love.” She mused as her husband chuckled. Even after all these decades, she was still a child at heart.

“They really are.”

Esmeralda’s eyes wondered to Smith Jr who had looked up, he had been talking to his father and she winked at him. He smiled at her, she loved him and he knew that. Suddenly she wanted the event to end but she was working. She chuckled as she moved in that slim cut suit with a camera hanging around her neck. She walked closer to the stage as she took pictures and she made sure she still had her microphone on for the questions they were going to fire later once the CEO takes centre stage. The room darkened and the screen brightened and in the absolute quiet, the company’s Chief Marketing Officer took centre stage and Austin leaned back listening while Alora listened as she came up with

her own company strategies in her head.

Hades placed his hand on Reba's thigh as they listened. Ten minutes later, that presentation was over and done with and a local artist was called to the stage. People lightly chatted among themselves and Alora used that opportunity to excuse herself and head to the bathroom. Her bladder was going to be a problem tonight. Austin watched her walk out with her clutch in hand and smiled.

In the ladies' room, Alora closed herself inside the toilet and she breathed out. She had to lift the layered dress to sit on the seat but some chatter caught her attention as she lifted her dress.

“Women and trapping men!”

“Tell me about it. Just because he is a millionaire she got pregnant for him and now she has a cosmetics line? Weren't there any smart ideas out there?”

“But if your baby daddy has money, anything is possible..”

“True that.” the girl giggled and Alora rolled her eyes as she relieved herself. She sighed. Two minutes later, she was done.

“Kana mme she was rude to him...”

“Bro. I think she is there for the money, her sister is also dating someone rich and at least her sister goes to University and she actuated a succeed career before she was a junkie bu-“ Alora took that opportunity to step out of the toilet and she looked at the ladies as she kept her serious face on. The girls faced the sink awkwardly unable to maintain eye contact. She didn’t need to prove herself did she? No no, most probably they hadn’t attended an Ivy League or been out of the country to begin with, just because she doesn’t share most of her life on social media shouldn’t make them think that they knew her besides she knew most local country men never watched other University graduations even if her face was currently on Princeton’s Website as this year’s Valedictorian. She walked over to the sink and they scooted back. They thought she was going to say something but she didn’t. She just washed

her hands three times making sure they were thoroughly scrubbed before she dried her hands and walked out. The two ladies looked at each other before they shook their hands and walked out as well.

Alora took her place besides Austin and he kissed her lips.

“You’re good? You look annoyed.” He whispered.

“I’m annoyed but good. When is it your turn to talk?”

“In twenty minutes or so, your food will be arriving in ten minutes.”

“You’re being a good person to me.” He laughed and she hit his chest not to attract attention to them.

“People are looking.”

“And I’m talking to my baby mama.” She faked a gag.

“No. That title sounds urg, don’t call me that.” He lowered his head whispering.

“But you are my baby mama. A hot fatcake that can still take this di-“ this time she laughed and lowered her head.

“You’re impossible and I hate you.”

“Do you mon coeur?”

She shook her head just as some people at their table looked at them and a few of them smiled, of course some of the staff at Mathew Inc knew they were together. She as always in his office and sometimes they walked out together. Reba smiled. Another speaker took the stage as they went into detail about the diamonds and the process that goes into making the jewellery. Alora leaned back and settled her hands over her stomach as the starter was placed in front of her. Her gaze caught the piece the waitress was wearing. She liked it. She’ll buy it. Austin followed her eyes, she loved diamonds and the fact that the diamonds she always wore around her neck were his boosted his ego. He placed a hand on her stomach as she picked the water bottle.

After all that was said and done and people were on their feet after their starters mingling while waiting for Austin's speech, Alora made her way to Reba who hugged her.

"You're gorgeous."

"I know. Let me go now." Reba squeezed her a bit before she let go and Alora shrugged.

"You're gorgeous and thank you Reba." Reba smiled as she took her sister's hand.

"Can we look at the diamond pieces?"

"Only for a few minutes before I sit down."

"I forget sometimes."

"Hmm." She let Reba lead her as they stopped some of the waitresses and waiters mid way to look at the pieces they had adorned. This was good and Alora didn't know which one she was going to buy. They were obviously expensive so she can only buy one set. Just one. Austin caught up to them.

"Hey, you're stunning today and can I have her

back?” Reba was more than happy to give Alora back.

“I’m not property. I’m probably going to kill the both of you one day.” Austin just held her waist and she turned to face him.

“Are you nervous?” She asked concerned now. “It’s okay to be nervous sometimes autwe? I’m not going to hold it against you.” She soothed and he smiled.

“I’m okay.”

“Sure?” He pecked her lips.

“Sit down, you shouldn’t be up on your feet for too long.”

“Mhmm.” He led her back to where they were seated and she sat down. She took his unopened water bottle just as he took centre stage and the waiter brought him a glass of champagne. She will just toast with water, just great. Hades saw almost everyone had champagne glasses in their hands and he called over a waiter.

“Can I have sparkling water?”

“Make that two.” Reba added. The waiter nodded and he squeezed her hand.

“I got you.” She whispered. Sobriety was their path and they will walk that narrow road till their dying breaths.

“Now I have everyone’s attention, can we have a moment of silence for the founder of Mathews Inc, Celine Mathews...” everyone lowered their head in silence for almost a minute.

“Thank you and may her soul rest in peace. Let me formally welcome you to the launch of yet another line associated with Mathews Inc. Mathews Diamonds.” Some places their flute glasses down to clap their hands as the white light dimmed and the fancy lights lit up the brightest.

“This is a line I’ve been working on for more than a year, it was under wraps and it seemed like nothing to add to an already well oiled machine that had been functioning for years and had grown in abundant leaps under the guidance of a legend...”

His mother was a force to be reckoned with business wise and that little hollow ache that could never be filled ached more today as he mentioned his mother. He didn't let the emotions show though.

“But the more I drew the designs, the more they made sense and my first piece was actually the one I gifted my then rival for our first date..” Alora smiled. She loved being on his team more than competing with him. It was called growth.

“She loved it and she didn't know where it was from when I was still trying to get a fair chance at being more with her.” Alora blinked. This didn't seem to be about diamonds was it? He showed the piece on screen and she smiled as some people who follow her on social media recognised the pendant she used to take selfies wearing.

“It was designed specially for her and that's the feel you get with Mathew Diamond pieces, they are crafted for you and you will not doubt that they are a part of you. Each piece speaks to every individual's tastes.” Most nodded their heads impressed and some turned to look at Alora who

couldn't see herself beaming looking at him speak by the podium with such poise and regality. She loved him. He went on and on and he paused.

“The second diamond she got, still not knowing where it was from was when she was waiting for her results.” Liar! It was after she gave him her virginity. He smirked and she knew he knew that.

“But let me not dwell too much on the history. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mathew Diamonds.” There was a huge round of applause and then he raised his champagne glass up in a toast as they all raised their glasses. She raised her water bottle. To his success. She smiled as he got down from the podium and dropped a kiss on her head before he started mingling with the who's and who's of Botswana. She sipped her water silently. This was what happiness and having everything work out for the best felt like. She loved it.

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[06/22, 09:43] : REBORN

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The party commenced and Alora who wasn't supposed to be on her feet for too long, watched as everyone networked. She looked at her stomach.

“You're more precious than millions of Pulas akere?” She asked her baby and she was rewarded with a light kick.

“At least you are already feisty and agree with me. I think I'll like you more than your dad.” She said under her breath and looked at her empty plate. She is full, she had gone to the restroom too many times and she was full as well. And she thought the child was calm like the father? Or maybe a combination

of both? It would be odd. Very strange to say the least. She placed her head on her hands. the dj took over and she watched as people talked. She should probably just stand up. Ten minutes on her feet won't hurt and she was actually grateful she wore flats, the heels would be killing her if she had worn them. Luckily for her, Austin came and he took her hand.

“Do you want to go home?”

“Don't be silly. The night is still young.”

“If you're tired...”

“I'm not going to be used as a scapegoat so you can leave early.” She got up on her feet as the lights started flickering in different colours as if they were at a club.

Alora chuckled remembering her first club experience with him. The dj switched to those songs that were normally jivy tunes and were fun. Reba and Hades shared a look as she let go of his hand and he laughed.

Oh don't you dare look back
Just keep your eyes on me
I said you're holding back
She said shut up and dance with me
This woman is my destiny
She said oh oh oh
Shut up and dance with me
A backless dress and some beat up sneaks
My discotheque Juliet teenage dream
I felt it in my chest as she looked at me
I knew we were bound to be together
Bound to be together

She took his hand as he spun her around with a grin
and Alora just held onto Austin.

“I’m not dancing.” People danced in the open area
and he looked down at her.

“Humour me.” She shook her head.

“No.” She rested her head on his chest and he kissed the top of her head as the song faded to play the classics they used to hear as kids growing up and her face lit up looking up at him.

“I used to like this song low-key.”

“Want to slow dance to it?” He smiled down at her and she agreed reluctantly as he held her waist and he swayed her to the sides while singing BBM by Liquideep to her and she flushed as she snag the words back to him. There was still more and more soulful songs were played the likes of adj Sbu’s Summer Rain and Han-C’s songs. The dj switched beats.

“It’s to partayyyy!” He said on the mic.

“I think you should take off the tux jackets and remove the high heels.” He said to the corporate ladies and gentlemen in the room as some of them shouted. Austin shook his head with a smile. He kissed her head.

“You can relax and let go baby.” The dj started

playing Shumaya and some of the ladies abandoned their shoes and held their long dresses as they danced in formation. People laughed as they danced the song, reminding them of the song's music video. Alora chuckled and watched from a distance.

“I'm old but in my days I was a great dancer.”
Maduo said to her husband who laughed.

“I know and I remember. I still have the memories and the videos.”

“The kids should take over now.” Maduo said and she held her husband's arm as she watched the people dance.

Sapphire looked at Shane before she shared a look with Loapi. Dan shook his head.

“Fire don't look at me like that.”

“It's always nice embarrassing your children and I'm not that old, I'm in good shape and I don't have grey hair in my head Sky.” Loapi shook her head.

“You win. Let’s go.” Loapi didn’t even remove her heels as Sapphire grinned. She took out a ribbon from her purse before she handed it to her husband. She tied her hair back. Loapi chuckled as she followed her cousin just as the dj played Dr Malinga’s Orlando. The classics were a good song choice and everyone knew the songs. After those heavy thirty minutes of grooving, the di hit the mic.

“This song is a special request, so I’m going to play it for this J ustin Bieber fan. I know you guys know him but anyway...” people looked at each other as they sat down. Austin looked down at Alora who had rested her head on him as J ustin Bieber’s Favorite girl played. J ust this last dance even though she didn’t even dance then he can call it a night for them and take her home to rest. She blushed and looked up to him.

“Let’s dance sweetheart.” This time she fully agreed and he held her close as he led her to the open space and had her step on his shoes for her height adjustment. She just let him move her and her fat belly with a smile.

“I love you and congratulations baby.” She whispered with yawn escaping her lips.

“Endgame?”

“Forever Mr Mathews. Till we burn in hell together or make our own heaven.” He chuckled and kissed her hair with tears stinging in his eyes. He kissed the top of her head again.

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[06/22, 09:44] : REBORN

158

The following morning, Austin turned his head to

face her. She was fast asleep and understandably so because last night had been a long night for her. He touched her belly and he hoped she was going to love the surprises he had in store for her today. He kissed her forehead and he got out of bed to get her breakfast ready.

In the same house, Reba woke up with very disheveled hair and glanced over at Hades. Last night had been one hell of a rollercoaster and she had loved every bit of it. She kissed his face and got out of bed to head to the bathroom. They decided last minute that he wasn't going to drop her home. She smiled like a fool as she stared at her reflection. She needed to get rid of the makeup and take a good shower.

An hour later, Alora woke up to breakfast in bed and she smiled looking at the set tray on the bedside table along with a cute little note on it. She smiled as she picked up the note.

‘Morning Lora. I trust you’re well rested. There is breakfast and meet me in my study after you’re done. Love Austin.’ She placed the note against her naked chest with a smile before she got out of bed. She opened one of the drawers and she wrote on the note as well before she trotted over to the bathroom to get clean. She was back thirty minutes later and she ate first before making the bed. In her white dress, she made her way downstairs with the tray and she washed those plates before she made her way up the stairs yet again. She breathed in and out before she opened the door. She hadn’t even touched her phone ever since she woke up. With a smile on her face she found him comfortable on the sofa with a book in his hand and he grinned at her, he looked down at his book and turned a page and it was kind of sexy. Of course she found him reading sexy.

“Morning.”

“Hi. Why am I here?” He placed the book down and stood up walking towards her. He held her and looked at her clear face.

“We’re going to be stuck here for some time sweetheart.” He led her to the sofa and she sat down. A bit confused. Why? What was happening? He walked over to one of the top shelves in his library. Why did he keep things at the top? It wasn’t fair. He came back with a cute pink book and she audibly gasped when she read the book title. He sat next to her and kissed her cheek.

“For you.” She had ordered that book online and it had literally taken so long to arrive to the point of her giving up and he handed it to her? She looked at the edges and tears filled her eyes.

“You didn’t-“ he pulled her close.

“Open it.” She opened the very first page and she read his dedication on the page, her fingers moved over his handwriting on the pages as her heart raced with every word she read. She looked up at him.

“I love you.” He just kissed her cheek. He gifted her the book, annotated just for her.

“Hear my thoughts and soul speak to you.” She

nodded and she started reading the first chapter, looking at the tabs and sticky notes in the book, his clean highlights and writing. She blinked back tears, she didn't want them to stain this book. This was somehow the best gift she has ever gotten from him and he didn't know how much it meant for her. She snuggled into him as he kissed her head. She was going to be reading this book practically the whole of today and revel in it.

She didn't know how much time passed as she immediately went back to reading after he brought her lunch and she was left with only less than ten pages. She had laughed, cried reading it and with every comment he had left she could hear him saying those words in her head and it made her happy. Was she supposed to be this happy in life? Was this happiness meant for her? The door opened and he walked back inside, she looked up from her book and smiled.

“I'm almost done and I-thank you.” He smiled. Hiding his nervousness as he settled next to her,

waiting for her to read till the last page. When she was left with three pages to read since she wasn't really minding him, he got up on his feet walking over to his desk. He was hoping that it goes well. God he planned this to the T but it still made him nervous. He watched her flip the page and he picked his phone which was connected to the bluetooth speaker he hid in his study. He played the song Latch By Sam Smith...Alora looked up with a goofy smile and shook her head to continue reading.

I feel we're close enough
I wanna lock in your love
I think we're close enough
Could I lock in your love, baby?
Now I got you in my space
I won't let go of you
Got you shackled in my embrace
I'm latching on to you

Alora paused as she finished the book. The very last page had something written on it. She turned to it and those four simple but heavy words stared at her in the face and she blinked with tears. He was asking her? She looked up from her book and instead found him in front of her on one knee with a ring in hand his eyes so hopeful. Very hopeful. Her lips quivered.

“Will you marry me Alora?” She looked up with tears in her eyes. She should stop crying now.

“You’re the reason I believe in fate and love. You’ve healed parts of me that I didn’t know were broken. In you I’ve found my match, an extension of me. The better version of myself. I’m terribly in love with you Lora...” she nodded and opened her mouth.

“Y-yess...” the music was still playing in the background as he slid the ring on her finger before he picked her up and spun her around as she giggled amidst tears. He placed her down on her feet and pushed her hair back. He lowered his head

to look at her tear stricken face. She smiled but couldn't stop the tears.

"Thank you." He whispered as she nodded and placed her head on his chest while he held her.

"Our very own story is just getting started."

"We're our own biographers." She murmured as he kissed her lips and she opened up her mouth for him. God her chest was exploding from the sheer joy. It was overwhelming and it made her want to sob forty days and nights because this man loved her. He chose her, she was truly his endgame.

Forever. He loved her regardless of her spiteful self and he accepted her flaws and her. Fate was so kind to her.

He broke the kiss and rubbed her cheek to wipe away the tears.

"For as long as I am alive Lora, I live with you." He uttered softly.

She placed her hand on his chest where his heart was, where he had her birthday tattooed, where the organ that beat for her was.

“In truth, spirit, body and mind, I live with you.” She solidified and could feel his heart beating. Those simple vows to each other, done privately in the study meant more to both of them. Promises that were their forever.

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[06/22, 09:44] : REBORN

159

Alora snuggled into Austin as she admired the ring on her finger, it was something she would pick for herself and she loved the cut used for the diamond and it wasn't your regular diamond as well. His

hands were on her stomach and their baby chose that exact moment to kick. He smiled.

“We should open the envelope an-“

“I don’t think I want to know the gender anymore.”
She breathed out. She didn’t want to overthink, as long as this baby was healthy she was okay.

“You want to wait till the final day?”

“Yes.” He kissed her head.

“Okay.”

“I’m going to call the family. Later on to let them know about the engagement...”

“Do you want a traditional experience?” Alora paused. She didn’t know, would it work with the family? Now she was thinking too much and she didn’t want to think.

“I’ll see...”

At Molepolole, Sentle and her friend stood under yesterday's tree as her friend handed her her phone.

"You saw? Alora is dating one of the richest men in the country and you two are cousins, Sentle use your brain. Tota you shouldn't be struggling and your cousin has her own company? Sentle nyaya mma." Sentle shuffled her feet and sighed.

"I have to go and help mama with nkuku. Bye." She turned around and started walking. Her friend shook her head. Stupid girl. She was going to suffer if she didn't utilise the connections she had. Why did Sentle want to be told everything? Stupid!

Sentle jogged home and the moment she opened the gate her siblings walked over to her.

"Sentle my shoe is old."

"I don't have money but I'll see what to do. Mama o kae?"(where is mom?)

"Gone." She sighed. Her mother wasn't the best mother on earth but she gave them money when

she felt like it. The woman was probably going to be back after a week or two and they were a bit overcrowded in this house including her aunt's children as well. She sighed. Her aunt of course abandoned those ones when she got married because she didn't want children to ruin her marriage. She had a new family now and it was hard on her kids and their grandmother. She opened the door and she sighed. It was going to get dark soon and she was grateful it was a Saturday, they won't complain about homeworks and trying to do them in the dark.

"Papi, is the fire still there?" She asked one of her cousins who nodded.

"Did one of you make porridge for nkuku?" They looked at each other and she sighed. She just passed by their feet and headed to the grandmother's room. She sat by the mattress and smiled.

"Did you eat after I went to charge my phone?" The old woman shook her head. Old age had caught up to her and with such a bad diet, it was worse

because there were days were they barely ate.

“Ke tla apaya motogo.”(I’ll make soft porridge) Mma Moremi nodded and smiled looking at her granddaughter. It seemed like eons ago since she had seen her son’s children. Her grandchildren. Their mother stopped coming over with them and it just died from there. She was sure they forgot her existence. She couldn’t even picture what they looked like. All four of them.

“Nkuku, I have a question..” she said as she fixed the old woman’s pillow and looked into her eyes, God her cataracts were also getting worse and she didn’t have the money for surgery. She also wasn’t the sharpest knife so school had not been her thing, she could only hope her siblings would do better.

“Why did you, mama and aunt Kelets o hate Susan?” The old woman coughed. There was no use hiding the truth now.

“P-pelo moloi ngwanaka.”(the heart is evil my child) she blinked and extended her hand to touch Sentle’s cheek. “Susan really loved Moremi, ne a mo

rata marato and she took him to school to make him better. His sisters except Tsholo didn't like that and that Moremi listened to her and she had a better life than us."

Sentle nodded. She had just grown up hating her cousins and making fun of their skin tone because they had seen the adults do it and they never really put much thought into it.

"Where is this coming from?" Sentle shrugged.

"Alora and Reba are supper successful and are trending on Facebook and we are here..."

"They don't remember us, let them be. We have caused enough pain and suffering to them." Sentle sighed.

"I-but if I can humble myself and ask them to help me find a job that would be better, we are really struggling and bone they have money to spend." Sentle said. Reba had been wearing a dress that cost more than ten thousand and the necklace Alora had worn was speculated to have cost 50k according to her friend. That kind of money was

rare and her just having one thousand was like Christmas.

“Sentle..”

“Nkuku you need some medicine, the children need shoes and winter uniforms and blankets. There is no electricity and not enough food. Mpho comes home whenever she wishes and she even left school, how is that life fair when we can ask for help?” Pain choked her. It wasn’t fair at all.

“You can apologise and I try to find something for a better life...”

The old woman kept quiet. It seemed like Sentle made up her mind.

“I’ll borrow money and take a bus in the morning to go to Gaborone. I have to try and it’s better that than to ask myself gore what if they would have helped me.” She stood up and dusted her behind.

“I’ll go make food.” With that she walked out and the old woman closed her eyes.

Alora held the phone as she stared at the camera. It was always too easy letting everyone know at once than texting each and every one of them. Once all of her sibling's had connected, she asked Reba to call the rest of her family.

“Hi everyone.” She waved at the camera with her left hand and her ring flashed a bit. Reba frowned.

“Wait..wave that hand again..”Thabiso and Susan watched as she did and Mooketsi's eyes widened.

“Ah!”

“I never have anything bad to say Rora, congratulations.” Bokamoso said and she smiled.

“Thank and that's the news. I'm officially engaged. I didn't want you guys to hear it from social media.

“Congratulations Alora.” Susan said and she smiled.

“Thank you.”

“I won't take too much of your time so that's that

and thank you guys. I love you and bye!” She hung up and placed her phone down. Now that was sorted, she should sleep. She got up from the couch and looked at her ring admiringly. The door opened and she looked at Austin.

“What is it?” He held her waist as he walked her out.

“Has therapy crossed your mind?” She frowned.

“I’m not crazy. I have weird tendencies but I’m n-“

“Lora you do know that’s a dumb answer?” Every time this man called her stupid she wished she would implode.

“And don’t evade my question..”

“No. I haven’t thought of therapy because I don’t want therapy.”

They walked into their bedroom.

“And why do you feel like you don’t need it?”

“Because I am coping extremely well.”

“Is it? Or are you burying your feelings and you let your OCD control you to the point of you feeling like

it's normal?"

"It is normal. It's my normal. Robert don't try to pick a fight with me, I've just been engaged. My goblins and I are tired and want to sleep while basking in the happiness of my engagement. We'll resume this back and forth tomorrow or maybe Tuesday because Monday Lora Cosmetics is being shelves countrywide so it's my big day." She yawned as she slid off her shoes and removed her dress. He watched her as she moved towards the wardrobe to get a fresh nightie. He watched her button it before she picked her bonnet and put it on her head. She yawned again while peeling the blankets.

"We'll discuss this again. I promise mme but not now." He actually chuckled. The topic was pushed back just like that. He could help but tuck her in to make sure she was comfortable and was sleeping on her good side.

"It's too early to be sleeping."

"Good thing, I sleep when the baby tells me too."

"A foetus can't speak Lora."

“To me she c-“ she caught herself and Austin caught that too.

“You want the baby to be a girl?” She breathed out.

“Yes.” Was all she said and Austin figured that she didn’t want to open the envelope because she might be disappointed that she isn’t carrying one and hence avoiding heartbreak.

“But even if it’s boy, it’s our little child right?”

“Darling why is your voice shaky?”

“I-It’s the hormones..” he kissed her forehead.

“You’re lying but sleep now.” She chuckled and he held her cheek.

“I love you.”

“I love you too Mrs Mathews.” She gave him the most genuine smile and it took his breath away. Who knew he would love another human being more than he loved himself? Scary and James always reminded him of how far he has come.

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[06/24, 04:54] : REBORN

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The following morning, Sentle walked over to her friend's house. She stood outside by the tree and she sent her friend a call back hoping she was awake. She had put on her best dress and shoes and was now ready to go to the city. Her friend walked out of their house and she held her hip.

“What is it? Go phakela kana.”(it's too early)

“Kopa hotspot .”(can you hotspot me?)

“Ok” Sentle waited for her friend to connect her and

when she did she went to Facebook to search up Reba. Alora was probably too young to remember her so she searched up Reba. She typed up a message and sent it to her before she searched for her other cousins on Facebook. All of them were doing well. Talk about a twist of fate.

“What is it Sentle?”

“I want to go to Gaborone.” Her friend eyed her suspiciously.

“Okay. Is it regarding what I advised you to do?”

“Yes. I don’t have madi a palamang mme. Ke adima P50 Ke tla mmusa.”(I don’t have transport money. Borrow me some and I’ll bring it back.)

“Just because I’m sure you have cousins well off who can repay that thrice I’ll borrow you.” Her friend handed Sentle the phone just so she is still connected while she went back to the house. Sentle sighed and checked her messages. It was still morning, maybe she wasn’t online or anything. She went through pictures of that Friday night and Alora was pregnant. What if she is the maid and helped

out? She quickly typed a message to Alora and sent it. Anything was good. She'll think about what to say when she gets there. Her friend came back and handed her the note.

“There.”

“Thank you so much.” She handed her friend back the phone and slid her phone and money into the small bag she was holding.

“I'll let you know of the developments but I have to go now. Thank you.”

“Alright and all the best.” With that Sentle walked away with a smile on her face. Maybe her life was going to change for the better.

At Susan's house, the woman hummed as she prepared breakfast for her family while playing Danko by Ezra Neethings the background on a good Sunday morning. She smiled as she sang along

swinging her hips to the sides. Reba walked inside the kitchen as she chuckled and sang along with her mother. She was in such a good mood and that made her happy.

“Why are we happy this morning? We’re probably going to have a feast for breakfast.” Reba said with smile as her mother grinned and pointed at her with the big spoon.

“Life is good.” Susan said with a smile, everything was going to go back to normal. Of course that secret that Lina killed Emily was probably going to die with her and her husband. It would ruin peace and start a very unnecessary fight. The past will be and finally she’ll let it rest. She wasn’t communicating with her oppressive former in-laws and she couldn’t even care less about what they did with their lives. They took everything Moremi owned and she had started from scratch again. She was happy now.

“Sit down and let me continue with what I’m doing.” Reba grinned as she sat on the high chair. Her father and Emory were probably going to wake up

an hour later.

At Austin's house, Austin made his way downstairs to the kitchen shirtless and found Hades sipping on coffee.

“Good morning.”

“Morning. Is the dragon lady sleeping?” He nodded as he checked the coffee pot. There was some coffee. He opened the cupboard to take out a mug. After he poured the coffee he leaned against the counter as Hades looked at his coffee before he faced Austin.

“I have been looking for house and I found one.” Austin threw his head back in thought.

“You want to move out?”

“With the baby coming, you two need your privacy and I also need privacy with Reba.”

“You’re sure you’ll be fine?”

“I’ll survive and the house is on the other street.”

Austin chuckled. That’s as close and that would make it easy for the sisters with the houses being minutes away. A walk away even.

“Still going to go to gym everyday?”

“You bet.” Hades raised his mug in the air.

“Ebile let’s go for a run.” Hades said.

“Okay. Meet you downstairs in ten minutes.” That was all Austin said as he picked his coffee mug and walked out of the kitchen. Hades smiled. He better get ready for that morning run.

At the bus station, Sentle looked around. She should try to buy airtime so she can subscribe for My Social to check if Alora or Reba opened her messages. She stopped by a woman’s shade and she counted her change. She had enough to go

back and to catch a combi to her destination.

“Dumelang, ke kopa nzamela wa P5.”(hello. Can I have airtime?) she handed the woman P5 and the woman handed her the phone to enter her number. Sentle handed it back and she checked her phone to see if it reported. Once it did she said bye and moved out of the way to subscribe for my social bundles. In minutes she was on Facebook and she checked her Messenger. She sighed annoyed. It was these scammers who were just inboxing her and neither of them had replied. She didn't know where they lived nor did she know where her uncle's wife lived. She quickly went to the Lora Cosmetics page and she checked for the address of their offices. She saw them but she didn't know where that was. She walked over to the woman who, she just bought airtime from.

“Dumelang, do you know where this place is?” She asked as she showed the woman the address.

“You can ask the combi men and those taxi men. They know where everywhere is.”

“Thank you.” With that Sentle walked to the combis again. She didn’t know which but she was hopeful one of them will help her.

When she got to one of them, she showed them the address and they directed her to the right combis to get on board. She was one step closer. She was doing this for her siblings and cousins. They had no one but her.

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[06/24, 04:54] : REBORN

Alora stepped out of the bathroom just as Austin opened the door. He was all sweaty. She watched him remove his t-shirt and threw it in the laundry basket.

“Hey there Mrs Mathews.”

“Morning to you too.” He smiled and walked towards her and she placed her hands behind her back.

“If it’s a kiss you seek, the you’ll get it but don’t touch me I’m squeaky clean and you’re...” she waved her hand to show his whole body. He chuckled and stopped in front of her. He placed a hand on her lower back and lowered his head to kiss her.

“Morning and you’ll make breakfast?”

“Of course. How was the run?”

“As if you’re ever going to join me...”

“I’m not built for vigorous activity that gets me sweating and out of breath.”

“But you get sweaty and out of breath beneath me.”

“It’s different. Take a shower now.” She stepped back and he rubbed his lips. She moved to the side so that he can step into the bathroom and once he was inside and the door was closed, she used that opportunity to get dressed.

At Lora Cosmetics offices, Sentle stood outside the building as the security guard looked at her.

“Hello. It’s closed. Try coming tomorrow.” Sentle didn’t have money for tomorrow.

“I-I need to speak to the owner. It’s really important.” The security guard shook his head. His bosses were off and it was a Sunday. Working resumed tomorrow so there was no way she was supposed to be here.

“Unfortunately that’s not possible.”

“Please. Ke a go kopa.”(I’m begging you)

“You’ll try tomorrow...”

“I have no money to come back here tomorrow. It’s important, try calling her tell her it’s family.” The security guard frowned. Isn’t family supposed to know where each other lives?

“I don’t believe you because family knows where to find each other and each other’s numbers, are you trying to lead thieves here? That won’t happen girly, please go.”

Sentle’s eyes blurred with tears. She was really desperate and this was her last option.

“Please. Ka go kopa. Call her and tell her it’s Sentle Moremi, I don’t know the people in this city and I wouldn’t dare steal. Ke a go rapela...” the security guard sighed as he looked at her glistening eyes and he took out his small phone. Sentle rubbed her eyes.

Alora picked up her work phone and frowned. Why was security calling her? Was there a problem? She answered the call.

“Hello.”

“Hello Ms Moremi, there is someone looking for you.”

“Can’t they come by tomorrow? Offices open up tomorrow.”

“She says she is your family” there was whispering before the man started speaking again.

“She says her name is Sentele Moremi.”

“Senile Mo-“ Alora paused.

“Okay. I’m on my way.” She hung up and chuckled in disbelief. What the hell was going on? She walked out of the bedroom and slowly walked down the stairs. What could she possibly want from her? What the hell was happening? She pushed her hair back as she looked at Robert.

“I think we have a problem.”

Austin turned his neck, waiting for her to speak.

“Security just called and said a relative was looking for me.”

“Okay...”

“My father’s side of the family.” She said quietly. Those people had been so terrible to her family, she wondered how Susan had coped with them especially with her skin tone being used against her. Reba had the same skin tone and so did her siblings and how dare they shame them for their skin tone? That was being colourist and it had been years since they spoke to them. Why now?

“Can you take me to the office? I need to get to the bottom of this.”

“The one you haven’t spoken to in years?”

“That side of the family yes.” He just agreed and got up on his feet to go get his car keys.

Twenty minutes later, Alora got out of the car and

headed to where security usually was.

“Hi.” She greeted the security man and he greeted her back. He stood up and walked a few feet away, giving the ladies privacy.

“Alora hi. You’ve grown.” Settle started out and she could still see it was the same little girl who was never free around them and would rather just isolate herself from the rest of the family. Her eyes traveled to the rest of her body and she smiled.

“Pregnancy suits you and congratulations.” She noted the ring on her finger as well and it looked so expensive. She even smelled expensive as well.

Alora was still stunned by the fact that she was here and why now? God why now?

“Thank you. What brings you here?” Straight to the point. Settle noted.

“I came to apologise...” Alora raised an eyebrow.

“For what happened all those years, it’s been long and we are family an-“

“Ema pele. Is that all? Because I am not buying that.

Not in a million years.” Senile sighed.

“The truth of the matter is that we’ve been struggling and I’m looking for a job.”

“Aha!” Alora said. So if it wasn’t for that she wouldn’t be here. She figured.

“So if you guys were okay and all you wouldn’t be here right?” Sentle faced the other way.

“It makes sense and I don’t blame you for trying to use youths relative card to your advantage but what I won’t allow is the disruption of peace, Su has been okay without being told about her failures. I might have been young but I know. Opening the door for you means your mother and grandmother are the package and tota we have suffered enough. I really do hope that one day, when you’re not hitting dead ends and you’re genuinely prospering the apology might be valid because you don’t want to get anything from it. Family is more than blood and most times blood s not thicker than water.” That means she hit a dead end. Sentle asked herself. Can she try Reba, maybe she will be more

welcoming and help her find a job or something?
Alora pressed her phone.

“Can I have your number?” Hope bloomed in
Sentle’s heart as she gave it to Alora. Funny that
this girl was years younger than her but more
successful than her. Sentle’s phone buzzed.

“I sent you money. It’s up to you to use that to make
your life better. Start a small business but just stay
away from the people I care about. Maybe you
might realise that you don’t really want forgiveness
and you guys still hate us and it was just your
struggles making you want to do that.” With that
Alora walked away and Sentle looked at the money.
She should go to the atm and cash out that ewallet
and see what to do. Alora breathed out. At this point
peace was the only option. The past should just
stay in the past and not try to interfere with the
present and the future.

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THREE YEARS LATER

[06/24, 04:55] : REBORN

162

Reba was woken up by her phone ringing. She yawned and stretched her hands to look at the time. Fuck she had to be at the office, something about a photoshoot with her sister. She picked up the call.

“Reba hello.”

“You’re still asleep?”

“No. I’m getting dressed.”

“The meeting will start in two hours, if you don’t get your behind here and while you’re at it, check your Facebook.” Alora hung up and she rubbed her eyes

getting out of bed. She went to her Facebook and scrolled down. Her eyes widened. So they were big big like Times New Square in New York? She did her little happy dance as she walked into the bathroom. She and her sister did that? International? So they were competing with Fenty and Kylie Cosmetics now? This was a huge feat and she should really get a move on as in now.

Alora held Lorato's little hand as she walked to her office. Lorato pouted then let her mother's hand go and walked ahead of her mother. Alora couldn't stop the smile on her face as she watched the toddler make her way to her office and she stood in front of it while waiting for her.

"I'll never run after you in my heels themma."

Lorato just sighed as Alora opened the door for her. Sometimes he behaved like Austin which was a weird trait to see on her two year old. She gave her that look that Austin usually gave her and it felt like

being judged by a mini him who looked like her. She was confusing herself now. Lorato carefully climbed onto the couch as Alora walked over to her desk and pulled out the chair.

“Mama?”

“Ma?”

“I’m hungry...” pronouncing that ‘r’ was still difficult for her but they’ll give it time, she was still a baby. She brought her hands together. She wasn’t even supposed to be at the office but the meeting was today and it couldn’t be postponed. She took turns with her husband as they both adjusted their work schedules for this little gremlin. Robert went to the office on Monday and Tuesday while she worked from home. Wednesday and Thursday he worked from home while she went to the office. Friday they both went to the office and Lorato was in her grandmother’s care. It was a schedule that worked wonders for the both of them and this little gremlin loved it. Lorato placed her hands on her lap and Alora hid her smile. She was cute even though she wasn’t particularly happy about that outfit but her

little gremlin had to learn young so she allowed her to pick what she wore.

“Should I feed you?” She shook her head.

“Not a-a baby.” Alora rolled her eyes.

“You’re still a baby my gremlin.” This little one as soon as she could walk on her own, she didn’t want to be picked up by her. Only her father, talk about being a traitor. Alora got up from her desk and walked over to the other side of her office. Lorato ke bag had everything she might need. She took out the lunchbox and a handkerchief. It was not even 12pm yet, if only her life was as simple as her daughter’s. Food, sleep, food and bother her parents. She opened the lunchbox and crouched in front of the sofa with the food.

“Let me do this, then we’ll wash our hands right?”

Lorato nodded as her mother tucked a piece of the handkerchief into her strawberry printed t-shirt.

Alora just picked her up and Lorato gave her a look.

“I’m starting to not like the fact that you’re glaring at me.” Her baby giggled and placed her head on her

neck as they walked into the small bathroom so she can wash her hands.

“I promise, we won’t be long here. Just three more hours gremlin and we’ll be on our way home. Do you want a cat? Just to annoy daddy?” Lorato looked up at her.

“Cat?”

“Yes. The furry thing that meow meow..do you want one gremlin? Work with me here Rato.”

“Cat?” Alora used one hand to open the tap and she lowered her baby so she can wash her hands.

“Mmh. O batla kats e akere?”(you do want a cat right?)

Lorato shook her hands into her hands and Alora held her nicely as they walked out. The two year old tried to remember where she heard the word cat before. She closed her eyes and opened her mouth.

“Cat!!”

“Yes baby, cat...”

“I want cat.”

“I know you do baby. We’ll get one after I’m done. We’ll buy a small small cat for you. Your little furry friend my goblin. J e t’aime.” She kissed her plump cheek and placed her back on the sofa before placing handing her the small lunchbox. She turned her back and paused as she touched her flat stomach. This time she found out first.

Hades called Austin as he asked about a minor issue he had encountered. It has been a challenging year, with his father telling him that the board deemed him old to be running Hudson Co. And since it was a family company he was supposed to take over, it had been rollercoaster. At some point he wondered how Austin took in being a CEO in such stride and he usually asked him for advice for most matters which he helped on. He leaned back in his chair. A few more months to go and he’ll be four years sober, who knew he would be here? He

was about to marry his girl in a month and he had people who cared. His father was trying but it seemed like he drowned himself on alcohol each and everyday so it was getting harder and harder to try and reach him. He even stopped trying. His phone rang and he smiled.

“Hades...”

“Hey bro. I’m in town and can I come over for dinner?”

“Is everything okay? I hope that...”

“Hades he is still my husband. Yes everything is okay. Can I come over?”

“Anytime Zara. I think Reba will be home though.”

“Perfect. Alright. Bye and see you.”

“Bye.” He hung up and he picked up the picture from their engagement party. They had years to go and this was just the beginning. They had talked about family, they were seeing a fertility specialist and the good news was that Reba had started seeing her periods after not seeing them because of

the eating disorder. That's as progress on their part. He smiled placing the picture down.

Susan looked at Thabiso while she folded her arms.

“Can't you talk to him? Zara has been so good to him and he can't treat ngwana wa batho jalo.”

“He has pride. A lot of men do. It's not easy to lose your job and have your woman take care of everything but I tried talking to him and he won't budge.” Susan sighed.

“Kana Zara is pregnant and she shouldn't be stressing like this. Mooketsi won't listen to me and his siblings, they can find him a job but urg..”

“I'll talk to him again. Hopefully he sees that he is losing his family just so he can drop the pride.” Susan nodded with a worried sigh.

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At Mooketsi's house, he read his wife's note. He wished she could understand somehow that he wanted to be the man and take care of her every whim now she left while pregnant? He covered his face. His phone rang and he saw his father's name flash on the screen. He just answered.

"Hello.."

"Mooketsi can we talk?"

"I'm listening..." Thabiso sighed.

"All I can say I understand where you're coming from, partly but I understand still. You've drummed it into yourself to be your wife's rock because growing up your mother was the one who held everything together and you don't want that."

Mooketsi swallowed. He was right. He hated that he was right.

"But you don't want your siblings' help. You want to do it on your own and it's okay but it's straining your marriage and if you aren't careful you're going to lose Zara and your child. Mooketsi where is that fighting spirit? You were the one who told us you married Zara and we should accept it and we did. Because you loved her, why can't you push your pride aside for the woman you broke protocol for? If you really do love her like you say you will..." with that Thabiso cut the call and left Mooketsi thinking. Mooketis finally got out of bed.

At Molepolole, Sentle smiled as she finally packed up her stuff. The magwinya, fresh chips and soup was finished now she had to go start preparing those scones the church ladies ordered. Somehow it worked out, that P5000 Alora sent her 3 years ago had been put to good use. Maybe in a year or so, she'll fully gain enough courage to apologise. Her siblings and cousins were comfortable like other kids and this selling business had a lot of money. She did follow them on social media and they made a lot of strides in their careers. Lora Cosmetics was a successful brand and Reba was equally successful. She smiled. One day it will work out for them. Somehow the world worked in everyone's favour. She called the taxi man who regularly picked her up. Her grandmother had finally succumbed to old age a year ago and as sad as it was, she had to move on. Her mother of course tried to cause a ruckus about the house but she fought so hard to keep it just because her siblings and cousins stayed there and she had started renovations on it as well. Life was always teaching them lessons everyday.

At Susan's house, Zara looked around the bedroom. She just needed to breath away from him. She wasn't trying to make him less of a man, she was only trying to help was it so hard to understand? There was a gentle knock and she rubbed her eyes.

"Come in." Susan walked in and just sat on the bed next to Zara. She hugged her daughter in law.

"He'll come around. He is just stubborn but whatever you need, we're here." She said and Zara sniffed nodding.

"We love you okay?" She nodded as Susan rubbed her back.

Hours later that day, the bedroom door opened. Mooketsi looked at his wife sleeping peacefully. He sat on the corner of the bed and pushed her braids back as she breathed softly. He looked at her bump

and touched it then withdrew his hand. He kissed her forehead.

"Hello love. I'm so sorry my love. I'm so sorry." He whispered as she turned in her sleep. He'll be here when she wakes up and they'll work it out. They always do.

At Bokamoso's house, he held back tears as his wife held up a positive pregnancy stick. He picked her up and spun her around as she giggled. Finally. After years of struggling.

"Our prayers have been heard." She nodded ecstatic. She was finally going to be a mother and call her shallow but it has been a lifelong dream of hers.

He placed her down on her feet and kissed her.

"I love you so much." She kissed him back. She loved him. He stood by her side while they battled this silently. He didn't use it against her, she loved

him so much and was happy to mother his child.

Hades held the phone against his ear as Zara said she might not pass by for the dinner. That was okay either way, he'll see his sister tomorrow. She was probably tired since she was pregnant. He said bye and carefully parked his car in front of the yard. He used his extra set of keys to unlock his father's gate. He pushed it open and walked towards the house. He knocked on the door and waited for him to open it. It opened minutes later and his heart broke as he looked at the state his father was in, it didn't matter if his father at some point of his life emotionally abused him. He was going to help him and be there for him. He walked inside and closed the door.

Reba looked at her engagement ring and smiled as she tied her silk gown while she played music softly in the background. She smiled. This love was pure and if someone was to ask her how long she has loved her fiance she would say there hasn't been a day where she hasn't loved him. She heard the gate slide open and like the very first time they started dating, her heart beat picked up and the butterflies started in her tummy. She heard the car drive in and she smiled. Time moved slow as she waited for him to open the door. When he finally did, her face lit up and Hades grinned. He walked over to where she was standing and he placed his bag down. He kissed her.

"Hi pretty girl."

"Hi..." they locked eyes as James Arthur's Say You Won't Let Go played in the background.

"You're beautiful and I'll never stop thanking my lucky stars that you're mine sunshine."

"And you're mine. Look how far we've come.."

"And we're still going to go far Mrs Hudson. Reba

and Hades like it has always been."

"Reba and Hades. Only now we're doing far better than we expected."

"We're reaching for the stratosphere my love." They shared one sizzling kiss basking in their love and their journey.

At the Mathews estate, Austin moved a puzzle piece as Lorato rested on his shoulders. Alora had lost the first game and it had been an easy win. Alora never lets him win easily. Again with the second one he won and she wasn't fighting.

"Sweetheart is something bothering you?" He asked as he picked Lorato from his shoulders and placed her on the carpet between his legs. The kitten was a surprise he hadn't been expecting when he came home but his girls talked him into accepting the little creature. Lorato fought sleep and tried to keep

her eyes open.

"Do you want to sleep little darling?" She shook her head and laid it on his leg. He chuckled and Alora smiled. He was the best dad to their little goblin, if people could see how excited her baby is when her dad's about to arrive and he always scoops her up in his arms swinging her little body around as she giggled. And another precious moment stored in her memory was when she came back from work to find Lorato feeding her dad with her hand and she looked so happy as her dad humoured her.

"She'll be fast asleep in a minute or so." Austin said and looked down at his daughter. Her eyes were closed already. He glanced up at his wife.

"She is like you."

"No she's not."

"Somehow the two chess games you lost have a significance because you don't lose that easily and you're always a sore loser." She rolled her eyes.

"Die Robert." He gave a low chuckle, being mindful of the sleeping baby in the room.

"What is it darling?" He asked and gently picked Lorato up standing up. Alora stood up on her feet and walked over to his side. Her room was upstairs to make it easier to tend to her at night. She snuggled herself under his arm and he kissed her forehead, using that free arm to wrap it around her.

"We're expecting another her." She said and he chuckled.

"I suspected it .."she rolled her eyes and he lowered his head to kiss her.

"Thank you and J e t'aime mon coeur." She smiled.

"We're forever.."

"Till we make our safe haven with our little ones."
Her eyes welled with tears.

"I love you Austin. So much."

"I love you Mrs Mathews. With every fibre of my being. You and the life we have created for ourselves. Our kids. I love you guys so much." This was it. Their happy ending, of course they were different people. Different from how they were

years back, one could say they were reborn but she thought, they changed for the better because of their circumstances. Love did that. Healing did that. Redemption did that. It was beautiful and nothing could ever top that up.

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*****THE END*****

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EPILOGUE

Reba smiled as the kids made noise upstairs and Bone walked down the stairs with tears in her eyes. She frowned looking at her three year old. She had been so grateful that Alora did this for her, being a

surrogate for her and Hades. It hadn't been easy and a part of her had felt so guilty at ruining her sister's plans because Alora said they were planning for five kids and she had four before she carried Bone for her and Hades. After her very scary and traumatic first pregnancy, the doctor had decided she wouldn't have kids after her first born.

"What is it?" Her baby cried real tears and she picked her up hushing her. Austin walked down the stairs with a sleepy Emely in his arms.

"What did the boys do?"

"I'm waiting to find out as well because this one here looks terrified." Austin looked down at his baby before he walked over to the kitchen to prepare her milk. Lora needed the sleep. This holiday was for them to rest but Emely didn't make it easier, her siblings adored their last addition to the family, he was happy that finally Alora had what she wished for. She had said they are going to stop having kids after she gives Lorato a baby sis. Maybe this was because of the sisterly bond she had with Reba and she didn't want Lorato to be the only girl in a house

full of boys. Luckily for them, they had this cute loud angel.

He kissed her little head and smiled boiling the water, she was probably going to cry for her mother's breast later during the day but for now his wife needed rest and he was on duty. Hades walked in and they fist bumped.

“She was up all night?”

“Yes.” Hades looked at his best friend. They were brothers now. They went deeper than the ink beneath the skin of their tattoos even if they didn't share the same blood.

Austin smiled. All four of them had taken different routes and even as the years had passed, hell almost a decade but they were still closer than ever. Coming back to this holiday house they had bought on a whim to get away from the city during holidays was where they spent some holidays together with their kids and the cousins growing closer together. Reba walked in with Bone on her hip.

“She says they scared her with ghosts.” The guys laughed.

“Typical. Are you okay love?” Hades asked his baby and she nodded while rubbing her eyes, Hades kissed the top of Bone’s head.

“She’ll be fine.” Hades mused as Austin got busy with Emely’s bottle.

“Breakfast is in the microwave and I’m sure she might start crying once she see’s Rora.”

“Probably. She loves her mother too much.” Lorato walked in and she grinned as she looked at her baby sister. Finally. She was tired of seeing those three’s ugly faces in hers everyday.

“Dad let me hold her.” She took Emely and walked out of the kitchen.

“Sisters.”

Reba said wistfully. It reminded of her with her little sisters. That sisterly bond that can never be broken.

“Dad did I tell you?”

“I’m listening Selena.” Lorato grinned. It always

made her happy when her dad sometimes switched to her second name. Apparently she was named after her late grandmother and sometimes during those father-daughter dates which she usually spends eating pizza and playing chess with her dad, he said she reminds him of his mother and she had been excited about her birth the moment she found out. That made her pre-teen heart happy. It really did.

“I’m part of the school mathematics Olympiad team.”

“That’s my girl.”

“Yes sir.” Austin smiled. He had never been the one to be happy about losing but he hoped all his children do better than him. In all aspects. Love, school and family. He was hopeful. After preparing the bottle he walked to the lounge and handed Lorato the bottle. Make sure she doesn’t wake up.

“I’ll try.”

On the other side of the house, Goleba one of the

Mathews twins was feverishly packing and organising his room after his younger brother had messed it up. He held back tears as his twin Charlie walked in.

“Goleba it’s okay...”

“It’s not okay. I made the bed in the morning and he ruined it. I-“ he held back tears just as the door pushed open and Alora who had just finished freshening up walked in. She hated that her baby was feeling the same way she always did, it had somehow passed onto him and it was ruining him. He was too young for this.

“Goleba, I know how you’re feeling.” She said softly as he continued to arrange his stuff. She walked closer and hugged him as he sobbed into her.

“I’m sorry okay? I’m so sorry.” Charlie watched them and he could understand his mother and twin. School was boring and he understood everything too easily and it wasn’t even challenging. It frustrated him to no end because he no longer paid attention in class. He didn’t want to skip grades

because what about Goleba, he was his twin and he didn't want to leave him behind. He sighed and walked out. He'll talk to his dad.

That late afternoon they all stood outside with smiles on their faces. Alora looked at Reba and Hades. She has watched Reba and Hades become sober and beat their addictions, Reba face the world again and Hades taking control of his life. Hades smiled, to think Austin has learnt to love other people and not just himself and Alora she's remained her. An ice princess they called her but she had one fucking big heart. They watched the sun set, glowing with orange hues. The silence enveloping them being the peaceful one as they tuned out the noise from the holiday home, as realisation dawned on them. That one day it will no longer be full and noisy. The kids will grow up and it will be quiet with just them. Just the four of them.

To actually believe it all started when they were in their twenties, fighting demons they have swam with for so long and the bitter twisted truths that stated them in the face but had no guts to face. They'll be back to where it started. Alora was tucked into Austin as Hades' best girl breathed against his chest. So beautiful. A decade later, they were all reborn into different people because of the trials that shaped them. Knowing the ugly cycles ended with them just as the healing process started with them. They'll be back years later. Just the four of them.

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THANK YOU!